# Avantgarde movements

In this chapter, I will provide (historical) context to the avantgarde view on aesthetics, art objects and art practice in general. This chapter aims to clarify the theoretical concepts used in this thesis.

The Wikipedia entry on the Avantgarde defines it “as a genre of art, an experimental work of art, and the experimental artist who creates the work of art, which usually is aesthetically innovative, whilst initially being ideologically unacceptable to the artistic establishment of the time.” (Wikipedia 2014-2023)

We should keep this definition in the back of our minds as a general idea. However, this is not our primary definition because it has at least two challenges for our argumentation. In the first place, the definition needs to be narrower. If we follow that, any artistic expression outside the mainstream falls under the avantgarde umbrella. This would imply that any art object using innovative media would fall under the Avantgarde; as we will later see, this is not the case. In the second place, this definition must illustrate the ideals and motivations of the avantgarde movements.

I will follow “Theory of the Avantgarde” by Peter Burger (Burger 1984) and “Historische Avantgarde” by Ferdinand Drijkoningen et al. (Drijkoningen et al. 1991) to gather the understanding of the theory of Avantgarde used during this thesis.

The first thing to understand about the Avantgarde is that it does not refer to one artistic movement. The Avantgarde encompasses a group of artistic movements considered innovative for their time[[1]](#footnote-1).

Paraphrasing the introduction of (Drijkoningen, et al. 1991), we can say that chronologically speaking, the first wave of Avantgarde movements is from before World War II. This wave came to a halt in the mid-1930s. This wave, called the *“Historical Avantgarde,"* encompasses artistic movements like Dada, Surrealism, Futurism, and Constructivism.

New Avantgarde impulses then emerged at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s, giving rise to a second wave called the *"neo-Avantgarde"*. Some of the movements in this new wave include Pop Art, Conceptual Art, Kinetic Art, Feminist Art, Minimalism and Fluxus.

It's important to note that avantgarde principles vary significantly between movements and periods. Some movements, such as Dada and Surrealism, may embrace absurdity and irrationality, while others, like constructivism, prioritise structure and interdisciplinarity. Nevertheless, overarching themes of avantgarde art are:

* Reaction to the autonomy of art (Burger 1984),
* rejection to art institutionalisation (Drijkoningen, et al. 1991),
* challenging the status quo in art and society (Burger 1984) and (Drijkoningen, et al. 1991),
* the role of art in everyday life (Burger 1984),
* and a commitment to innovation and experimentation (Wikipedia 2014-2023).

There are more principles related to Avantgarde art. For example, radicalism, interdisciplinarity, social and political engagement, rejection of tradition, and democratisation of art, but we will not discuss those here in detail.

## The core avantgarde subjects

I will now proceed to describe and illustrate the core avantgarde subjects that will make the common thread of this thesis. Any art movement that claims to be Avantgarde ought to at least address the subjects presented here.

### The autonomy of art

The concept of the autonomy of art refers to the idea that art should be self-contained, self-referential, and independent of external influences, particularly those of politics and society. It implies that art should be valued for its own sake, without the need for it to serve a specific function or purpose in society.

According to (Burger 1984), Chapters 2 and 3. The idea of the autonomy of art, particularly the notion of *"art for art's sake"*, gained prominence during the rise of bourgeois society in the 18th and 19th centuries. It reflected a desire to separate art from utilitarian and practical functions. This concept aligns with the values of the emerging bourgeois or middle-class society, which valued individualism, self-expression, and the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure. Art is then seen as a realm where individuals can freely explore their creativity and emotions. In particular, Peter Burger points out that the rise of the individual independent artist coincides with the appearance of the private art collector. As a follow-up, the autonomy of art also played a role in the development of cultural capital. Art, especially in the form of fine arts and high culture, became a marker of social status and education among the bourgeois class.

Peter Burger points out that Avantgarde artists rejected the notion of art's autonomy, arguing that it had become an isolated and elitist pursuit within bourgeois society. They sought to break down the barriers between art and everyday life. Movements, such as Dada and Surrealism, believed art should not exist in isolation but should actively address pressing concerns. Therefore, they engaged with political and social issues and challenged the bourgeois order.

[Illustration]

### Art institutionalisation

The developments on the autonomy of art also promoted the “autonomous art institution”.

Ferdinand Drijkoningen quotes Bourdieu as follows: *“…the process of art's autonomization correlates with the emergence of a distinct societal category of art producers. These producers are increasingly inclined to recognise only those rules that have been handed down by their predecessors, which can either serve as a starting point or be the rules they choose to break. Over time, they become more capable of shedding any societal servitude, whether it be related to moral censorship and aesthetic programs imposed by a proselytising Church, or academic control and demands from a political authority that seeks art as a propaganda instrument. In other words, just as the emergence of law as law, i.e., as an "autonomous domain," is associated with the advancing division of labour leading to a community of professional jurists, the process that leads to the constitution of art itself is accompanied by a change in the relationships that artists maintain with non-artists and, as a result, with other artists. This change leads to the formation of a relatively independent intellectual and artistic field. It is also related to the development of a new definition of artists and their art”* (Drijkoningen, et al. 1991, 16)[[2]](#footnote-2).

In other words, the autonomy of art is not only about the art object itself but also follows that the institutions around it became autonomous itself. More precisely, following (Drijkoningen, et al. 1991, 15), an institution is defined as *“an organised system of goal-directed activities”*. Therefore, by an “autonomous art institution”, we mean “an organised system of goal-directed activities for art”, where the institution itself defines art.

For example, a guild of painters guided by this belief no longer paints for the functional purpose of painting, e.g., decoration for the Church, but for its internal rules and objectives.

A more modern illustration of this would be the situation with Art galleries, which only address art as defined by them. Another example is the Rietveld Academy itself;

*“The Rietveld Academie is a small-scale, independent and internationally oriented university of applied sciences for Fine Arts and Design in Amsterdam (NL).”* (Rietveld 2023)

Ferdinand Drijkoningen (Drijkoningen, et al. 1991, 23-26) claims that rejecting these *“autonomous art institutions”* is a core element of all avantgarde movements.

In the case of the historical avantgarde movements, he describes the following four patterns of reaction to art institutions:

1. **Total Rejection:** A first and most radical view is rejecting any form of institutionalisation. *Dadaists* rejected the traditional art world and organised anti-art exhibitions and performances in defiance of established art institutions. Their work was often characterised by absurdity and anti-establishment sentiment. For example, Marcel Duchamp's *“Fountain”* (1917) is a urinal signed with the name “R Mutt”. Fountain is one of the most iconic art pieces of the 20th century, representing a significant shift in the function of art in society. It is one of the earliest examples of “*readymade”* sculptures. We will come back to this example in the next section.
2. **Alternative uses:** A second view of the place of art in the social order is one in which a different role is assigned to the institution of art. It has already been pointed out that institutions form a hierarchical structure: certain institutions can encompass the whole of institutions, often not without conflicts. *The Surrealists* aimed to challenge the conventional understanding of reality and art by exploring the unconscious mind. They sought to disrupt traditional norms through dreamlike and provocative works. For example, Rene Magritte's *“La Trahison des Images”* depicts a pipe with the text under “this is not a pipe”. Here, we can see a challenge to the establishment of paintings that are only images. The work's use of text and self-reference opens alternative perspectives to appreciate a painting.
3. **New order:** A third view engages in a radical battle with the existing institution of art and aims for a "new order," a complete upheaval in the social order. These movements speak of the "integration of art and social life" and the "aestheticisation of life". *The Italian Futurists* aimed to break with traditional artistic norms by introducing radical changes that would embrace the industrial age, technology, speed, and the dynamism of modern life.
4. **Change of perspective:** A fourth strategy focuses on the artwork and the associated beliefs: this is where the rupture with everything previously done and thought in this field lies. These alternative artworks and beliefs will bring about a revolution in the institution of art, which will automatically have repercussions elsewhere in the social order. *The Constructivist* movement aimed to create a new visual language that was in sync with the rapidly changing social and technological landscape of the early 20th century. The *“Staatliches Bauhaus”* (1919-1933) combined craft, fine arts and living style in its educational program. The influence of the Bauhaus is still seen today in several areas of design, art and architecture (DW Documentary 2019).

In the neo-avantgarde movements, we also see other types of reactions to institutions, for example:

1. **Creating Alternative Spaces:** Some avantgarde movements created their own alternative art spaces, such as artist-run galleries, performance venues, or publications. These spaces allowed them to showcase their work without the restrictions of traditional institutions and often fostered a sense of community and collaboration among artists. *The Situationist International* sought to create alternative situations and experiences through art and activism. They organised events, such as "psychogeographic" explorations of cities, outside the confines of traditional art institutions.
2. **Anti-Commercial Stance:** Many avantgarde movements resisted the commercialisation of art and were critical of the art market. They viewed art institutions as complicit in this commodification and believed that it compromised the integrity of artistic expression. *Street Art and Graffiti* artists often work outside the commercial art world, using public spaces as their canvas. They resist art market pressures by creating art that is accessible to a broader audience. Often, street artists want to remain anonymous.
3. **Desire for Inclusivity:** Some avantgarde movements, particularly those with political or social agendas, aimed to make art more inclusive and relevant to the general public. They often sought to challenge the elitist nature of art institutions and advocated for greater accessibility and diversity in the arts. The *Black Arts Movement* This cultural and political movement aimed to make art more inclusive and relevant to the African American community. It fought to challenge the elitism of traditional institutions and promote art as a means of cultural expression and social change.
4. **Temporary and Site-Specific Works:** Some avantgarde artists created temporary or site-specific artworks that defied traditional museum or gallery settings. These works were often meant to exist outside the institutional framework, challenging the idea of art as a permanent, collectable object. *Land Art (Earth Art) artists* make works that do not fit an art institution's traditional premises. For example, Marinus Boezem's *“De Groene Kathedral” (1996)* consists of trees planted in such a way that they replicate the cathedral of Reims. Such large-scale, site-specific works are not meant to be collected or displayed in traditional art institutions but are integrated with the natural environment.

<picture>

1. **Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity:** Avantgarde movements have frequently embraced collaboration and interdisciplinarity, working with artists from various fields and challenging the separation of art forms within institutional structures. As mentioned before, The *Bauhaus school* promoted collaboration among artists, architects, and designers, breaking down the divisions between art disciplines. This interdisciplinary approach challenged traditional educational and institutional structures.
2. **Reappropriation and Appropriation:** Some avantgarde artists have reappropriated or appropriated elements of art institutions' collections or spaces as a form of protest or to question the role of institutions in shaping artistic value. Elaine Sturtevant pioneered the *Appropriation Art* movement by appropriating/copying her contemporary male artists. For example, with her work *“Haute Tension”* (1969), she copied a homonymous work by Martial Raysse from 1965. With these actions, she recontextualised existing art, gender constructs, the concept of originality and commercial imagery of the moment. A clear challenge to the discourse led by art institutions.

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1. **Institutional Critique:** Some avantgarde movements engaged in "institutional critique" as a form of art itself. This involved creating artworks that directly questioned and challenged art institutions' practices, politics, and ideologies. *Hans Haacke’s* work often explores the politics and economics of art institutions. His piece "Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971" investigated the financial interests of an art gallery.

### Art and the status quo of society,

In the previous two sections, we followed (Burger 1984) and (Drijkoningen, et al. 1991) and their argument that one of the intrinsic motivations of the historical avantgarde movements was a reaction to the rise of the bourgeois society and the autonomy of art and autonomous art institutions. We also suggested that several other neo-avantgarde movements reacted similarly to art's autonomy and its institutions. This brings us to a third common characteristic of avantgarde movements: the challenge of the status quo.

*“Fountain”* by Marcel Duchamp is one of the most iconic Dadaist works of the historical avantgarde movements. As an illustration of how avantgarde movements challenge the status quo, let’s recall some of the steps that lead to *“Fountain”* and the concept of non-art. For this, we should go back to the nineteenth-century Paris and the “Salon des Beux-Arts”.

The “Salon des Beux-Arts” was the central institution that defined art at their time. The Salon defined art essentially as tableaus[[3]](#footnote-3) , and anything that would not fit this will not be accepted to be exposed in the Salon. For example, “*Masked Ball at the Opera”* by Édouard Manet was refused by the Salon in 1873.

Such institutionalisation meant that the careers of several artists depended on the decisions of the Salon jury because being exposed at the Salon was a synonym for “good art”. This induced several protests of refused artists and attempted alternatives, but they had little effect. In 1863, Napoleon III granted the refused artist an alternative exhibition space, the *“Salon des Refuses”*. But even with the emperor's blessing, this had the opposite effect than expected:

*“It is a mistake, then, to read the Salon des Refusés as an “alternative” exhibition and as the*

*glorious revenge of the Avantgarde against academicism: The public flocked to the Refusés mainly to laugh at the rejected works, and in many instances the crowd was right. As the critic Jules-Antoine Castagnary wrote in L’Artiste, “Before the exhibition of the Refused, we were unable to figure out what a bad painting was. Now we know it.”* (De Duve 2014)

In 1884, the Société des Artistes Indépendants was founded. The Société’s no-jury rule implicitly contained the a priori admission that anything a member would present counted as potential art.

*“What the Société did not foresee, even though it logically followed from its no-jury rule, was that a betrayal of said rule automatically amounted to the denial of the rejected work’s potential art status. Whatever the Société refused to show would ipso facto be tossed into the limbo of non-art, where it would keep company with Le Bain, Masked Ball at the Opera, and all the other paintings that had been banned from public view over the years because the Salon jurors could not, would not, admit that the works were tableaux worthy of the name.”* (De Duve 2014)

However, even with the no-jury rule, Marcel Duchamp’s *“Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)”* was expelled from the 1912 Salon des Indépendants. Hence, as mentioned above, it qualifies as non-art. The rejection was *“presumably for not being a tableau cubist worthy of the name”* (De Duve 2014)

After such events, Marcel Duchamp moved to New York, where he witnessed the creation of the New York Society of Independent Artists in 1917. Where he was part of the board, again, this society planned an exhibition with no-jury rule.

Duchamp then submitted the piece *“Fountain”* under the pseudonym R. Mutt.

*“Objections, on both aesthetic and moral grounds, were immediately voiced, and an emergency meeting of the society’s directors was called to decide whether R. Mutt’s contribution was to be accepted. Heated arguments were heard from opposing viewpoints before the issue was finally put to a vote”* (De Duve 2014)

The piece was not publicly exhibited. It still generated discussions that are followed even nowadays.

*“Fountain”* challenged the status quo of the time on several layers. (De Duve 2014) presents the following:

* When a urinal is art, anything can be art.
* Anyone can be an artist.
* “Independent art institutions” actually create a monopoly in the art practice.

Such reactions to the status quo did not stop with the historical Avantgarde. We can also see it in neo-avantgarde movements.

For example, Elaine Sturtevant pioneered the *Appropriation Art* movement, which involved appropriating/copying other artists’ work. We will look more into this in the last chapter from the perspective of digital art.

In 1969, Elaine Sturtevant replicated Martial Raysse's 1965 artwork, "Haute Tension." Through her work, Sturtevant challenges several aspects of the status quo.

In the first place, Sturtevant challenges the prevailing belief of her time, which emphasised technique as the paramount aspect of art. She contends that neither the visual concept nor the execution holds the primary value; instead, the artist's intention lies at the core of the artwork. Consequently, deliberately reproducing an artwork can still result in a piece of significant artistic value worthy of inclusion in institutions like the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

In the second place, she challenged the gender bias of her time. At her time, all[[4]](#footnote-4) works in museums and galleries were by male artists. Moreover, by copying several other works by male artists, she illustrated that there was a gender bias, and it was not only the technique or concept of the art piece.

The Stedelijk Museum proved her right by showing both works side by side in its permanent collection.

Also, the art market proved her right. Several of her pieces have sold for more than the original piece. In 2007, an original *Crying Girl* by Roy Lichtenstein sold at auction for $78,400; in 2011, Sturtevant’s canvas reworking of *Crying Girl* sold for $710,500.

### Art and the everyday life

The cases of Elaine Sturtevant and Duchamp show how an artist can integrate their practice into the reality they live in. This brings us to the fourth common characteristic of avantgarde movements we will use during this thesis. Namely, the position of art in everyday life.

More explicitly, a common characteristic of avantgarde movements is the integration of artistic practice in the praxis of life.

The lecturers of the Bauhaus, like Johannes Itten, advocated for integrating all art practices and everyday life.

*“Itten taught under the motto 'Play becomes party - party becomes work - work becomes play'. The same link between work and play was in Gropius's mind when he wrote the Bauhaus Manifesto: 'Theatre, lectures, poetry, music, costume balls. Creation of festive ceremonies in these gatherings.' And indeed, the everyday life of the Weimar 'Bauhäusler' was punctuated by many such events. Gropius introduced Bauhaus evenings of literary readings … with the intention of bringing together the local population and the youth of the Bauhaus.”* (Magadalena 2023, 79)

This is even more explicit and strongly formulated in the Bauhaus manifesto:

*“The art schools of old were incapable of producing this unity—and how could they, for art may not be taught. They must return to the workshop. This world of mere drawing and painting of draughtsmen and applied artists must at long last become a world that builds. When a young person who senses within himself a love for creative endeavour begins his career, as in the past, by learning a trade, the unproductive “artist” will no longer be condemned to the imperfect practice of art because his skill is now preserved in craftsmanship, where he may achieve excellence.*

*Architects, sculptors, painters—we all must return to craftsmanship! For there is no such thing as “art by profession.” There is no essential difference between the artist and the artisan. The artist is an exalted artisan. Merciful heaven, in rare moments of illumination beyond man’s will, may allow art to blossom from the work of his hand, but the foundations of proficiency are indispensable to every artist. This is the original source of creative design.”* (Gropius 1919)

These ideas led to the design of functional and aesthetically pleasing objects for everyday use. Two famous examples that still can be found nowadays would be the Wassily Chair by Marcel Breuer and Door Knob by Walter Gropius. Even more, the influence of the Bauhaus in the design can still be seen in how there is a general attention for good design on everyday objects.

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As shown in the DW documentary on the Bauhaus (DW Documentary 2019), the integration of art into everyday life was also seen in the Bauhaus teaching method that replaced the traditional pupil-teacher relationship with the idea of a community of artists working and living together. The Bauhaus aimed to bring artists/students back into contact with everyday life. Therefore, architecture, performing arts, design, fashion and even parties were given as much weight as fine arts.

## Section summary

In this section, we illustrated how the historical Avantgarde and neo-avantgarde movements challenge to the autonomy of art influenced cultural change, including a shift away from traditional notions of art as an isolated, purely aesthetic pursuit and institutions surrounding it. They advocated for art to be more engaged, politically aware, and socially relevant in society. This perspective played a crucial role in shaping the direction of avantgarde art in the 20th century and beyond. The impact of these ideas is still felt nowadays.

1. For this perspective the Wikipedia definition is accurate yet needs to be concrete enough as it does not explain why avantgarde movements are innovative. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. translation by chatGPT [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *“Tableau is used to describe a painting or photograph in which characters are arranged for picturesque or dramatic effect and appear absorbed and completely unaware of the existence of the viewer”* (TATE sd) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Perhaps there were other female artists exposing at her time, but the important point is that the art world was even more male dominated that what it is now. Something that has not improved much as it is shown by the work of the Guerrilla Girls; women are still fighting their place in the art society, and many have become an artistic PR icon [guerrilla girls] for the institutions to show “diversity”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)