# Historical contexts

In this chapter I will provide (historical) context to both the avantgarde and new media, or unstable media, art. The aim of this chapter is to clarify the concepts that will be used during this thesis.

## Avantgarde movements

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 sd)

We should keep this definition in the back of our mind, as a general idea. However, this is not the main definition we will use because it has at least two challenges for our argumentation. In the first place, the definition is too broad. If we follow that any artistic expression outside of the mainstream falls under the avantgarde umbrella, then any innovation is avantgarde, which is not specific enough for our theoritical context. On a second place, this definition does not illustrate the ideals and motivations of the avantgarde movements.

I will follow “Theory of the Avantgarde” by P. Burger (Burger 1984) and “Historische Avantgarde” by F. Drijkoningen et. al. (Drijkoningen, et al. 1991) gather the understandings of the theory of Avantgarde that will be used during this thesis.

The first thing to understand with the Avantgarde It does not refer to a single one artistic movement. The Avantgarde encompasses a group of artistic movements that are 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 is referred as the “historical Avantgarde” and encompassed artistic movements like Dada, Surrealism, Futurism, Constructivism, among others.

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

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

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

Other principles usually related to Avantgarde art but that we will not discuss in detail here are: Radicalism, Interdisciplinarity, social and political engagement, rejection of tradition, democratization of art, and engagement with technology.

I will now proceed to describe and illustrate the five core avantgarde principles that will make the common thread of this thesis.

### 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 was then seen as a realm where individuals could freely explore their creativity and emotions. In particular, P. Burger points out that the raise of the individual independent artist coincides with the appearance of the private art collector. As a follow up this, 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.

As P. Burger points out, (historical) 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 that 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 institutionalization

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

F. Drijkoningen quotes Bourdieu as follow: *“…the process of art's autonomization correlates with the emergence of a distinct societal category of art producers. These producers are increasingly inclined to recognize 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 proselytizing 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 labor 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 an intellectual and artistic field that is relatively independent and to a related development of a new definition of the artist 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), and institution is defined as “an organized system of goal-directed activities”. There for by an “autonomous art institution” we mean “an organized system of goal-directed activities for art”, where art is then defined by the institution itself.

For example, a guild of painters that is 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 purposes. A more modern illustration of this would be the situation with Art galleries which only address art as defined by them.

F. Drijkoningen (Drijkoningen, et al. 1991, 23-26) claims that the rejection to 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 the rejection of any form of institutionalization. *Dadaists* rejected the traditional art world and organized anti-art exhibitions and performances in defiance of established art institutions. Their work was often characterized by absurdity and anti-establishment sentiment.
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 than was the case at that time. 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 [expand]
3. **New order:** A third view engage in a radical battle with the existing institution of art and aim for a "new order," a complete upheaval in the social order. This movements speak of the "integration of art and social life" and the "aestheticization 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 [expand]
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 landspace of the early 20th century.

On the neo-avantgarde movements we also see other type of reactions to institutions for example:

1. **Creating Alternative Spaces:** Some avant-garde movements opted to create 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 organized events, such as "psychogeographic" explorations of cities, outside the confines of traditional art institutions.
2. **Anti-Commercial Stance:** Many avant-garde movements resisted the commercialization 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. *The 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 wider audience and often anonymous.
3. **Desire for Inclusivity:** Some avant-garde 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 sought 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 avant-garde artists created temporary or site-specific artworks that defied traditional museum or gallery settings. These works were often meant to exist outside of the institutional framework, challenging the idea of art as a permanent, collectible object. *Land Art (Earth Art)* make works that do not fit in the traditional premisses of an art institution; artists like Robert Smithson created large-scale, site-specific earthworks in remote natural locations. These works were not meant to be collected or displayed in traditional art institutions but were integrated with the natural environment.
5. **Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity:** Avant-garde movements have frequently embraced collaboration and interdisciplinarity, working with artists from various fields and challenging the separation of art forms within institutional structures. *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.
6. **Reappropriation and Appropriation:** Some avant-garde 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. *Appropriation Artists* like Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince have appropriated and recontextualized existing art and commercial imagery, challenging the roles of institutions and originality in art. [change for haute tension]
7. **Institutional Critique:** Some avant-garde movements engaged in "institutional critique" as a form of art itself. This involved creating artworks that directly questioned and challenged the practices, politics, and ideologies of art institutions. *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) where they argue that one of the intrinsically motivations of the historically avantgarde movements was reaction to the raise of the bourgeois society and the autonomy of art and autonomous art institutions. We also suggested that several other neo-avantgarde movements also had a similar reaction to the autonomy of art and its institutions. This brings us to a third common characteristic of avantgarde movements; namely the challenge of the status quo.

More explicitly, a common characteristic of avantgarde movements is the use of art to challenge the status quo of society, art and its institutions.

In the case of the historical avantgarde movements they are challenging the status quo of the bourgeois society and art in it. This is also a common denominator in neo-avantgarde movements.

For example, Elaine Sturtevant pioneered a movement called *Appropriation Art* which consisted of appropriating/copying other artist’s work.

A more specific work would be Haute Tension. In 1969, Elaine Sturtevantcopied of a homonymous work by M. Raysse from 1965.

With her work Elaine Sturtevantchallenges the status quo in several points.

Looking at the technical value of a piece, Sturtevant challenges the believe of the time that technique is the core asset behind art, neither is the visual concept that the observes sees. Rather she is showing that the intention of the artist is at core of the artwork. Therefore, intentionally coping and artwork still can make a valuable piece of art worth of a national museum as the Stedelijk museum in Amsterdam.

At her time, all[[3]](#footnote-3) works in museums and galleries were by male artis. Moreover, by copying several other works by male artist she challenged the institutions of art. had a gender bias and was not because of technique or concept of the art piece.

Both the Stedelijk museum and the art market have proof E. Sturetevant’s points right.

The Stedelijk museum shows both works on side of each other in its permanent collection.

The art market has paid more for some Sturtevant’s appropriated works than for 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 case of Elaine Sturtevant shows how an artist can integrate their practice into the reality they live in. This brings us to the fourth common characteristic of avantgarde movements that we will use during this thesis. Namely, the position of art in in the everyday life.

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

In the case of the Bauhaus, they advocated for the integration of art into the everyday life. This well illustrated in their manifesto:

“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.” [Walter Gropius, 1919]

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

As shown in the DW documentary on the Bauhaus [reference], the integration of art in the everyday life was also seen on the Bauhaus teaching method that replaced the traditional pupil-teacher relationship with the idea of a community of artist working and living together. As described by The DW Its aim was to bring art back into contact with everyday life, and architecture, performing arts, design, fashion and even parties were therefore given as much weight as fine art.

### Art, Innovation and experimentation

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### 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 have a more engaged, politically aware, and socially relevant role in society. This perspective played a crucial role in shaping the direction of avant-garde art in the 20th century and beyond. The impact of this perspective is still felt nowadays.

I intentionally avoided any mention to technology, computers and digital media and the avantgarde movements because that connection will be discussed in the next section.

1. For this perspective the Wikipedia definition is accurate yet not concrete enough as it does not explain why avantgarde movements are innovative. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. translation by chatGPT [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Perhaps there were other female artis 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 Guerilla 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-3)