

AVANT-GARDE – FROM THE DYNAMIC OF MOVEMENT TO A NEW NARRATION IN URBAN SPACE

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The transformation of the Great City and artistic presentations of movement

The phenomenon of movement is an intrinsic element in the dynamic of the great city, the city of industrial revolution and the snowball changes that followed. As S. Giedion¹ pointed out, the industrial revolution instigated far more dramatic transformations than the social revolution in late 19th century France. Paradoxically, it is the latter that seems to resonate more with people nowadays. Still, it was new socialists like William Morris who stood at the forefront of the war against anti-aesthetic of repeatability which came with the omnipresence of machines that freed man from the hardships of manual labour. This goes to show how much the socio-economic situation in Europe changed over a mere 100 years between the 18th and the 19th century. The growing pace of life which followed after the industrial revolution redefined the entire political landscape of the continent. Almost instantly there emerged a new, powerful social group – the proletariat – whose natural environment was the industrial structure of big cities, where it thrived and grew. William Morris, whose anti-imperialist ideas had prompted him to oppose England's involvement in the war between Russia and Turkey in 1876–1878, was rather late to realize that there can be no fighting for universalist ideals when a new division emerges around the globe. As a result of this new division the world was practically halved into two irreconcilably opposing parts – the world of capital and production and the world of the working men. What was the use of socialist ideals when reality overtook and transformed the struggle of ideas into class struggle? Morris attempted to change the world by reviving urban aesthetics and redefining buildings and interiors in his search for an alternative to industrial production. By doing so, however, he

fell victim to his own self-limiting assumption that ugliness inevitably contributes to the degradation of humanity. At this time, in Europe and beyond, most socialists called for improving proletariat's working conditions. Great reformers of art such as Walter Gropius or Henry Van de Velde focused their efforts on campaigning not as much for social rights as for the right to new urban aesthetics for flats, houses and the entire urban fabric. This struggle was no longer Morris's fight against the repeatability of mass production, but instead it used it and the opportunities it offered to create a new environment for the working man. All these efforts were part of a dramatic transformation of modern cities in the wake of industrial revolution.

Later, Le Corbusier would see mass production as a coded, anonymous aesthetic model and an affirmation of the new working man. He wrote: *Everyday items have become our modern slaves (...) why should we seek to make these object our trusted friends? Let them be accurate, hardworking and discreet, that is all we should ask of them.*²

Futuristic awakening

In late 19th century, visual arts attempted to give autonomy to the content of a work of art. No longer satisfied with static representations which only allowed one-dimensional reception, artists kept searching for new solutions. The ethereal mist used by impressionists to emphasise temporal distance (Claude Monet, *Gare Saint Lazare*) was replaced by the first futurists by simultaneity, where one picture depicted different stages of movement at the same time.

Industrial revolution considerably changed the way urban life was to be perceived by the artistic community. No longer the static reality that characterized pastoral landscapes of the country, the city

¹ S. Giedion, *Przestrzeń, czas, architektura. Narodziny nowej tradycji*, PWN, Warsaw 1968, p. 139.

² "Architektura i Budownictwo" 11/1932, p. 352. Quote in: J. Wujek, *Mity i utopie architektury XX w.*, Arkady, Warsaw 1986, p. 157.

with its hustle and bustle invited artists to capture moments by allowing them to experience different states of mind simply by observing real life situations in the same spatial context and location. This way a wholly new, dynamic image would emerge as a product of many experiences and observations. Artists sought to find elements of this synthesis by discovering new *continuance effects* or *spiritual harmony*. Thus, the perception of the world kept changing in the eyes of post-impressionists. Visual arts, however, went even further and gave rise to a great debate over the definition of object in art. Advocates of change rejected as pointless the approach which assumed faithful representation and, consequently, unequivocal definition of objects, and argued that this would impoverish the artistic message.³

The futuristic breakthrough was indeed quite unprecedented, also in terms of how it was born. It did not emerge in the aftermath of some memorable masterpiece which would proclaim the dawn of a new era, but instead was the first to proclaim itself, to be born from a manifesto and from the “poetry of action” that meant rejecting the art of the past. This determinism of destruction became the essence of the new artistic system⁴ (Fig. 2).

The phenomenon of futurism lied in the fact that its proponents breathed life and vitality both into the object – work of art, which they set in motion – and the artist engaged in the creative process. This gave rise to a highly dynamic form of expression in which both these dynamics of movement synergically overlapped. This is how one should interpret Robert Delaunay’s *Tour Eiffel* (1911) or Gino

Severini’s *La Danse du „pan-pan” au Monico* (1909–1911).

Cubo-Futurism and the new urban narration

The first to realize the imminence of the upcoming change were poets and writers. It was them who stood at the forefront of this new approach to art in its very cradle – Italy. From the very beginning, futurist art glorified rebellion, risk and struggle. In the Manifesto of Futurism (published in *Le Figaro* in 1909) Tommaso Marinetti and painter Umberto Boccioni wrote: “*Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece.*” This same idea found a somewhat different welcome in Russia, where – much like Art Nouveau with its Western universalism before it – futurism took a nationalist turn and developed into Cubo-Futurism, where the frenetic intoxication with aggression has a promethean streak to it, a touch of optimism for the future. According to Vladimir Mayakovsky, the adrenaline of new urbanism does not demand dealing blows, but rather speed; new words would invigorate art and great deeds would give it new purpose.⁵ This vision was shared by Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, who advocated the need to create words that had never been used before, which will originate from the futuristic language of art.⁶ New words were to change reality and become Zeus’s lightning bolts in the hands of the poets. In their works, they referred to the philosophy of a cosmic community of empa-

³ To name an object is to suppress three-quarters of the enjoyment of the poem, which derives from the pleasure of step-by-step discovery; to suggest, that is the dream. It is the perfect use of this mystery that constitutes the symbol: to evoke an object little by little, so as to bring to light a state of the soul or, inversely, to choose an object and bring out of it a state of the soul through a series of unravelings. S. Mallarmé, *Z odpowiedzi na ankietę J. Hureta: Evolution littéraire*, 1891, [in:] *Moderniści o sztuce*, p. 252, [quote in:] W. Juszcak, *Postimpresjoniści*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warsaw 1972, p. 86. [English quote in: H. Dorra, *Symbolist Art Theories: A Critical Anthology*, University of California Press, 1994, p. 141].

⁴ In his choice of subject matter for “*Le Vieux Port*” and “*The Departure of the Train de Luxe*”, Nevinson appeared to be working through the industrialised systems of mass transportation that Marinetti had famously listed in the “*Founding and First Manifesto of Futurism*”: shipyards, stations, factories, bridges, steamers, trains and aeroplanes. In this cataloguing of enthusiasm the Englishman was certainly not alone. D. Ottinger, *Futurism*, Centre Pompidou, Paris 2009, p. 288.

⁵ Partly in contradiction, Mayakovsky continues to extol urbanism (“*The nervous life of the cities requires quick, economical, abrupt words*”), or suddenly declares: “*It’s for life that we need words; we don’t recognize useless art.*” V. Marko, *Russian Futurism: A history*, New Academia Publishing, California 2006, p. 182.

⁶ Mayakovsky continues to preach the gospel of the word, proclaiming it the only aim of a poet, who must find the freedom “to create words from other words.” This process is also described as “*creation of a language for the people of the future*”. One source of this creation is folk poetry; and, in Mayakovsky’s opinion, his fellow futurists, like Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, do take inspiration from “*the native primeval word, from the anonymous Russian song.*” V. Marko, *Russian Futurism: A history*, New Academia Publishing, California 2006, p. 182.

thy and compassion shared by the entire humanity. Victor Khlebnikov wrote about this in his book *Time the Measure of the World*.⁷

His writings also dealt with the determinism of revolution understood as a clash of the creative powers of the universe as a result of man's past mistakes. This clash, according to Khlebnikov, should bring about a complete reconstruction of the world, including in the field of urban planning. Poetry was to play a prophetic role in the process, and herald the changes before they come. He did not prophesise an evolutionary improvement of the city, gradual emergence of underground communication, motorways, multi-level junctions, electric power, sewage system, gas, telephone wires etc. What he believed would come was a wholly new urban formula where people would thrive in harmony with nature and in a universal brotherhood between city- and country-dwellers, nations, countries and continents.⁸ How similar was this vision to Christopher Alexander's idea of a new formula of the urban environment.⁹

Wassily Kandinsky, in his turn, abandoned traditional art not for the sake of the raging futurism, but for the abstract, in which he sought to find a new civilisational formula based on new artistic form in sync with the new consciousness of the emerging civilisation. This consciousness was to be built out of dispersing old structures, including urban ones. The artist was also convinced it was necessary to combine different art genres under the primacy of new spirituality and new humanity. Kandinsky, who in his early years had been strongly influenced by symbolism and sezanism, used aesthetics to find new art combining deep spiritual and religious symbolic representations.¹⁰ Similar was the artistic path of Piet Mondrian, who was deeply fascinated by mysticism, especially early in his career.¹¹ Paradoxically, this kind of aesthetics could only have

come to existence in the context of new urbanism, so his escape from futurism was only partially a success.

Eventually what all these artists found in abstract art was not as much rejection of the metropolis, as a fascination with cubism, primarily as an idea. The paradox of it was that to depict the dynamic of the city one had to first abandon the idea of portraying it, only to rediscover one's place in it, as exemplified by *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* by P. Mondrian (1942-43), (Fig. 3). It was about portraying the life of the city, not the city itself. How this city life would be interpreted was entirely up to the artist, which is what allowed dynamic and movement to live a life of their own, independent from objects and sceneries.¹² The avant-garde of the early decades of the 20th century was, it seems, ahead of its time, laying foundations for deconstructionist ideas nearly 50 years before the father of deconstruction Jacques Derrida.

The moment when the most prominent Cubo-Futurists in literature realized they no longer wished to see their endeavours as an art of the city, but rather as an art of the citizens and city dwellers, marked a dramatic turning point in their artistic approaches and – which they might not have fully realised – a dissociation from the very roots of Cubo-Futurism. The modern city was replaced by the new man – the inhabitant. In literary narration, Cubo-Futurists argued that it was not the city that was meant to change mankind, but the new mankind, modern mankind, should change the city. Thus, the logical approach of “studying” urban transformation was rejected in order to try to free people from the spatial limitations of the past. *Our questions are shouted into outer space, where human beings have never yet set foot. We will brand them in powerful letters on the forehead of the Milky Way ...* – wrote Khlebnikov.¹³

⁷ В. Хлебников, *Время – мера Мира*, Издательство «Типография Л.Я.Ганзбург», Москва 1916, http://sinsam.kirsoft.com.ru/KSNews_233.htm.

⁸ Cf. *Swans of the Future and Fraternal World*.

⁹ Christopher Alexander et al., *Язык wzorców. Miasta – budynki – konstrukcja*, Gdańskie Wydawnictwo Psychologiczne, Gdańsk 2008 [Original title: *A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction*, Oxford University Press, 1977].

¹⁰ Wasył Kandinsky's adventure with mysticism started early with his treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*.

¹¹ As a young man he was a member of a theosophical society and was influenced by M. H. J. Schoenmaekers.

¹² „It is not a recognisable scene”, Picabia wrote about the two versions of *Dances at the Spring*. “There is no dancer, no spring, no light, no perspective, nothing other than the visible clue of the sentiments I am trying to express... I would draw your attention to a song of colours. D. Ottinger, *Futurism*, Centre Pompidou, Paris 2009.

¹³ Quote in: Ł. Żadowa, *Poszukiwania i eksperymenty. Z dziejów sztuki rosyjskiej i radzieckiej lat 1910–1930*, Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, Warsaw 1982, p. 41. [English quote in: Velimir Khlebnikov, Charlotte Douglas, Paul Schmidt, *The King of Time: Selected Writings of the Russian Futurian*, Harvard University Press, 1990].

The urban avant-garde of the New Art detached from the rationalism of widely understood urbanization. The experiments of new urban planners stopped functioning in the context of improving the existing infrastructure, and instead went on to search for completely unprecedented solutions. The belief in the new civilization and the new formula of humanity which would inevitably take over the world, shared by many representatives of the avant-garde, was to a large extent derived from Christianity and the vision of the judgment days, which can be seen in the works of Victor Khlebnikov, Wassily Kandinsky (Fig. 4), Pavel Filonov and Kazimir Malevich.

Reasons for rejecting representational art

Cubo-Futurism took to its own path, dissociating itself from its origin and foundation which was the thriving life of a modern city, and rejecting the point of view of a city dweller for the benefit of a philosophy of change of the very nature of man as a city dweller. The transformation of human personality in New Art was considered more durable than the transformation of the city itself through new spatial arrangements. Avant-garde artists believed that new art no longer needed the context of urban movement but in itself creates movement, and as such it does not require a language to express movement. Urban philosophy ceased to be developed and portrayed, and some even started to negate it in favour of the dynamic of human experience inspired by a work of art. Therefore the topic of the city which predominated in the works of avant-garde artists of the first two decades of the 20th century went on to be gradually replaced by abstraction, a trend which had appeared even earlier in the art of Malevich and Suprematists.

The modern city – early concepts

Despite all the hope that was put in it, Art Nouveau produced nothing that could help art free itself from the labyrinth of historicism. This disillusionment was a factor which considerably contributed

to the rejection of representation in art. The mistake of Art Nouveau lied in the fact that it failed to take up the challenge and opportunity of new materials and mass production in the construction industry. Still, attributes such as mass production, simplicity, geometry etc. were associated with the archetypal modern urban art and went on to almost completely transform, within mere 20 years, the form and the intellectual synonyms of futurism. This heralded the coming of a new era and a division of Avant-Garde caused by different perceptions of the city, whose way was paved by Theo van Doesburg and his Elementarism. Van Doesburg believed the most elementary components of a work of art to be colours in painting, forms in sculpture and building materials in architecture. While Elementarism opened the doors for Modernism, it deprived it of the original, futuristic power; there was no room any more for the noisiness of the urban machine.¹⁴

The early 1920s were dominated by Piet Mondrian's Neo-Plasticism, which attempted to follow in Malevich's footsteps and create a new artistic vocabulary on the basis of the different emotional tensions invoked by colourful geometric shapes. These experiments, while legible in the two-dimensional realm of painting, faced enormous difficulties when transposed into the three dimensions of architecture. Theo van Doesburg's attempt at redefining Elementarist architecture, which he published in the magazine *De Stijl* in 1926, became a manifesto of conflicting contrasts, such as *form* without a *concept*, *sum* without *synthesis*, *spatial form* without *shape*, *majesty* without *place* and *scale*, the simultaneity of the *inside* and *outside*. This is the time when new concepts surface, such as the theoretical house (1922–1923) and – moments later – the famous Schröder House designed by G. Rietveld in Utrecht (1924), where three-dimensional form is disintegrated not only in the facade, but also in the interior and outside the building (Fig. 5). History has shown that despite ostentatious proclamations of the abstract in visual arts, the rejection of the old vocabulary was only momentary. Eventually no one dared to completely rid art of the object, even though the traditional forms of architectural expression – the

¹⁴ The tendency in modern art which was based on Theo van Doesburg's theory that "art is always produced by the interaction of elements, not of forms." The "elementary" components of a work of art were, according to van Doesburg, colours in

painting, forms in sculpture and building materials in architecture; he believed them to be finite and natural values which existed regardless of the "individual form" of a given work, which masks the elements and the interactions between them.

ornament and detail – were violently attacked, e.g. by Adolf Loos in his famed 1908 essay titled *Ornament and Crime*.¹⁵ This established modernism as the dominant movement in architecture for years to come.

The non-conformism of the New Art

To survive the difficulties of the first three decades of the 20th century, sooner or later the New Art needed to impose some limitation on itself and choose a path it would follow in the future. It faced a dilemma: whether to remain avant-garde, and therefore give up on ever reaching the masses, while dismissing all other art as kitschy or academic, or perhaps seek to ally with “modernity” and under its flag sail away from siege mentality.¹⁶ The creators of New Art reasonably chose the latter, doubtlessly aware that in the long term it is better to be the Prometheus of constantly rotating modernity than a professional exposé of kitsch. Statistically speaking, the mass audience is generally more apt to admire new art rather than keep rejecting all its many new trends.

The masses have always remained more or less indifferent to culture in the process of development. But today such culture is being abandoned by those to whom it actually belongs – our ruling class. For it is to the latter that the avant-garde belongs. No culture can develop without a social basis, without a source of stable income. And in the case of the avant-garde, this was provided by an elite among the ruling class of that society from which it assumed itself to be cut off, but to which it has

*always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold.*¹⁷

This doesn't change the fact that eventually these so-called masses will opt for the art which they understand, “art that tells”, which contributes to building their identity.

Choosing modernity in the intellectual discourse meant over-exploitation and apotheosis of the machine, which was supposed to ensure everlasting youth to the New Art. Production and manufacture were seen as noble, utilitarian, common and rational, giving new opportunities and actual power, which was a dream come true for futurists.

The machine needs a creative power which would employ it, as it is, together with the qualities it has, to do the world's work and gradually transform this work to make it an expression of the free spirit of mankind no less than ever before. We need to create an expression of life as rich as it is commonly produced. Or we will have to succumb to the madness of the machine as a result of our admiration. – Frank Lloyd Wright (1932).¹⁸

Paradoxes and challenges – new gravity

The paradox of an avant-garde art is its necessity for making montages of several techniques or several realities at the same time. This principle was introduced to visual arts by cubism,¹⁹ and persisted ever since. Here lies the invisible border between Cubism on the one hand and Constructivism and Suprematism, both rooted in Cubo-Futurism, on the other. While Cubism and Constructivism follow the principle of combining several techniques and

¹⁵ *I have made the following observation and have announced it to the world: The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use. I had thought to introduce a new joy into the world: but it has not thanked me for it. Instead the idea was greeted with sadness and despondency. What cast the gloom was the thought that ornament could no longer be produced. What! Are we alone, the people of the nineteenth century, are we no longer capable of doing what any Negro can do, or what people have been able to do before us? Those objects without ornament, which mankind had created in earlier centuries, had been carelessly discarded and destroyed. (...) We have out-grown ornament, we have struggled through to a state without ornament. Behold, the time is at hand, fulfilment awaits us. Soon the street of the cities will glow like white walls! Like Zion, the Holy City, the capital of heaven. (...) Man had progressed enough for ornament to no longer produce erotic sensations in him, unlike the Papuans, a tattooed face did not increase the aesthetic value, but reduced it.* A. Loos, *Ornament and Crime* (1908). [Quote in:] A. Sarnitz,

Loos, wyd. Taschen, Koln 2006 [English quote in:] D. Goldblatt, L. B. Brown, *Aesthetics: A Reader in Philosophy of the Arts*, Routledge 2016.

¹⁶ *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*, p. 14–15, [in:] C. Greenberg, *Obrona modernizmu. Wybór esejów*, Polskie Towarzystwo Estetyczne, Universitas, Krakow 2006.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹⁸ Quote in: J. Wujek, *Mity i utopie architektury XX w.*, Wydawnictwo Arkady, Warsaw 1986, p. 177.

¹⁹ *In the „papiers colles” of Picasso and Braque that they created during the years before the First World War, we invariably find a contrast between two techniques: the ‘illusionism’ of the reality fragments that have been glued on the canvas (a piece of a woven basket or wallpaper) and the ‘abstraction’ of cubist technique in which the portrayed objects are rendered.* p. 95. P. Bürger, *Teoria awangardy*, Universitas, Kraków 2006. [English quote in: p. 73. P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Manchester University Press, 1984].

realities, Suprematism only combines realities. It is worth pointing out here that montage is a technique characteristic of the art of film-making, which developed at the same time. The difference is that in the movies it combines live pictures.

While New Art searched for synthesis, the unity of a work of art as a picture of a whole started disappearing. This was a time when visual arts abandoned, never to fully recover again, representational narration, which was taken over by cinematography.²⁰ It is a certain paradox that more than a century after the invention of the cinematograph, narration in movies has hardly changed and has remained representational and faithful to the invariable principle of a single scene where the frame still follows the renaissance rule of the golden ratio.

Whereas New Art, having rejected representational narration, has never rejected objects. The structure of binding the story dissolved, leaving objects to be freely interpreted, but when the hierarchy between the story and interpretation (and culmination) vanished, the understanding of scenes collapsed. No wonder, then, that new symbolism was forced to look for even further synthesis, which heralded the coming of Minimalism. When art loses its gravity, the affirmed object becomes the subject of new – that is modern – gravity.

Avant-garde, penetrating into our time, emanates a certain conflict of ideas, as pointed out in 1964 by Frank Stella in his commentary to an exhibition of his works at Leo Castelli's gallery:

*My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. A painting is nothing but an object... All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion... What you see is what you see.*²¹

The great defeated in the struggle between narration and object turned out to be time, the accelerator of change in cities and urban life. Contemporary artists found themselves in a trap of theatricality and the impossibility for the New Art to function without audience. Admitting this would lead art out of the painstakingly nurtured rhetoric of Modernism.²²

Modernism created space for people, and new architecture based on the archetype of new gravity created a product of the clash of creative forces of the universe and the rationalism of building structures for people to use. The central point of this new gravity was the creative vitality of man, no longer an individual, but a “society of change”. The fall of Modernism in late 1970s turned out to be a bitter awakening from the dream of new mankind, and left new urban life and urban planning at a crossroads (Fig. 6, 7).

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²⁰ Ibidem, p. 103.

²¹ M. Hussakowska, *Minimalizm – teoria i praktyka artystyczna. Fakty i interpretacje*, Instytut Historii Sztuki Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 1998, p. 20.

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