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Aleš Erjavec, ed. *Aesthetic Revolutions and Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. 344 pp. \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-5872-5.

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Critics and art historians have debated the relationship between avant-garde art and politics since the beginning of the twentieth century. In the late 1960s, Western European and North American contributors to this debate began to narrow the scope of their inquiry. They focused on avant-garde objects and strategies that aimed to critique or even dismantle the culture industry. While these assessments provided rigorous analyses of capitalist ideology, they also limited the definition of political art. *Aesthetic Revolutions and the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, a volume of essays edited by the Slovenian philosopher Aleš Erjavec, works to expand this definition by approaching the relationship between avant-garde art and politics from a different angle. Inspired by Jacques Rancière's writings on the "redistribution of the sensible" as a means for the transformation and emancipation of a community (pp. 3-4), Erjavec suggests conceptualizing the twentieth century's politically engaged avant-garde movements as a series of "aesthetic revolutions" (pp. 5-6). Italian futurism, Russian constructivism, surrealism, muralism in Latin America, the Situationist International (SI), the American neo-avant-garde, and the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) art movement all emerged during moments of social upheaval. These transitory moments, Erjavec argues, made it possible for the instigators of these movements to test and expand the limits of art's appeal to the senses. This process allowed avant-garde artists to raise critical questions about both the state of the wider world and their particular communities. In so doing, they brought their works into the realm of the political. From there, the "aesthetic avant-gardes," as Erjavec calls them, worked to transform

their communities either by linking critical sensory experiences to particular political movements or by using them to carve out lasting spaces for dialogue and dissent (p. 3).

In his introduction, Erjavec does not describe how particular avant-garde works mobilize their appeal to the senses to open up a space for critique and social transformation. He leaves this task to the authors of the individual chapters. The volume's first three chapters focus on what their individual authors present as the aesthetic revolutions of the pre-World War II avant-garde. In his chapter on Italian futurism, "Politics as the Art of the Impossible," Sascha Bru demonstrates that the futurists aimed to expand the concept of art beyond the passive contemplation of beautiful objects into the realm of politics. They achieved this by implementing two innovative strategies. First, they introduced the idea of art as action. Second, the futurists added non-art elements to their works such as images of modern technologies and fragments of ephemera. Bru argues that the introduction of these "ugly" non-art elements forced the spectator to reconsider her understanding of the meaning of art.

The futurists introduced their strategies of artistic expansion just as Italy began to transition to mass, representational democracy. The notion that every citizen now had the right to help shape Italy's future resulted in a political cacophony. The public sphere filled with campaign slogans, agitational speeches, and pamphlets. Bru contends that in order to continue their aesthetic expansion project, the futurists had no choice but to become

political actors, who promoted their speeches and pamphlets as works of art. The author supports this claim first by providing a brief but thorough history of the democracy movement in early twentieth-century Italy, and then by highlighting the movement's links to the evolution of futurist activities. In so doing, he offers an alternative to the canonical narrative of the Italian futurists as catastrophic modernists, whose fascination with war and brutality led them directly to fascist politics. This alternative narrative raises a new set of questions about the nature of the link that the Italian futurists did eventually forge with the fascist movement. While Bru does not explore the topic in detail, he does point out that fascist activists, including Mussolini, found the aesthetics of the futurists' ugly "art-actions" particularly appealing (p. 33). Given Erjavec's argument that an aesthetic avant-garde bridges the gap between art and politics through sensory experience, is it possible that the futurists' historically grounded, expanded aesthetics unintentionally provoked fascist sensations?

Essays on Russian constructivism and surrealism follow Bru's text. Like Italian futurism, these avant-gardes emerged during moments of social turmoil. Although both trends had certain ideological principles in common with communist movements that emerged parallel to them, neither the constructivists nor the surrealists fused their aesthetic practices with the political strategies of either the Bolsheviks or the French Communist Party. In their respective essays, John Bowlt and Raymond Spiteri aim to offer new interpretations of the movements' aesthetic strategies and their relationships to the political moments in which they emerged, with mixed results.

In his essay on constructivism, "5 x 5 = 25?," Bowlt challenges the canonical image of the constructivists as iconoclasts. Through a careful analysis of the prerevolutionary economic, intellectual, and literary contexts that preceded the movement, the author demonstrates that while the constructivists did seek to eradicate the barrier between studio art and everyday life, their works did not rupture their connection to earlier artistic trends. Bowlt demonstrates that like the symbolists who preceded them, the constructivists valued art's ability to provoke irrational and intuitive sensations. Like the Italian futurists, the constructivists integrated forms associated with modern technology into their works. The author argues that by adding these elements from modern life to their works, the constructivists not only expanded the boundaries of art. They also made it more recognizable and accessible to those who encountered it. Through his broad analysis of Russian avant-garde objects, Bowlt

shows how, with few exceptions, the constructivists' interpretations of the familiar forms of modern engineering were designed to provoke novel sensations within the spectator. According to the author, their aim, in so doing, was to stimulate the spectator's own creative, cognitive impulse. Bowlt's assessment constitutes an important intervention into the history of constructivism, because of the clear link that it reveals between the avant-garde movement and the Russian aesthetic traditions that came before it. The author devotes little attention, however, to constructivism's relationship to the Bolshevik Revolution and its aftermath. Without a detailed discussion of constructivism's relationship to the political shifts of its time, Bowlt's essay makes it difficult to discern the movement's place within the history of twentieth-century aesthetic revolutions the volume seeks to trace.

Raymond Spiteri's essay on surrealism, "Convulsive Beauty," concludes the volume's discussion of the prewar avant-gardes. Spiteri argues that the surrealists broadened the concept of aesthetic revolution by making "the contested space between culture and politics" their movement's medium (p. 81). Drawing upon Walter Benjamin's 1929 theory of surrealist art as an "image-space" that offered illuminating insights into the political situation in interwar Europe, the author demonstrates that this space emerged from a series of uneasy alliances between the surrealists and the proponents of the French communist movement (p. 82). Spiteri specifically shows that André Breton introduced the concept of the image-space into surrealism when he refused to bow to pressure both from within the surrealist circle and the communist movement to abandon the production of art forms, such as painting, that promoted passive contemplation in favor of direct political action. For Breton, the opposition between the interior life of the artist or spectator and the political facts of everyday life was "wholly artificial" (p. 94). Spiteri demonstrates that Breton, Luis Buñuel, and Salvador Dalí produced works that sought to activate a revolutionary impulse by mediating the space between interior contemplation and external reality, between culture and politics. In so doing, the essay fills a critical gap in the literature about the evolution of surrealism's relationship to the political context within which it emerged. It also lays the groundwork for Spiteri's assessment of the Situationist International's aesthetic revolution, which appears later in the volume.

David Craven's "Aesthetic Avant-Gardes and Revolutionary Movements from Modern Latin America" offers the volume's only assessment of artwork produced outside the United States or Europe. The author's discus-

sion of the relationship between public art in the wake of the Mexican Revolution and public art in Nicaragua after the 1979 Sandinista Revolution bridges the volume's assessments of pre- and postwar aesthetic revolutions. Through his analysis of the works of Diego Rivera, David Alfaro Siqueiros, and José Clemente Orozco, Craven demonstrates that the Mexican muralists produced a new visual language that helped create "a new cross-cultural sensorium within the public sphere" (p. 117). This new sensorium worked to precipitate dialogical encounters between the spectator and the mural object. Craven further demonstrates that this approach influenced the development of public art in Nicaragua after the Sandinista Revolution. The Nicaraguan murals, however, proved even more accessible to the public than their Mexican precedents, both because they employed images from popular culture and because they were installed in visible locations. According to Craven, this combination made it possible for the Nicaraguan murals to precipitate an aesthetic revolution. By encouraging dialogical engagement among broad segments of the public, they transformed the sensorium that defined the postrevolutionary public sphere. Craven's introduction of the concept of the dialogical into the volume's discussion of aesthetic revolution raises important questions about the relationship between visual art, corporeal sensation, and social relations. His careful attention to the anticolonial aspects of the work of the Latin American artists also asks the reader to consider how the specter of empire continues to influence our understanding of aesthetic revolution both inside and outside the European context.

In his essay "All along the Watchtower," Tyrus Miller considers the meaning of American aesthetic revolution during the social turmoil of the 1960s. His text focuses on the works of La Monte Young, Jackson Mac, John Cage, Alison Knowles, Carolee Schneemann, and Andy Warhol. All of these artists produced transformative works, but none linked their art to a particular political cause or singular revolutionary moment. Miller argues that instead they generated an avant-garde aesthetics that "refused mainstream social values," established "new types of artistic actionism," and modeled "alternative institutions, spaces, and frameworks for collective experience" (p. 148). He demonstrates that the artists of the postwar avant-garde challenged generic definitions and hierarchies by mixing diverse media such as dance, graphic design, music, and film with elements from popular culture. This "holistic approach to the sensory and sensuous environment of experience" allowed them to expand and transform the social sensorium (p. 159). In so

doing, Miller explains, this aesthetic revolution not only gave those who encountered the works "a chance to experience a personal, aesthetic, and political awakening" (p. 173). It also allowed the artists of the aesthetic avant-garde to project "the emergent constitutive power of a new, utopian collective order," which having worked its way into the language of American art and popular culture provides a model for future forms of dissent (p. 163). Miller's argument offers compelling new insight into of the sensory effects of the postwar American avant-garde. He also demonstrates, contrary to the position of many modern interpreters of the Frankfurt School, that avant-garde art can engage popular culture without being absorbed into the machinations of the culture industry. Indeed, Miller's essay suggests that the inclusion of such elements is essential to a lasting aesthetic revolution.

Raymond Spiteri and Miško Šuvaković round out the volume with their respective articles on the Situationist International (SI) and the Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK). Both texts address an avant-garde aesthetic that became a radical political movement. In his essay "From Unitary Urbanism to the Society of the Spectacle" Spiteri builds on his earlier essay on Surrealism to show how the members of the Situationist International created an aesthetic that worked to critique the late capitalist Spectacle and spark a revolutionary impulse among those who encountered it. He also provides an astute summary of the debates surrounding the role of the SI in the revolutionary events of May-June 1968. In his essay on the NSK, "Critical Phenomenology of the State," Šuvaković shows how in the 1980s the artists' collective combined modern art with propaganda images to create an aesthetic strategy that offered critical insight into both the crisis of modernism and the experience of late socialism in the former Yugoslavia. He then shows how that practice has evolved into a global aesthetic, which uses the artifacts of state bureaucracy to deterritorialize post-postmodern manifestations of power. Šuvaković makes clear that NSK's effectiveness has resulted, in contrast to the members of the SI, from their ability to work together over the long term as a collective. This insight suggests that sustained collectivity is key to a contemporary aesthetic revolution, and that those artists from former socialist countries, like the members of the NSK, may be the best to show us how to achieve it.

The essays in the volume reveal the diverse strategies that twentieth-century avant-garde artists used to transform the world. They suggest that across Europe, the United States, and Latin America, expanding the definition of art proved key to the transformation of the so-

cial sensorium. The creators of aesthetic avant-gardes in these regions achieved this most effectively when they included forms from everyday life, popular, and mass culture into their works. This significant insight opens up new pathways for our understanding of the relationship between modern art, visual culture, and politics. In particular, it allows us to exceed the confines of earlier, formulaic approaches to the topic, which have narrowly defined politically engaged art as a object or practice that offers a direct critique of the economic factors that main-

tain the culture industry. The aesthetic approach described in this volume offers tools for assessing the elements of late capitalism, such as affect, that exceed the boundaries of the processes of accumulation. It also offers insight into how the relationship between politics and aesthetics evolved in those socialist systems that existed outside the capitalist model, and provides a pathway to understanding the complexities of the global aesthetic experience.

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