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## **THE AVANT-GARDE AND AESTHETIC VALUES\***

### *THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF ART*

Does it make sense to speak of aesthetic values in avant-garde art? Is not the very formulation of the theme tainted with contradiction? After all, avant-garde artists have postulated repeatedly, and quite unambiguously, that it is not their aim to create aesthetic values; we do not want to have anything to do with aesthetic values — they used to add contemptuously. The presence of aesthetic values in art depends on its definite features. Until recently many of them were unanimously looked upon as the constitutive properties of art. Yet, it was exactly the avant-garde that called in question nearly all properties regarded earlier as the specific features of art. Perhaps, then, the problem posed in the title falls not only because of the postulated neutral, or even anti-aesthetic, attitude of the avant-garde, but also because the avant-garde is not art at all?

To find answers to these questions I shall begin with setting down properties regarded earlier as the constitutive features of art and which were rejected by the avant-garde.

1. An art work consists of a certain finite number of basic elements bound by relations. Spots of colour, lights, solid bodies, sounds, motions, inscriptions are examples of such elements. As examples of bonds linking the elements one can adduce space and dynamic relations; connecting spots of colour relations of contrast, of complementation, of saturation; binding sound relations of higher pitch, of rhythm, of consonance; syntactic and semantic relations between inscriptions.
2. The system of elements and relations mentioned under (1) makes up a whole: any change in elements or relations is received as an alien element and thus changes the identity of the system.
3. The kinds of basic elements are determined by the domain of art in which an art work properly belongs.
4. The choice of basic elements and relations depends on decisions of an individual artist. In making them he takes into consideration, at least to some extent, artistic and aesthetic rules as well as philosophic, religious, and

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other assumptions prevailing in his epoch and milieu. The choice meets the restrictions set down under (3).

5. An art work as a whole as well as some of its parts fulfil as a rule certain semantic functions: expressing, denoting, representing, symbolizing.

6. In choosing basic elements and relations an artist takes into account various logical and causal relations (as opposed to random choice); they give his work definite formal and semantic properties as well as a style.

7. An art work as a whole and its fragments or aspects carry aesthetic values. They are founded upon properties of the work described under points 1—6; their creation is also conditioned by the artist's craftsmanship, by his skill and good work.

8. A system of elements that meets the conditions 1—7 makes up the ground of a formal-expressive structure of a work.

In what way were the properties 1—8 called into question by the avant-garde? By which avant-garde? Should the repudiation of aesthetic values be looked upon as only a program declaration, or is it a fact implied by the changes introduced in the avant-garde art? Historians and theoreticians of art are far from being unanimous on the reach of the phenomenon called avant-garde. Some connect its lower limit with the rise of Dadaism; others include also Impressionism and Cubism. However, independently of how the reach of the avant-garde is set, there is no common attitude among avant-garde currents as to the problem here discussed. The features of art rejected by some avant-garde movements might well be continued to be acknowledged in other currents. When I say that certain features were called into question, I mean their repudiation by some avant-garde movements even though some other currents might continue to accept them or at least to realize them in their actions<sup>1</sup>.

I consider the changes in art introduced by the avant-garde in the following order: first I take into account the materials used to produce basic elements, then the relations binding those elements, and last the functions of art.

### **New materials introduced in avant-garde art**

The materials used in avant-garde art differ in important respects from those employed earlier. Above all, their kinds have changed, and thus the

<sup>1</sup> Comparing the avant-garde with the art of earlier periods I assume its broad reach: the lower limit includes Impressionism, the upper — the present time.

properties and qualities with which they impinge upon our senses. It was Dadaism which first considerably enlarged the stock of materials. It admitted materials hitherto neglected and despised: old tickets, newspapers, pieces of old iron or wood, etc. The next step was made by Fluxus and the Happening; they introduced materials like industrial refuse or worn-out items of everyday life. A new feature appeared in such art currents as Art Povera or Land Art. In them primitive, archaic materials are employed, like stones, earth, water. Acting on our senses with their specific qualities they also induce in us manifold sequences of associations: with the lot of man upon Earth from the most primitive forms of his existence; with the ancient rudiments of philosophic reflection which saw in those primitive materials the basic elements of which all existing things are built.

A special mention is due to the body of the artist as a new material of expression; Body Art and some of the Performances supply representative examples. It is closely connected with more general changes in contemporary art — with the transition of the objectivist-extrovert attitude of the Happening to the subjectivist-introvert attitude of the Performance<sup>2</sup>. The body of the individual artist is put to trial, sometimes to a cruel one. For it is through the body that we experience our existential problems: of life, death, and the sense of existence, of autonomy and integrity of the individual, so endangered in contemporary mass society.

Also the quantity of used materials had advanced to an important artistic variable. The scale of its gradations extends between a certain minimum and a certain maximum. Around this variability arose new artistic directions and problems. Art Povera, Body Art, the Performance, especially in its early period, form the minimum pole. The scarcity of materials creates the atmosphere of austerity and asceticism; transfers the pivotal point from acting with sense qualities of materials to engaged experiencing (Body Art), to expression, to inducing chains of emotive-intellectual associations. Many happenings occupy the maximum pole. Acting with a great mass of materials the artist sometimes intends to create the impression of overwhelming or domination, now and then — that of chaos. An example is the happening by A. Scott “Catalogue Tearing”, London 1968. A photograph shows the artist drowning in a vast heap of torn catalogues. On the surface floats only the face of the artist, smiling ironically. The action expresses protest against attempts to manipulate art on the part of patrons, directors of galleries, or critics nominated by them. At other times it is the artist’s aim

<sup>2</sup> I analyse this transition and put forward some psycho-social hypotheses to explain it in my paper: “From Happening to Performance”, *Philosophica*, 1983, University of Ghent, Belgium.

to experience, and let the audience experience, the very quantity of materials and their quality of being materials. This aspect appears in some of the pieces by A. Kaprow. In his happening "Yard" we see a backyard piled up with worn-out tires. The artist, smiling, dabbles in the mass of material, moves and throws it over from place to place.

Does the introduction in the avant-garde of new materials remove aesthetic values with which materials can operate upon perception? The facts and remarks here adduced compel us to answer this question in the negative. They testify that the avant-garde did not reject aesthetic values, but replaced the old by the new ones, based on the qualities of the newly introduced materials. It is thus an extension of the set of aesthetic values accepted in art as a whole. Such a process of extending seems best to be explained within a pluralistic conception of aesthetic values. The process develops gradually. The materials used in Dadaism, especially those employed by Schwitter's, act differently from those employed earlier, like paint or marble. Still, Schwitter's assemblages are refined juxtapositions of objects of broken, toned-down colours. The operation of materials used in the Happening is markedly different: it is rough, rapacious and directs our thought to the basic needs of man.

Materials employed by the avant-garde operate not only with their specific qualities, but also by inducing emotive-intellectual sequences. An example is the body of the artist himself or the archaic materials used in Art Povera. It is obvious, though, that such associations can be evoked by any materials, however abject or despicable. So, for instance, refuse found in a slum and employed in an artistic realization affects us in a different way than that taken from a garbage can in a house of rich people. Our thought, following one of the tracks of associations, reaches the fundamental problems of social structure, of division into layers and classes, with resulting social conflicts.

As it was shown above, the introduction of new materials by the avant-garde does not imply rejection of aesthetic values. The validity of point 7 in our list is, therefore, preserved in the avant-garde, at least with regard to materials as a source of values. It is not so with other points. Artists of many avant-garde directions postulated, and in fact admitted, free use of all possible kinds of materials, means, and techniques, independently of the domain of art or life they may derive from. They grounded this postulate in their need for spontaneous, authentic expression. This cannot be reconciled with care for homogeneity of means, or purity of style, because such a care — as avant-garde artists say — blocks the creative process and kills spontaneity. Let us add that the very concept "domain of art" was seriously shaken in the avant-garde.

Many avant-garde artists applied probability mechanisms or some other form of chance to choose their materials. An example is A. Kaprow who employed this method, especially in his early happenings<sup>3</sup>. Such a way of proceeding cannot be reconciled with points 4 and 6 in our list; these points make choice dependent upon logical-causal relationships, or some received artistic rules or assumptions.

### **Changes in the relations connecting the basic elements**

According to point 2 in our list a set of basic elements bound by relations make up a whole. Do changes introduced by the avant-garde annihilate this property? The evolution of art in the Twentieth century, and especially the changes introduced in the avant-garde, gradually dissolve the criteria of wholeness, and finally reject the concept entirely<sup>4</sup>. Here are some of these changes in a short presentation.

On the basis of their experiments with light and colour impressionists introduced a new way of laying paint on canvas. The impressionist colour spot does not render the local colour, its hue is loosened with light, its outline bleared. The shapes of objects rendered with the impressionist colour spot are indistinct, their edges fuzzy. In this situation it is easier to imagine a change which — when introduced in a picture — would not be received as an alien element.

It was Cubism which further loosened the criteria of wholeness. In Analytical Cubism an object disintegrates into an aggregate of colour spots, spread in a non-transparent way in a space of complicated, ambiguous parameters. In Synthetic Cubism the rendering of objects also deviates extremely from their usual presentation in relation to space. The use of collages further complicates relations between the elements in a picture in that it introduces ready-made materials — elements alien in a paint-covered surface. These properties of Cubism make it still easier to envisage a change in a picture which would not be received as an alien element, and thus would not be counted as a violation of its wholeness.

The furthest reaching changes were brought about by Dadaism and some later art directions, like the Happening, the Assemblage, or the Environment. The following two things come to the foreground: the admission of

<sup>3</sup> The role of chance and the use of probability mechanisms in contemporary art are analysed by me in the paper: "The Concept of Happening"; a chapter in: T. Pawlowski, *Concept Formation in the Humanities and the Social Sciences*. D. Reidel, Dordrecht, 1980.

<sup>4</sup> I recall that a feature rejected by one avant-garde movement might well be accepted by others. Thus, the concept of a whole was continued to be accepted in such avant-garde directions as Purism, Constructivism, or Neoplasticism; attempts were even made to make it more precise.

chance as a factor co-determining creative decisions of the artist, and the abolition of time and place limits accepted in traditional art.

Before, the introduction of chance selection of materials of which the basic elements were made as well as determination of relations binding them depended on formal, expressive, and semantic functions of an art work. With reference to those functions it could be explained why these and not other elements were selected, and why certain and not other relations bind them. The admitting of chance to determine the relations has entirely shaken the criteria of wholeness. For now any change in relations is admissible, so long as it is based on the same principle of chance. No such change can be regarded as an alien element. The admission of chance violates entirely items 2, 5, and 6 in our list of properties. It is to be stressed, though, that the extent to which chance intervenes in art varies considerably. At its minimum it may influence only few small aspects of a realization; at the opposite extreme chance would determine all its important features.

The authors of happenings or environments, among others, postulated the abolition of time and space limits accepted so far in art. The place in which a happening occurs may be of any size, says Oldenburg; it may be a room or a country. The action "Winter Assemblage" arranged by the Gallery Foksal, Warsaw, has no time limit nor did it envisage any end effect. There are environments constructed in natural surroundings, e.g. in a lonely forest on a slope of a mountain; natural and atmospheric elements are here purposefully admitted as forces cooperating with the artist in making the realization. In the intent such realizations could be continued deliberately long. Also the individuality of authorship was rejected: if one author died or gave up, the work could be continued by any other one; as we saw, Nature could also act as "co-author". These are strong blows against the conception of wholeness. They reject entirely, and unambiguously, items 1, 2, and 4 in our list of properties.

The examples adduced concerned mainly visual arts or music. Similar changes can be observed in other domains of art, e.g. in literature. Thus, the novel has undergone considerable evolution: from the classical Nineteenth century novel to Proust, Joyce or Butor. Most earlier novels were fictional, contained narrative, character delineation, and dialogue, and followed a regular time sequence. Some of the properties, e.g. regular time sequence or narrative, are absent in avant-garde novels. Their place is taken by other features which did not exist in earlier novels, e.g. the interspersing of actual newspaper reports within the text.

Do the changes introduced by the avant-garde in relations binding basic elements imply that these relations have ceased to act aesthetically? With regard to changes which do not consist in applying chance the answer must undoubtedly be in the negative. Satire, biting irony, sometimes chaos emanate from many Dadaist realizations. Numerous happenings exhibit coarseness, primitiveness, dramatic tension, aggression mixed with sharp social criticism. And how is it with relations determined by chance? The negative function of chance is to break radically with the received rules of creation. Chance replaces all logical and causal relationships which hitherto shaped the creative process by something entirely different — by the principle of randomness. Chance fulfils also a positive function — it is a source of new aesthetic values. Chance determined relationships between words drawn randomly from a hat by Tristan Tzara. This lent his poems the quality of freshness, of unexpected, fruitful collisions between intellectual and emotive contents of randomly juxtaposed words. In combining randomly syllables and words the representatives of the Concrete Poetry wanted to let fully speak the aesthetic values of purely graphic or sound aspects of language. They also hoped to reach the archaic layers of meaning, to drag them from accretions, deposited by ages of later associations, and thus lay open unknown reserves of culture.

Similar examples of new aesthetic values created by random juxtaposing of objects can be found in such domains of contemporary art, like the Assemblage, the Environment, or the Happening. Valuable aesthetic effects brought the technique of Aleatorism in music. An example are compositions by W. Lutoslawski, in which moderate (controlled) Aleatorism is employed. This technique provides for a margin of freedom in execution of certain details, mainly rhythmical ones, within the framework of a precisely determined composition. This brings the aesthetic effect of freshness, of refined irregularity and richness of rhythm.

Chance presents a challenge to the audience. Unexpected, random combining of elements stimulates the audience to a greater interpretative effort, intensifies their cognitive and emotive reactions.

In some avant-garde movements great stress was laid on the abolition of one borderline between art and life, and also between the artist and the audience. This borderline is artificial — as happensers used to say — and should be obliterated entirely. The postulate to incorporate art in real life had two aspects: the social and the aesthetic one. The incorporation should end the harmful isolation of art and promote its influence upon life and interhuman relations. That is why happensers wanted to engage the audience into active participation in their spectacles. In the aesthetic aspect

the assimilation of art to life was to give it a specific brand of objectivism and realism; an artistic action should “extend”, “repeat” real life. Art should not present nor express anything, but should consist of real actions, like those we meet with in life situations. In all those efforts a great role was played by chance; it weakened the semantic relations between the elements of which a realization consists, and thus assimilated art to life, which — as happens say — is also governed by chance.

### **Changes in the functions of art**

Also in this respect there is no unanimous stand among avant-garde artists; on the contrary, there exists a variety of tendencies and attitudes.

It is not the aim of art to produce objects: paintings, sculptures, drawings; instead, art expresses itself in actions of various kinds, interventions, performances. This postulate was put forward and realized by many avant-garde artists. This change in understanding the function of art had presumably the largest following among avant-garde artists. It rejects entirely item 1 in our list, or at least considerably broadens its understanding. It does not follow, however, that all artists who accepted the change abandoned their earlier interests: painting, drawing, sculpting, etc. In addition to doing actions of the new type many continued to cultivate their former disciplines, or produced objects of a new type — the installations.

In shifting their attention from producing objects to actions artists had at least two important things in view. Painting, sculptures and other art works are objects of trade. This makes the artist market-dependent. Gallerists try to influence the artist's creation in order to maximize the market value of his products — which contradicts the postulate of independent art. That is why early artistic actions were often held at private places or in streets; this gave their authors independence. Later on, though, artists returned to galleries and museums, for they have realized that their actions can also be turned to objects of trade.

The second reason concerns the substance of actions. Many problems of interest of avant-garde art could only adequately be presented through the medium of suitable actions. In what way can the artist's body be used or acted upon in order to lay open authentic bodily and psychic reactions? How a change in one parameter or aspect of art conditions a change in another one? — these are some examples of such problems. To put up a problem of this kind the artist must carry out suitable actions in front of the audience; for only in this way the changes can be evoked which are the subject of inquiry.



What is the function of art according to the avant-garde? It consists of the following three elements: 1. to create situations evoking strong engagement in the artist himself and in his audience; 2. to stimulate the cognitive powers of man, to refresh and sharpen his sense, emotive, and intellectual reactions; 3. to carry out inquiries on problems considered as important, actual<sup>5</sup>.

The artists who followed the first program reiterated that it was not their aim to present or communicate anything, but to evoke intensive experiences, otherwise unaccessible, and thus lay open new perspectives. Body Art and the Performance contain essential examples of such actions. The individual artist puts his body to severe tests in order to try himself out in extreme situations. Often, he wants to reach and live through his authentic self, to lay open his original bodily and psychic reactions, usually submersed under layers imposed by unifying mechanisms of mass media. The use of the body to evoke such experiences is a novum introduced by the avant-garde art. Some analogies can be found in the mysteries of the Middle Ages. Experimenting with the body has certain counterparts in Oriental culture; it is presumably from there that it was taken over, together with certain threads of philosophic thought. However, the meaning of such actions in those epochs and cultures was different: they had a religious, mythical character and did not function as art. A novum is also some problems which stimulate contemporary artistic actions. An example is the threat to autonomy, integrity, and independence of the individual. This problem is new, because it appeared in its present form only in contemporary society.

The stimulation of man's cognitive powers has, as an aim of art, two aspects. Some realizations put up the problem of stimulation, reflect on how man's sensitivity declines, and what measures can be used to enliven it. In other cases the purpose is not theoretical reflection, but creation of situations and stimuli to restore the lost freshness. The performance by the Spanish artist Noguerra, Lyon 1981, is an example. Upon entering the gallery the audience is confronted with an arrangement of slimy, obscure shapes. During the performance the artist washes them with an energetic stream of water; various objects of everyday environment reveal themselves to the audience.

Actions which aim to restore freshness to reactions of man's cognitive powers often employ chance or unexpected juxtaposition of circumstances. Relevant examples can be found in many currents of avant-garde art.

It is true that art has always created stimuli to refresh our cognitive powers.

<sup>5</sup> Also the earlier art fulfilled the first two functions to an extent. The avant-garde fulfils them in a new way, which is discussed here. One can also speak about beginnings of researches in the earlier art; in this case, though, the difference has the basic character.

However, it was in a way its secondary product, achieved on the margin of the main task: problems of form, expression, representation, etc. In avant-garde art the striving to achieve this effect advanced to the main purpose of action. New is also the reflection on factors which can diminish or increase the strength and vividness of man's cognitive-emotive reactions.

The third constituent of the function of avant-garde art is to carry out researches on various problems. It is impossible to define generally the kinds of problems involved; they include any themes considered in the milieu as important, actual; often, they are simply problems in vogue. Here are some examples: The threat to the individual's autonomy in contemporary society. What are the individual's authentic needs and ways of behaviour? The existential problems of the individual. Art and the artist, and their relations to society. Reflection on the essence of art, its meaning and function. Phenomena of creation and reception of art. Shaping of space and time, and their perception. The influence of environment upon behaviour of persons who are present in it. Inquiries into the technical and artistic possibilities of modern domains, like film, video, electronic music, etc. Many currents in contemporary art are concerned with some or other of those problems; one could mention here Conceptual Art, Body Art, Art Povera, Minimal Art, Mail Art, the Performance, the Happening, avant-garde music.

In comparison with other currents an unfavourable impression produces some purely verbal realizations counted as conceptual ones. These are essays concerned with the essence and function of art, its relation to society. The standard of those elucubrations is often lamentable; they are read in front of tantalized audiences by authors who do not have sufficient knowledge of the subject. Even Kosuth himself is here not without fault. Some of his thoughts on art and definitions, frequently quoted from various dictionaries or encyclopedias, evoke dejection with their banality, vagueness, formal and semantic errors.

Artistic researches can generally be characterized as pre-scholarly reflection on various problems. It is not causally that I have juxtaposed two seemingly incompatible words: "artistic" and "research". In numerous discussions I have had with artists on this problem the following scheme repeated itself regularly. The Artist: In this piece I wanted to inquire into the relationship between the factors A and B (e.g. definite changes in the presented forms and the resulting character of perceived space; a change in direct conditions of perception, e.g. light, distance, neighbouring objects, and the course of perception) I: If it was really this relationship you wanted to inquire into, then you should have juxtaposed the relevant factors in a different way. As it is now, too many factors change at a time, so that it is impossible to find out

which factor is dependent upon which. The Artist: I agree; this is indeed how one should have proceeded if what I am doing were scholarly research, but it is art.

Artists often say they put up definite problems in their realizations. Yet, they do not in fact pose any problems in the usual sense of the word; for this requires a verbal formulation of a question which is not the case in art, as a rule. Rather, the artist creates a situation, supplies visual stimuli which present, at best, a concrete example and not a general formulation of a problem. On the basis of these stimuli and data the percipient himself must try to formulate the problem. Further, it is a characteristic feature of such realizations that they do not provide sufficient grounds for posing a problem. The percipient has to make up the stimuli supplied by the artist with additional elements, often with extensive knowledge of history and theory of art. The whole so composed does not, as a rule, determine a single problem, but provides for the formulation of many ones. Reflection stimulated by such artistic realizations is often vague, and not carried to its ultimate conclusions. This is not simply the fault of the lazy percipient, although it may so happen, but results from the character of supplied stimuli. This is connected with a certain feature of artistic inquiries, which sets them apart from scientific research. The purpose of such inquiries is not only the formulation and — what seldom happens — the solution of a problem. They strive to influence the whole personality of the percipient; to enliven his imagination; to convince him of the importance of a certain matter and make him do something about it; they supply a starting point for philosophic reflection, evoke existential, cathartic, or dramatic experiences. These are all precious values with aesthetic colouring about them. They are based on aesthetic qualities of materials used by the artist. However, their main source lies neither in those qualities nor in masterly craftsmanship of the artist, but in the contents of his action, in its appeal to the percipient's imagination, to his intellectual and emotive powers.

### **Is the avant-garde art? Does it create aesthetic values?**

The time has come to draw conclusions. Let us go back to the question we posed at the beginning: Is the avant-garde art? We have to answer with a clear and decisive: No! — if we accept the traditional sense of this notion, whose basic properties have been set in the list of eight items. I have shown that nearly all those items were questioned by the avant-garde. Actually, the term “anti-art” or the pompous sounding description “transavangarde” is used in reference to the contemporary avant-garde by some art theoreticians<sup>6</sup>. This exaggerates the innovations introduced by the avant-garde.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. A.B. Oliva, *The International Transavangarde. Milano 1982*.

Naturally, such use of language strengthens the prestige of the artist, and of art theoreticians by whom the new expression was introduced. Yet, this is a persuasive argument; besides, it may result in overlooking the process of gradual changes which form the passage from the earlier art to the contemporary avant-garde.

In the preceding analyses the gradual character of this passage has been documented with reference to several important items in our list. It gets out clearly in the evolution of the concept "whole" as well as in the passage from logical-causal to random determination of creative processes, as these two concepts are logically connected with other items in the list they involve them also in the process of gradual change. As a consequence of this evolution the set of realizations presently referred to as art includes pieces which sometimes differ widely from each other: the contemporary productions besides art works of the earlier epochs. The question arises if it is right to refer to all those different things with one and the same term "art?" Let us turn the question around and ask, why should it not be right? A possible answer would certainly point to the unhomogeneous character of such a set. However, the concept of homogeneity is a relative one; it gains a clear meaning only with reference to a corroborated theory, or at least to a set of concepts and statements which forms an essential beginning of such a theory. At the same time the notion regarded as homogeneous must belong to the basic notions of this theory. In our case it should be a theory which explains various aspects of that broad set of realizations presently referred to as art. The more of such aspects can be explained by the theory, the stronger is corroborated the hypothesis of the homogeneity of this broad set of realizations; and the greater the usefulness of the corresponding notion<sup>7</sup>. It follows that this broad set can justifiably be recognized as unhomogeneous only on the following conditions: 1. There exists a corroborated theory of art and the extension of its basic notion — "art" is a proper subset of that broad set, or partly overlaps it, or — in extreme case — both sets are mutually exclusive. 2. Serious attempts have been undertaken to construct theories covering exactly all realizations presently referred to as art. None of these theories has stood the test of verification. As far as I know, these conditions have not been fulfilled yet. For the time being, therefore, there are no grounds, except of suppositions, to recognize as unhomogeneous the broad set of realizations presently referred to as art.

That was a negative argument for accepting this broad set as the extension of the term "art". Two additional positive arguments can be adduced. The first refers to the existing colloquial usage which actually assigns this broad

<sup>7</sup> Cf. my *Begriffsbildung und Definition*, de Gruyter, Berlin — New York, 1980. I discuss there conditions for the usefulness of concepts and definitions in the humanities.

extension to the word “art”. Departure from the existing usage — if it is to be rational — must be substantiated with some important reasons, in particular with its little usefulness. As far as I know such a substantiation has not been given yet. The second argument refers to a procedure which is sometimes employed in such cases. It consists in assuming the institutional (sociological) criterion of art as a starting point for further research. The broad set of realizations described presently as art meets this criterion; their creators all have the social status of an artist. The above three arguments speak for the broad understanding of the term “art”; it includes the avant-garde besides the art of earlier epochs. Suppose now, a new theory of art is developed which successfully explains phenomena of creation and reception. Suppose further that this theory assigns the term “art” an extension which is a proper subset of that established by the institutional criterion. In that case that criterion might be replaced by a narrower concept, stipulated by this theory. This, of course, on condition that no competitive theory is simultaneously developed which explains the set of phenomena corresponding to the broad understanding of art.

The presence of a formal-expressive structure is often regarded as a feature characteristic for pre-avant-garde art. Is it justified to accept this feature as a criterion to differentiate the avant-garde from the earlier art? Now, not all realizations counted as avant-garde lack such a structure. It is present in impressionist, cubist, and fauvist paintings — if we count these currents to the avant-garde. Also some later realizations regarded as avant-garde have it. An example is the performance by the French artist Jean Clareboudt, Lyon 1981. The artist acted with the qualities of his motions, with expression of the ballet and the poetic type, not without deeper philosophic meaning. What the audience sees looks like wandering. The artist moves along curves and loops; his motions evoke ballet and sport gymnastics. The wandering man leaves behind traces of his individual, unique way, gives testimony of his efforts. The round complicates and aims to a culmination — to the final, highest effort. The man tries to raise an immense metal shield, fights with the heavy burden, resists it, sometimes steps back, and then attacks again, strikes it with his naked fingers, hurts himself. It was a very personal, concentrated utterance, full of passion.

The absence of formal-expressive structure is, therefore, not an absolute criterion of the avant-garde. Would it be true to say that such structures are absent from the majority of avant-garde realizations? The concept of formal-expressive structure is closely connected with several features of art which were gradually changed and finally refuted in the avant-garde. I have in mind above all the concept of a whole built of a finite number of elements bound by logical-causal relations, as opposed to relations determined

randomly. In a formal-expressive structure a great stress is put on form and expression, on aesthetic values based on traditional sense qualities. All these reasons speak for assuming the absence of formal-expressive structure as a criterion distinguishing the avant-garde from the earlier art. However, on the following conditions: 1. We do not interpret the criterion as unexceptional one. 2. We refer it mainly to the period between the early fifties and the present.

Searching for features which would distinguish the avant-garde from the earlier art some authors point to the absence of aesthetic values. Artists themselves have repeatedly postulated the aesthetic neutrality of the avant-garde.

Despite these contentions I am convinced that avant-garde art produces aesthetic values. However, they are often, although by no means always, different from those met with in the earlier art. I have already called attention to this fact; now I shall sum up the results of the preceding considerations.

The sources of new aesthetic values in the avant-garde are, first, materials and means which were not used previously. Dadaism, Fluxus, the Happening, Art Povera, Body Art — these are examples of modern art currents which have largely extended the stock of materials used. Sense qualities of the new materials act in a different way: they evoke specific shock, repel, fascinate, intoxicate with the cognition of intimate spheres of human body and psyche; they evoke far reaching associations with the primitive fundamentals of man's existence and his lot upon the Earth, with the reflection on the origins and nature of world.

Another source of new aesthetic values is relations binding material elements of which contemporary realizations consist. A special role is here played by chance and the positive and negative values which it creates.

Novelty, which has never before been valued so highly, advanced in avant-garde art to an important source of aesthetic values; in extreme cases it is identified with the criterion of creativity.

The main source of aesthetic values has moved from sense and formal qualities to contents of artistic realizations, to intellectual-emotive associations which they can evoke. Contrary to the prevailing conviction, this shifting of the source of value does not involve any absolute change, but consists, instead, in making the aesthetic function of materials more indirect. For, the sense of a realization, the message it eventually communicates, does

not simply arise out of conventions or usage — as it is the case with language signs — but is grounded in specific juxtapositions of sense qualities of the material bearer of information. Any change in these qualities, implies change in the meaning and the intellectual-emotive associations evoked by those qualities. Thus, in influencing the meaning of the message they indirectly determine its aesthetic function.

Among aesthetic values produced in the earlier art the dominant role was played by the positive ones: beauty, charm, symmetry, transparency, moderation, ability to evoke liking or pleasure. The main feature of many new values introduced by the avant-garde is their negative character: the materials used act rapaciously, roughly; they evoke shock, depression, sometimes boredom. It is difficult, though, to describe the aesthetic action of those materials, because it closely depends on their specific qualities, for which no language has names. The existing terms, or such that may yet be introduced, do not grasp the specific features of these values; these terms are too general, too abstract — are able to differentiate only some more general aspects of values, common to a certain class of them. A specific quality of a certain value can only be described with the aid of an ostensive definition, i.e. by demonstrating concrete materials or situations where this value is present.

I think that the difference between aesthetic values in the avant-garde and in the earlier art is an indicator which explains why avant-garde artists postulated aesthetic neutrality or even anti-aestheticism. Two factors seem to have played a role here. It is just those positive aesthetic values which are responsible to a large extent for turning the products of pre-avant-garde art to a commodity sought after in the market. It is due to those values that they functioned as refined decorations to raise the prestige of their owners. It made art dependent on financial and political patronage. The second factor concerns the sharp, critical attitude — so characteristic of many currents of contemporary art — towards the existing artistic and social reality. Severe criticism, though, cannot be reconciled with producing positive, harmonious aesthetic values. Refutation of all aesthetic values was, therefore, announced, although in fact values of one kind were replaced by other ones. Was this a camouflage? Or a not quite clear awareness of one's own motives of action? Perhaps an exaggerated expression of postulates — so characteristic of all avant-garde movements — in order to stress one's own distinctness, and thus to attract the attention of society? Certainly a touch of all these things.

I mentioned above the dominating role of negative values in avant-garde art. Instead of “negative” one should perhaps say “sharp”, or use some

other description. The point is to avoid suggesting a continuum of aesthetic values, with number zero representing objects aesthetically neutral; left of zero stretches the realm of negative values, right of it — that of positive ones. Such a suggestion would be wrong on two grounds. So called negative values cannot be identified with the absence of corresponding positive ones; rather, they represent concrete values of a different type, equipped with their distinctive qualities. Also the idea — suggested by number zero — that there exist objects aesthetically neutral seems to be wrong. For, I think that all objects and qualities have the ability to act aesthetically. This ability is not always actualized. The role of the artist who discovers or creates new values consists, as it were, in removing the cataract from our eyes, in making our cognitive powers more sensitive. These assumptions are part of my conception of aesthetic values which I present elsewhere<sup>8</sup>. Its main features are: panaestheticism, objectivism, pluralism, and an empirical character of aesthetic values.

<sup>8</sup> It is to be included in a book of mine on art and aesthetic values which is now being prepared for printing.