

WHAT ARE YOU READING? EDITED BY EDWARD ZITER

Elin Diamond

“This overheated and distasteful little book—for me the wrong book in many ways—addresses matters about which there is, precisely, nothing left to say.” The Rutgers University library believed this antihype and never purchased Paul Mann’s *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (1991), a book so amusingly dour, so relentlessly dialectical, as to be, for me, irresistible. A member of Mike Sell’s *Vectors of the Avant-Garde* seminar at last month’s ASTR, I decided really to read instead of skim my Alibris-purchased copy of Mann’s distasteful little book. In it the main figures of futurism, dada, and surrealism become a failed or self-recuperating aggregate whose discourse of inflammatory “anti-” stances served only to undermine their revolutionary intentions: “[T]he avant-garde’s assaults on tradition, cultural establishments, and the formal structure of the work of art tended to place it in the service of, not . . . the revolution, but of its deferral, its displacement. . . . The avant-garde’s historical agony is grounded in the brutal paradox of an opposition that sustains what it opposes precisely by opposing it” (11).¹

For lefties who still get recuperation headaches at the theatre, at dance concerts, or at art galleries, much of this book may seem familiar. But for others (and here I include the aforementioned lefties) who imagine that these were the wrong headaches, this book is delectably bitter medicine. Published in 1991, *Theory-Death* arrived at the end of a decade of ideological theorizing and theorizing about ideology. For literary, performance, and art critics the story of the avant-garde—and I stress, following Mann—the *story* of the avant-garde’s oppositional tactics and their ultimate neutralization and recuperation has

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become an exemplum for understanding how to think about cultural resistance, how to look for the dialectical “germ” as Mann puts it, within avant-garde posturing and proclamations that contaminates the effects of resistance. Mann writes: “the avant-garde is not the victim of recuperation but its agent, its proper technology,” and the key term for Mann, as for everyone in that era of theoretical scholarship, is “discourse.”

For avant-garde discourse is not a matter of movements alone, nor is it some abstract Discourse metonymized by the “Adornos” and “Greenbergs” and “Bürgers” of the scholarly index, nor is it merely a few tangential lies told by Marinetti, Tzara, Breton. The discursive economy circulates works, and in order to circulate these works must have incorporated, in some form the economy’s structures and values. Discourse is not extrinsic to the work, it is not an assault on the sanctity of the art object: in its most fundamental and characteristic devices and tropes the poem or painting has already introjected the economic relations that will provide for its recuperation. (92)

Underlying this Blau-esque statement—“the death of the avant-garde is its theory and the theory of the avant-garde is its death” (3)—is the protean, all-absorbing nature of theory: that is, discourse. “The death of the avant-garde is not its termination *but its most productive voluble, self-conscious and lucrative stage*” (3). Fine. But now it’s time to argue back. . . .

For theatre scholars Mann’s plaint sounds decidedly undialectical. There is nothing about the theatrical apparatus that is not redolent of commodity-intensive effect and affect, and this has been true in the West at least since the late sixteenth century, when theatre began to move from court patronage to a freestanding commercial enterprise. One could argue that that date is far too late: Attic drama was, *pace* Brecht, “theatered down” by the theatre apparatus of Athens. What drama, theatre, and performance bring to Mann’s discussion is an already advanced phase of the circulation and recuperation of discursive economies. Theatre history is full of theatrical “love and theft”—stealing the plots, characters, actors, musicians, technical effects, and publicity strategies from one theatre, only to have their appearance in another theatre touted as original. I like to imagine a “*Quem quaeritis*” performance at Canterbury, remembered and copied—but represented as divinely inspired—by a priest from Gaul upon his return home. Performance has always existed in and through networks of suspicious mutuality, gossip, competition *as well as* “opposition and alignment” (Mann’s ubiquitous terms).

Mann is richly evocative in relation to dada’s efforts not to, futilely, kick against the commodity but to embrace and then destroy it by destroying its own discourse. Said Kurt Schwitters of Richard Huelsenbeck’s German dada: “Huelsenbada ‘foresees its end and laughs about it’” (quoted in Mann, 83). But Mann shies away from performance within and as discourse. It’s always easier to consider the art object in its travels from studio to gallery to museum, noting the ideological investments that shift with each move, than to consider a medium that is constitutively activated by its own disappearance only to instantly reappear as discourse. For the latter reason alone—the ways in which performance is

surrounded by and saturated by discourse—performance should be his chief case study, especially given the avant-garde artist's will to performance throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. Perhaps André Breton's eventual loathing of dadaist public pranks in Paris in the 1920s infected critics with a similar anxiety. Writes Mann: "In 1958 Yves Klein exhibited an empty gallery and that vacant space continues to fill discursive passages thirty years later. Edward Lucie-Smith argues that 'Klein is an example of an artist who was important for what he did—the symbolic value of his actions—rather than for what he made.' For many critics this tendency towards gesture remains problematic" (25).

At this, a performance scholar can only weep. In performance, *what you make IS what you do*. And gesture, what Klein *did*, is the keyword and the bridge that allows the artist to move from the writing tablet or the canvas into the public space—time of performance. See, for example, the description (Mann would say "discourse") produced by Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Gino Severini, and Giacomo Balla in their *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* (April 1910). One month earlier they had appeared with Marinetti in a bombastic futurist "evening" at the Teatro Chiarella in Turin, and their public performance found its way into their published manifesto, which in turn infected the paintings they would exhibit one year later, in April 1911. "The gesture for us will no longer be a *fixed moment* of universal dynamism: it will be decisively the *dynamic sensation* made eternal" [*italics in Technical Manifesto*]. Dynamic sensation will be transmitted through the painting's "activity" directly to the audience. Wrote Boccioni: "Painting [is] no longer an exterior scene, the setting of a theatrical spectacle. . . [instead, wrote Ardengo Soffici]: "the spectator [must] live at the center of the painted action."²

The larger question is whether, Artaud-like, "living at the center" of avant-garde performance, then and now, means that we can resist theory-death, the recuperation Mann sees as the contaminating "germ" of all avant-garde production. We might point out that while the gestures of/in performance are conventional and, by extension, commodifiable, they are not strictly translatable. We might insist that there is a necessary gap between embodied gesture and the discourse production it provokes. Is this merely to perpetuate theory-death, to supply more fodder for Mann's chugging dialectical machine? That depends on where we place our machine. Like a good dialectician Mann offers his own conditional reprieve from theory-death: "If art sometimes operates through tacit collusion with discourse and sometimes through futile resistance, sometimes it also pursues a kind of resistance by collusion, a seizure of the means of discourse production" (25). Mann drops the point almost immediately, but the cat is out of the bag. Quite apart from the idea that collusion might equal resistance (a thoroughly 1990s notion, presaged here), let's look at Mann's rhetoric: "Operates," "pursues," "seize[s]"—these naughty verbs of praxis are nestled in Mann's theory-death dialectic, hiding in plain sight. Theatre scholars know that performance never escapes representation, commodification, and thus discourse circulation; but praxis, always theory-haunted, has its own losses, beauties, misses, and scatterings that theory finds, and will always find, difficult to neutralize. Mann knows this and extravagantly silences himself (and artists) at the

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end of his book: “The last chapter of the death of the avant-garde is blank” (145). But the vivifying bright red seam of praxis (of making/doing) is everywhere in the sentences of this dark and rigorous book.

In spite of itself, an excellent read!

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 11.

2. Quoted in RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1988), 13–14.



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