

THE IDEA OF THE AVANT GARDE AND WHAT IT MEANS TODAY 2

EDITED BY MARC JAMES LÉGER



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The Idea of the Avant Garde And What It Means Today, Volume 2

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*This book is dedicated to Vito Acconci, Chantal Akerman, John Ashbery, Robert
Ashley, Pierre Boulez, Glenn Branca, Trisha Brown, Věra Chytilová, Ornette
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Jonas Mekas, Pauline Oliveros, Jacques Rivette, Mark E. Smith,
Cecil Taylor, David Tomas and Agnès Varda.*

- “The very term ‘avant-garde’ was first used figuratively to designate radical or advanced activity in both the artistic and social realms. It was in this sense that it was first employed by the French Utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon, in the third decade of the nineteenth century.” – Linda Nochlin • “One commentator, not known for his sympathy to the Revolution, has recently written: ‘With the tolerant and sophisticated Anatole Lunacharsky in charge of cultural affairs and with a high proportion of Bolshevik leaders (Lenin, Trotsky and Bukharin) being intellectuals [...] it was taken for granted that the creative process was not amenable to crude administrative control’” – Tariq Ali citing Max Hayward • “Perhaps there is no such thing as an *avant-garde*, only a few uncorrupted sensibilities who cling together in times of rampant militarism or commercialism to challenge their elders.” – Cyril Connolly • “The avant-garde groups of today conduct their antilingualistic action from a base that is no longer literary but linguistic: they don’t use the subversive instruments of literature in order to throw language into confusion and demystify it, but they set themselves at a linguistic zero point in order to reduce language—and thus values—to zero.” – Pier Paolo Pasolini • “We have then to recall that the politics of the avant-garde, from the beginning, could go either way. The new art could find its place either in a new social order or in a culturally transformed but otherwise persistent and recuperated old order.” – Raymond Williams
- “Mere noise permits no articulated interactions. Short cuts, of the kind that concept art peddles, are based on the banal and false conclusion that the development of the productive forces renders all work superfluous. With the same justification, one could leave a computer to its own devices on the assumption that a random generator will organize material production by itself.” – Hans Magnus Enzensberger
- “I met John Cage towards the end of the 1950s, through Stefan Wolpe. What Cage gave me was confidence, that the direction I was going in was not crazy. It was accepted in the world called ‘the avant-garde.’ What I was doing was an acceptable form. That was an eye-opener for me. Pre-Cage composers such as Henry Cowell, Stefan Wolpe and Edgar Varèse should be remembered for their brilliance and courage, too. They were in pain already because it seemed that they were rapidly forgotten once Cage came out.” – Yoko Ono • “The Clash have taken Beefheart’s aesthetic of scorched vocals, guitar discords, melody reversals, and rhythmic conflict and made the whole seem anything but avant-garde: in their hands that aesthetic speaks with clarity and immediacy, a demand that you have to accept or refuse.” – Greil Marcus
- “To confuse art and politics is a political mistake. To separate art and politics is another mistake.” – Armando Hart • “While the avant-garde movements I am writing about situated themselves in opposition to consumer capitalism, they also emerged out of societies based on such a mode of organisation and thus *do not entirely* escape the *logic* of the marketplace. This is particularly obvious in relation to the obsession many of them display over the concept of innovation, which reflects perfectly the waste inherent in a society based on planned obsolescence.” – Stewart Home • “A major consequence of the changes in the social situation of the artist as well as in the political and social importance of the arts generally, as seen in the increased resources which were allocated to them during this period [1940-1985], was that the artistic role ceased to be that of an avant-garde with its concomitant overtones of alienation from popular culture and middle-class values.” – Diana Crane • “We are directors, we are the creators, we should be the hornets that sting.” – Werner Herzog • “Embracing the new technologies and market formations, the new audiences seemed to seriously believe that an expansion of artistic practices into the registers of the culture industry would compensate for the destruction of the emancipatory promises of the avant-garde cultures of the twentieth century.” – Benjamin H.D. Buchloh • “The avant-gardes were didactic in their desire to put an end to art, in their condemnation of its alienated and inauthentic character. But they were also romantic in their conviction that art must be reborn immediately as absolute—as the undivided awareness of its operations or as its own immediately legible truth.” – Alain Badiou •

Marc James Léger The Idea of the Avant Garde **Martha Rosler** Take the Money and Run: Can Political and Socio-Critical Art 'Survive'? **Sven Lütticken** Permanent Cultural Revolution **David Cunningham** Elementary **David Thomas** We Know What We're Doing **Massimo Ricci** Just Another Establishment **Ultra-red** Ways of Listening: Socially-Practiced Art and Solidarity **Pauline Oliveros** Quantum Avant Garde **John Tilbury** 18 Questions **Richard Barbrook** Ludic Training for the Situationist Revolution **Gabriel Rockhill** The Theoretical Destiny of the Avant Garde **Machete Group** What Does the Avant Garde Mean Today? **Mark Hutchinson** For the Avant Garde: Notes on Art, Capitalism and Revolution **Chika Okeke-Agulu** The Spectral Avant Garde **Gavin Grindon** Disobedient Objects **Marcelo Expósito** Festive Disorder, Subjective Mutation and Revolutionary Becoming **McKenzie Wark** #Marx21c **Sylvère Lotringer** After the Avant Garde **Patricia Ybarra** 'The Whole Thing Is Over by Nine O'Clock': The Rude Mechs's Adaptation of Greil Marcus' *Lipstick Traces* **Kelly Copper** On the Perverse Pleasures of Indifference **Morgan von Prelle Pecelli** Seeing What's Really There: A Talk with Richard Foreman **Robert Wilson** Construction in Time and Space **Carrie Noland** Experimental Living: Westbeth Artists Housing, Merce Cunningham, and Me **Lucien Kroll** Revolutionary Homeopathic Engineering and Empathetic Architecture **Hans Ulrich Obrist** A Conversation with Raoul Vaneigem **V. Mitch McEwen** and **Dawn Lundy Martin** On the House Opera | Opera House in Detroit **Lina Stergiou** Praxis: The Everyday NOT as Usual **Eda Čufer** Feelings and Territories: *Makrolab's* Avant-Garde Inquiries **MAP Office (Gutierrez + Portefaix)** Urban Spectacle in Post (Socialist) China and Other Illuminations **Oliver Ressler** Socialism Failed, Capitalism Is Bankrupt. What Comes Next? **Condé + Beveridge** Cultural Relations **Edith Brunette (with François Lemieux)** The Imaginary Exit of Disengagement **Freee** The New Freee Manifesto **Zoe Beloff** The Advanced Guard and the Rearview Mirror **Reverend Billy and The Church of Stop Shopping** The Teachable Life-or-Death of Ferguson **Dread Scott** Revolutionary Archive **Marc James Léger** Austerity and Impunity, and a Few Words with Theodore A. Harris **Matthew Shipp** Language Out of the Abyss **Carla Harryman** DISK **Niall McDevitt** Contra Avant-Garde or Why Poets Should Reclaim the Avant Garde from the Academics **Joshua Clover** The Genealogical Avant Garde **Marijeta Bozovic** Poetry on the Front Line: Kirill Medvedev and a New Russian Poetic Avant Garde **Jessica Zychowicz** FE/M/EN and the Avant Garde: Locating the Text **Marc James Léger** A Punk Prayer to the Lack of Reality **Benjamin Noys** Epic Fails: Scale, Commodity, Totality **Fabio Vighi** Capture and Symptom in Leos Carax's *Holy Motors* **Philippe Theophanidis** Godard Avant-Gaze **Jean-Marie Straub** The Bach Film **Alfredo Jaar** The Marx Lounge **David Walsh** To Create a Genuine Artistic 'Avant Garde' Means Confronting Critical Historical Issues **Bruno Bosteels** Three Paradoxes of Communist Art

Ludic Training for the Situationist Revolution

Richard Barbrook

*I have studied the logic of war. Moreover, I succeeded, a long time ago, in presenting the basics of its movements on a rather simple board game: the forces in contention as well as the contradictory necessities imposed on the operations of each of the two parties. I have played *The Game of War* and, in the often difficult conduct of my life, I have drawn a few lessons from it—I also set myself rules of the game for this life, and I have followed them. The surprises of this kriegspiel seem inexhaustible; and I fear that this may well be the only one of my works that anyone will dare acknowledge as having some value. As to whether I have made good use of such lessons, I will leave it to others to decide.*

— Guy Debord, *Panegyric*

On the autumnal evening of November 9, 2007, the members of Class Wargames assembled for a training session in ludic subversion at the Occupation Studios in London. Having discovered its rules in the back of Len Bracken's biography of Guy Debord, we'd utilized my teenage collection of Ottoman and Hapsburg figurines to build a homebrew version of his almost forgotten military simulation: *The Game of War*. Our enjoyable task for the next few hours would be manoeuvring these toy soldier armies to victory or defeat across its gridded terrain. Above all, our objective on that November evening was to find out why Debord—the commander-in-chief of the Situationist International—had promised that playing his game was learning how to put proletarian theory into revolutionary practice. In our lives as artists, academics and activists, the founders of Class Wargames had all been heavily influenced by the practical innovations and theoretical insights of this iconic New Left movement. Five decades earlier, the Situationists had defined the avant-garde techniques of provocation, remixing, drifting and participatory creativity, which still provide the tactical manual for left-field art in the early twenty-first century. They were the original version of the punks, ravers and hackers. Crucially, as the smartest wisdom of the French May 68 Revolution, Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* remains unsurpassed in its fierce critique of the political chicanery, economic alienation and solipsistic tedium of today's media-saturated capitalist societies. He was the New Left prophet who never sold out for the tawdry neoliberal trinkets of celebrity and money. Placed between Pop art and Fluxus in the Tate Modern's avant garde timeline mural, the

International is given due respect for its impressive aesthetic and theoretical innovations between the 1950s and 70s, which have helped to shape the contemporary imagination. Whether they know it or not, everyone nowadays is a bit of a Situationist.

What had initially brought the members of Class Wargames together earlier in 2007 was our common curiosity about the puzzling absence of any detailed discussion of Debord's *Game of War* in the increasing number of laudatory journalistic and academic accounts of the International's inspiring achievements. For these admirers, Debord's ludic experiment was nothing more than a poetic metaphor for his pugnacious attitude to life. Serious grown-ups would never waste their valuable time actually playing this frivolous diversion. For many left intellectuals, Debord's military simulation also reeks of the imperialist aggression and masculine competitiveness of bourgeois society. Wargaming is a weird hobby of history nerds with dodgy politics. However, as he emphasized in the quotation from his 1989 autobiography, which begins this text, Debord believed that *The Game of War* was his most important legacy to future generations: a ludic meditation on the Situationists' many years of hard fighting against the class enemy. Yet, when we read the contemporary hagiographies of the International, we could find only the briefest mention of the long hours that he'd dedicated to designing and refining his board game. Unconvinced by this dubious rewriting of history, we formed Class Wargames to investigate why Debord had been so convinced that his military simulation was the culmination of his life's work as an artistic and political revolutionary.



Alex & Lucy (blue and yellow) vs. Ilze & Rod (white and black). Class Wargames at the Occupation Studios, London, November 9, 2007. Courtesy of Richard Barbrook.

Fulfilling this ambition, on that November evening in Occupation Studios, the rival teams of North and South enthusiastically engaged in head-to-head combat for mastery over the game board. The two miniature armies advanced towards each other, both trying to seize the centre while simultaneously moving around one flank. Attacks were followed by counter-attacks. A fort was taken and lost. The cavalry charged, lines of communication were cut and one team's arsenal was destroyed. Even a bravura display of tactical moves now couldn't change the final outcome. The initiative had been seized and would be doggedly retained until the enemy was routed from the battlefield. As our training session drew to a close, the players of North and South took satisfaction that we'd all been winners of *The Game of War*. If only for a few hours, the Situationist fusion of avant-garde art and revolutionary politics had been experienced in dialectical unity. Enthused by this insight, the members of Class Wargames were now ready to launch their

campaign of ludic subversion against spectacular capitalism. With the name of Debord written on the wall of the Tate Modern, every intelligent person must try playing *The Game of War* at least once. They weren't educated if they hadn't. Class Wargames had discovered its world-historic mission. By hosting participatory performances of *The Game of War*, we would enable people to experience Debord's simulation of the Situationist insurrection for themselves. Class Wargames had issued the orders of battle to the turbulent multitude: Play-It-Yourself!

In the years since that training session took place in autumn 2007, the members of our group have gone on to host participatory performances of *The Game of War* and other political-military simulations at art galleries, cultural festivals, academic conferences and bohemian hang-outs across Europe, Brazil and Russia. During this hard-fought campaign of ludic subversion, our goal has been to encourage

our audiences to move beyond a contemplative admiration of Situationist ideas. As Debord realized, playing games is learning by doing. At our events, competing in mock combat becomes training for cooperative action against neoliberal domination. In these troubled times, this Situationist ludic enlightenment is urgently required. The squabbling tendencies of today's left are nothing more than a bunch of historical reenactment societies: the Bolsheviks are stuck in Petrograd 1917; Anarchists fantasize about Barcelona 1936; and Autonomists hark back to Milan 1977. There are even some Situationist groupies who think they're living in Paris 1968! Taking our cue from Debord, Class Wargames has an entertaining remedy for this debilitating determination to fight contemporary struggles with old strategies. If you want to reenact the heroic moments of the revolutionary past, we have an extensive collection of board games that will allow you to become Leon Trotsky, Buenaventura Durruti or Toni Negri in their prime for a few hours. Most wonderfully, by putting these dramatic events back into play, the dogmatic certainties of the Bolshevik, Anarchist and Autonomist sects are soon revealed as temporal contingencies. With cleverer moves and better dice throws, the fixed course of history can be changed on the game board. There isn't—and never has been—one infallible method for securing victory in all times

and places. Like its predecessors, this generation must also devise its own unique combinations of strategy and tactics for fighting the capitalist enemy. The players of Situationist games are already experimenting with new formations and innovative manoeuvres for successful combat on the spectacular battlefields of the early twenty-first century. By making the past mutable, they're learning how to conquer the future. Inspired by the Situationists' vision of a truly human civilization, Class Wargames proclaims that the revolutionary watchword of the insurgent proletariat is now the proud boast of Guy Debord: "I'm not a philosopher, I'm a strategist!"

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Richard Barbrook's *Class Wargames: Ludic Subversion Against Spectacular Capitalism* can be bought as a hardcopy or downloaded as a free PDF from the Minor Compositions website: <http://www.minorcompositions.info/?p=636>. Check out the Class Wargames website for forthcoming events, photographs, publications and movies: <http://www.classwargames.net>.

The concept of the avant garde is highly contested, whether one consigns it to history or claims it for present-day and future uses. The first volume of *The Idea of the Avant Garde – And What It Means Today* provided an unprecedented forum on the kinds of radical art theory and partisan practices that are possible in today's world of global art markets and creative industry entrepreneurialism. This second volume presents the work of 50 artists and writers who explore the diverse ways that today's avant-gardism renews the project of aesthetic and political praxis. The manifest strategies, temporalities and genealogies of avant-gardism are expressed through an international, inter-generational and interdisciplinary convocation of ideas that covers the fields of film, video, architecture, visual art, art activism, literature, poetry, theatre, performance, music and intermedia.

Marc James Léger is an Independent Scholar living in Montreal. He is the author of *Drive in Cinema, Don't Network* and *Vanguardia*.

“More than one hundred years after the eruption of Dada and fifty years after its loudly proclaimed death, the spectre of the avant garde returns in renewed and vibrant forms. This excellent collection gives an overview of just how and why an experimental artistic politics is important.”

Stevphen Shukaitis, author of *The Composition of Movements to Come: Aesthetics and Cultural Labor After the Avant-Garde*

*“One hundred years after the October Revolution, why does art continue to be meaningful in terms of ideological disruption, that is, in avant-garde terms? If you are looking to understand this question, *The Idea of the Avant Garde – And What It Means Today* is the place to start. Navigating the decade marked by the financial apocalypse of 2008, this forum introduces the twenty-first century anti-capitalist zeitgeist in no uncertain terms: art reserves the right to not let us lose sight of what is wrong, who is responsible and what it means to take sides.”*

Angela Dimitrakaki, author of *Gender, ArtWork and the Global Imperative: A Materialist Feminist Critique*

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