

t h e t r a d i t i o n o f t h e a v a n t - g a r d e

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We apply the term "avant-garde" to art that is not in fact ahead of its time but simply more fully expressive of it. Henry Miller writes in his 1959 preface to Jack Kerouac's "spontaneous prose" novel *The Subterraneans*: "We say that the poet, or genius, is always ahead of his time. True, but only because he's so thoroughly *of* his time."¹ What the avant-garde artist accomplishes very often becomes in time a model for others; we therefore focus on classifying him in his role as forerunner. But what distinguishes him more precisely from his more conventional contemporaries is really the greater concordance with his times which his work seems to express based on a willingness to make fuller use of new themes and the formal possibilities that they offer. In an era of more dramatic change, the difference between the art which embraces such change and that which resists it will be all the more striking. The Storm and Stress writers in Germany, the Romantics of Europe, and the Naturalists throughout the Western world noticeably changed the appearance of art by incorporating in it the new

is a profoundly important aspect of literacy and, as such, is essential for a responsible and informed use of the text by virtually the entire literate world.

The primary purpose of THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE TEXT is to present a retrospective of pivotal avant-garde paper works to the American art public. While examples of avant-garde texts are often included in exhibitions of twentieth century art, there have been few systematic attempts to mount retrospectives of this scope within the United States. One factor contributing to this surprising situation has been the lack of attention paid to the innovative formal characteristics of the works themselves. While it is true that the materials cannot be viewed without an understanding of the critical perspective toward which they were directed, it is wrong to perceive of them as mere gestures and thus deflect attention away from the works as objects of art. Scrutiny of many of these texts discloses a sense of aesthetic purpose rarely surpassed in the twentieth century. Faced with historical imperatives, the avant-garde artist confronted questions concerning the capability of the text to address contemporary issues. How the avant-garde confronted these questions accounts for the nature and extent of the formal innovations evident in these works. While providing a rich context for the objects is essential to their proper understanding, it is not sufficient. The importance of the avant-garde text rests, in part, in its transposition of the problematics of culture into visual statements. Lack of concern for the viscosity of the works can only lead to misunderstandings. It is the concern of the curators for this exhibition that the materials be rediscovered as some of the most innovative artistic statements of the last one hundred years.

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the communicative aspects of the text as object (the communication of different ideas required different object qualities; because the conventions of the text were so strong, it was felt that it was necessary to make the new object qualities of the text part of the communicative process). The avant-garde's reformulation of the text required an active role, or involvement, from the spectator in the communication process (conventional texts had been sender oriented; the avant-garde text required a participatory or active role from the audience or receiver).

In general, the avant-garde text was attentive to its relationships to the individual and to culture at large. The avant-garde was always an active concept and as such, was highly aware of its positioning in relationship to the general public. The avant-garde chose the text and its mass media formats as the objects of their revisionism specifically because of their effectiveness in communicating to large audiences (the general public was far more fluent when confronted by the text than when faced with more traditional art formats such as painting, sculpture, drawing, etc.). The avant-garde considered its use of language and the text to be of overriding importance because no other dimension of culture could be adequately accounted for without them.

The current exhibition makes the assumption that the purpose of history is to teach the present. Through a critical examination of the historical revolution of the text, attention is called to the responsibility of the present to do the same. The general audience in the present has something to learn about its own perception of the relationship between culture and the text through an awareness of how earlier audiences perceived and were influenced by the historical avant-garde's manipulation of the text and the mass media. Understanding how the text functions in culture, both in terms of its limitations and its possibilities,

consistently tested the process by which new visual vocabularies are developed and communicated. As the current exhibition travels across the country, it is hoped that its publics will become more familiar with the relationship between avant-garde movements and their texts, experiments that produced artistic works counted among the most sophisticated and complex of our century.

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The avant-garde proceeded alternatives to society's conventional use of the text at the same time that it formulated correctives to what it perceived as culture's abuses of the social power of the text. The avant-garde criticized culture's manipulative use of the text and the strictness and limitations of the text's conventions. It examined the nature of the text's emergence from specific social contexts and the kinds of social events to which texts specifically responded. Implied in this activity was one of the avant-garde's primary purposes - effecting social reform.

The avant-garde believed that much of what happened in culture was understood by the public through the printed media. It was not simply a matter of the media communicating something but, more importantly, a belief that the media provided the very means by which people understood things. The text, as given, could only say what it was designated to say. If the avant-garde could redesign the text, innovate the text, expand it, as it were, the new language of the text could communicate new things. The avant-garde attempted to open up language in order to communicate more than the text was conventionally designed to communicate. This involved a reexamination of the specific historical relationships between the text and ideology. The avant-garde wanted to make the text capable of responding to "modern" social imperatives (the avant-gardist viewed the conventional text as anachronistic and incapable of Modernism). The avant-garde provided the text with a new flexibility in order to help it keep pace with important changes in other aspects of culture (the avant-gardist was convinced that the text was not aligned with other progressive aspects of culture). There was also an attempt to renew