

Grzegorz Sztabiński
Strzeмиński Academy of Arts in Łódź
grzegorzsztabinski@op.pl

THE AVANT-GARDE: ART AS THEORY

Abstract: The starting point of the paper are the questions formulated in 1993 by Philip Auslander as to whether the avant-garde is possible in postmodernism, or whether postmodernism itself can be regarded as a new phase of the avant-garde. The representatives of avant-garde art considered theory to be of great importance. Therefore, an attempt to answer the questions has been made here from the point of view of three theoretical approaches to the problem. The first one has been discussed with reference to Paul Mann's book *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* as that art today functions within the framework of a "discursive economy". The avant-garde theories, opposed to the artistic status quo, in fact support the functioning of this mechanism, becoming "discourse productive". Thus, instead of renewing it, they contribute to the death of the avant-garde, which is absorbed by the cultural "exchange effect". The second approach, referred to as "theory-life", is developed on the basis of the renewing attempt, by Peter Bürger. He considered that the basic aspiration of the avant-garde was an attack against the institution of art and revolutionizing life as a whole. This renewal was announced in their writings and manifested in artworks which became a way of undertaking and attempting to solve theoretical problems. I have described this phenomenon as "theorism". The third option discussed is the "end of theory", with reference to Victor Burgin's book of the same title. The British author believes that the concept of art shaped from the Renaissance period onwards through the Enlightenment and Romanticism, has collapsed in the 20th century. Currently art operates not in the area of theory, but in the sphere of the discourses creating "semblances of truth" and performing mobilizing and strategic, not ontological functions. The article concludes with some remarks on the change of metaphors ("death", "life", "end"), which are employed in connection with the avant-garde, as well as the possible consequences of this situation.

Keywords: avant-garde, theory, discourse, Paul Mann, Peter Bürger, Victor Burgin

In his 1993 review of the latest publications on the avant-garde, Philip Auslander pointed out that the anxiety of the researchers confronted with this subject was becoming symptomatic. This anxiety stems from the need to look at the avant-garde with reference to postmodernism. The American author observed that "This combination of terms immediately generates penetrating questions. Is postmodernism simply the current version of the avant-garde? If not, is there/can there be an avant-garde under Postmodernism?"¹. Auslander associated the avant-

¹ Books. Review by Philip Auslander, "The Drama Review" 1993, vol. 37, no 3, pp. 196-197.

-garde with resistance or opposition, and therefore, in developing his question, he considered whether there is room for such attitudes in our times, whether there are marginal spaces that allow such activities to take place, or whether postmodernism is a culture of total surveillance and absorption, as claimed by Baudrillard and other authors.

These questions are significant. The discussion on the relations between the avant-garde and postmodernism was particularly heated at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, the desire to cut oneself off from the illusions associated with the idea of modernity prevailed. The era of postmodernism was conceived as a period after the domination of the idea of universal history, after the "grand narratives", after the faith in eschatology and after the utopian visions of the transformation of the world and man. All these premises were found in avant-garde thinking, and that is why it seemed alien to the young generation of artists. Meanwhile, the situation changed partially in the 1990s. Perhaps that is why Auslander addresses the problem not in a confrontational spirit, but in search of answers. Ultimately, however, a broader reflection on the issue did not take place in the 1990s. The avant-garde seemed to be disappearing from view. It interested mainly aesthetic theorists and art historians, who treated it as a bygone phenomenon, which can be only described and classified after the disputes have ended. Artists did not refer to its slogans, either. They did not look for arguments to support their activities, nor did they oppose its assumptions. There was also no question as to whether certain versions of postmodernism could be considered as updated versions of the avant-garde. A gap has therefore developed in this area, which continues to exist today. Therefore, asking today about the avant-garde and avant-gardes, one should refer to the results of the research into its historical symptoms, and on the other hand, to the question of its replacement. Has the avant-garde become a purely historical fact, or can its aspirations be found in later artistic activities? Addressing these questions requires taking into account the current situation of art, but also taking another look at the avant-garde. However, it should be viewed from a different perspective. I believe that such perspective can be provided by considering the role of theory.

Theory-death

The point of reference for the questions posed by Auslander was, among other things, Paul Mann's book *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*². The author stated that the problem of the death of the avant-garde should not be associated with the lack of innovative creative practices that pose artistic challenges. He therefore

² P. Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1991.

opposed the views popular in the late 1970s and 1980s, according to which it was cultural exhaustion that triggered the emergence of postmodern tendencies. The advocates of such a position treated postmodernism as an attempt to overcome the crisis in art in the second half of the 20th century. At that time, a return was observed to the ideas of the avant-garde from the beginning of the century, but it was accompanied by the awareness of the different situation now facing the artists. It was therefore not possible to directly continue with the previously formulated slogans. Moreover, there was a belief that the cultural transformation declared in the avant-garde manifestos has not been successful. In such circumstances, the conviction about the end of the avant-garde era seemed fully justified.

This position can be exemplified by the book by Guy Scarpetta, *L'Impureté*³, popular in the mid-1980s. Instead of taking into account the context associated with the cultural changes of the second half of the 20th century, the author considered the evolution of the avant-garde itself. He wrote that the impasse and exhaustion of the avant-garde resulted from the impetus of its own radicalization. The avant-garde took its own developmental logic to extremes and as a result brought about its own self-destruction. This provoked disappointment and disillusionment among some artists and art critics. However, as Scarpetta emphasized, others regarded this as liberation. After a period of bans, taboos and asceticism, the artists enjoyed finding fun and pleasure in their work. The tyranny of theory was overthrown. It was decided that artistic activity could be pursued without the tiresome rules accepted or created by the artists themselves. Art can mean drifting, nomadism, it can be a spontaneously undertaken and modified practice. It does not need justification, it can develop freely and on many levels. It may be contradictory, ambivalent, and “impure”.

Mann takes a different point of view. For him, if the avant-garde had died, it was because external and cultural conditions had put a stop to its existence and effectively eliminated its critical activity. The avant-garde cannot exist without criticism. At the beginning of the 20th century, the situation was different. The protest against the traditional cultural conventions was perceived unequivocally and met with equally unambiguous approval or disapproval. No one attempted to “tame” and incorporate Dadaist or Surrealist scandals in the official culture. There was therefore some room for oppositional practices. According to Mann, in contemporary culture these oppositional practices are annexed by the official public sphere and, consequently, the areas where they can occur are disappearing. The question is whether such practices, which were present in the historical avant-garde, are still going to be perceived as oppositional, questioning the existing order, undermining the artistic status quo, or whether they are just one of the many approaches available on the cultural market.

³ G. Scarpetta, *L'impureté*, Figures/Grasset, Paris 1985.

The American author considers both avant-garde art and its criticism as functioning within the framework of, as he calls it, “discursive economy”. This concept derives from Jürgen Habermas’s deliberations on the bourgeois public sphere, which from the outset was an arena of dispute, debate and ideological opposition. Its reference point is the market. Thus, as noted by Mann, “the free zone of contentions was already contained within and determined by market conditions”⁴. The medium of exchange in this cultural economy is discourse. Therefore, artworks are defined “by their ability to move through and hence maintain the discursive apparatus. The work’s value is defined above all by what it can achieve both by confirming and by negating the recognized content. Critical or oppositional art must also be considered within the framework of the principles of “discursive economics”. It cannot escape it, because it is absorbed by it, it always takes the form of discourse. Moreover, Mann claims that the more oppositional art is, the more discourse-productive and consequently more cost-effective it becomes.

Auslander describes the situation that occurred in connection with the performance of Karen Finley. It piqued the interest of the representatives of the Playboy Channel, who wanted to include it in their broadcasting schedule as a sample avant-garde work. Thus, the work was supposed to be “normalized” in the sense described by Foucault. In this form, it was to be introduced into the broader cultural circulation. Ultimately, however, this idea was abandoned; thus performance art remains in the periphery. Auslander points out that in the beginning of the 20th century, artists were not confronted with such temptations. Rebellion or provocation were unequivocally classified as marginalized and as attempts to destroy the official culture. The current situation is more complex. It is possible – according to Auslander – for a performer like Finley to face a dilemma of whether to let her proposal be partly absorbed by the cultural market. She found herself with “one foot already sucked into the vortex, while the other remains positioned within the marginal space outside”⁵. The art critic Mario T. Pramaggiore, who described this situation, praised the artist for resisting such postmodern absorption by controlling her artistic image. In his view in doing this she had employed the criteria of valuation deriving from the avant-garde tradition.

The situations similar to the one presented above do not allow for an unambiguous answer to the questions raised by Auslander as to whether the avant-garde is possible in postmodernism or whether postmodernism is itself a new phase of the avant-garde. As the American author points out, discursive economy makes an ideological difference in the world, as “all goods are perfectly exchangeable, and the only significant effect of the exchange is to keep the economy humming”⁶. In conclusion, Mann stated that all such discourse is finally affirmative: there

⁴ P. Mann, *op. cit.* p. 22.

⁵ Ph. Auslander, *op. cit.* p. 196.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

is no place for critical activity, which was the essence of the avant-garde's aspirations.⁷ The concept of "discursive economy" thus provokes anxiety. "For us today", Mann wrote, "the problem of the avant-garde is thus essentially a critical one: how to enter its field without falling [...] into every trap of representation; how to write without merely manufacturing another or even better theory of circulation, another history for exchange. To explore recuperation without being entirely caught up in it [...]"⁸.

Theory-life

Nevertheless, is "discursive economy" actually the ultimate cause of the death of the avant-garde? Let us consider the way in which the critical functions of art were exercised in avant-garde works in the first half of the 20th century. I would like to refer to the deliberations of Peter Bürger, who emphasized their role most clearly. In an article published more than thirty years after the publication of his seminal book, the German author briefly summarized its principal point of view. He distinguished between two ways of presenting the historical avant-garde. He characterized the first as a typical example of modernist thinking about art, emphasizing the role of autonomy. The second one, on the other hand, he considered to be a rejection of modernism. He regarded Dadaism, Surrealism and Constructivism as particularly important avant-garde currents, as their main aim was to attack the institution of art and revolutionize life as a whole. Both of these aspirations went hand in hand, as "the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the possible realization of a utopia in which art and life are united"⁹. The basis for the achievement of the objectives of the second variety, which Bürger considers to be the avant-garde proper, is therefore critical activity. It is to this goal that works of art are subordinated, losing their former character associated with aesthetic teleology. Not just the role of aesthetic values ceases to matter, but so does the autonomy, so strongly emphasized by Adorno. The work is supposed to revolutionize life. For the "organization of a new life praxis" it is no longer sufficient, if, as in aestheticism, a work "is wholly distinct from the (bad) praxis of the existing society"¹⁰.

Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades are considered to be the most radical example of actions characterizing such an approach. In their case, it is "not from the form-content totality of the individual object Duchamp signs [that one can] infer the meaning, but only from the contrast between mass-produced object on the one

⁷ P. Mann, op. cit. p. 77.

⁸ Ibid, p. 93.

⁹ P. Bürger, *Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of "Theory of the Avant-Garde"*, "New Literary History" 2010, 41, p. 696.

¹⁰ P. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, transl. from the German by Michael Shaw, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, p. 50.

hand, and signature and art exhibit on the other”¹¹. However, the critical effect on the institution of art could also be achieved in a different way. Bürger assigns a key role in this respect to the assemblage. It stands in opposition to the creation of artistic form as an organic whole or a unity in multiplicity. He traces its beginnings to the collages of Picasso and Braque. “In the *papiers collés* of Picasso and Braque that they created during the years before the First World War, we invariably find a contrast between two techniques: the ‘illusionism’ of the reality fragments that have been glued on the canvas (a piece of a woven basket or wallpaper) and the ‘abstraction’ of cubist technique in which the portrayed objects are rendered”¹². According to Bürger, this contrast is the dominant interest of the two artists, because it includes an element of provocation that undermines the institution of art related to works of certain value, which are organic entities. Collages also questioned the institution of aesthetics as a field where these values were attributed significant social meaning.

However, the German author cautions us not to overestimate this “element of provocation”, because “although there is destruction of the organic work that portrays reality, art itself is not being called into question”¹³. Much more radical were the achievements of the Dadaists and the Constructivists. In these cases there was a direct reference to reality, which consisted in the fact that the works were not created as aesthetic objects, but rather as “images intended for reading” (such as John Heartfield's photomontages) or objects serving people who satisfy their practical needs (the Productivist phase of Russian Constructivism). Bürger believes that in such situations, “the artist not only renounces shaping a whole, but gives the painting a different status, since parts of it no longer have the relationship to reality characteristic of the organic work of art. They are no longer signs pointing to reality, they *are* reality”¹⁴.

The attack on the social expectations, carried out by questioning the concept of a work of art, was supposed to lead to challenging the foundations of aesthetics. The categories of perception and aesthetic experience, regarded as highly important in most periods of the development of European culture, proved inappropriate and useless when dealing with avant-garde works. As observed by Bürger,

The avant-gardist work neither creates a total impression that would permit an interpretation of its meaning nor can whatever impression may be created be accounted for by recourse to the individual parts, for they are no longer subordinated to a pervasive intent. This refusal to provide meaning is experienced as shock by the recipient”¹⁵.

11 Ibid., p. 52.

12 Ibid., p. 73.

13 Ibid., p. 74.

14 Ibid., p. 78.

15 Ibid., p. 80.

From the point of view of the artist, such a shock is desirable because it changes human behaviour. The German author believes that “it is the means to break through aesthetic immanence and to usher in a change in the recipient's life praxis”¹⁶. The former effect probably results from the fact that upon contact with an avant-garde work, the recipient does not discover its principle by him-/herself. This causes surprise, which will be transferred to the realm of practical life: “And this is the intention of the avant-garde artist, who hopes that such withdrawal of meaning will direct the reader's attention to the fact the conduct of one's life is questionable and that it is necessary to change it”¹⁷. Thus, contact with art did not isolate one form of life (as in the old concepts of aesthetic contemplation), but brought us closer to it and encouraged its evaluation.

The shock tactic seems to be purposeful and effective as regards attacking the institution of art and revolutionizing life. However, Bürger notes the dangers associated with such an approach. He writes that the audience responded to Dadaists' provocations with “blind fury”, and such a state is not conducive to desirable changes in behaviour. Moreover, repeating this effect causes the recipients to start expecting a shock. In turn, “such a nearly institutionalized shock probably has a minimal effect on the way the recipients run their lives. The shock is ‘consumed’”¹⁸. That is why the shock tactics is replaced by “the enigmatic quality of the forms”. It can be assumed that while the first strategy was connected with the Dadaist approach, the second one is characteristic of Surrealism. The artwork appears immune to the attempts to define its meaning. The recipients unwilling to give up interpretation then move to another level “instead of proceeding according to the hermeneutic circle and trying to grasp a meaning through the nexus of whole and parts, the recipient will suspend the search for meaning and direct attention to the principles of construction that determine the construction of the work”¹⁹. Bürger believes that in this way an avant-garde work of art provokes a certain split. Instead of looking for meaning, the viewer is forced to concentrate on the principles of construction, which are characterized by the above-mentioned inconsistency, inorganicity resulting from the fact that instead of the whole we are dealing with an assembly of different parts. Thus, instead of the aesthetic satisfaction based on harmonious compatibility, there is a tension that can be applied to the assumed goal of the avant-garde, which is the “revolutionization of life”.

As I have mentioned before, the German author believed that the neo-avant-garde emerging after World War II was a sign of the failure of the avant-garde project. He explains this issue by pointing to the fact that artists turned away from the problems of life after the war. Instead of bringing art to life practice, the neo-avant-garde brought back the forms of artistic activity pursued in the beginning

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 80.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁹ Ibid.

of the 20th century, in order to restore the traditional aesthetic premises. Clarifying his view on the historical failure of the avant-garde, Bürger drew attention to the museumization of its artistic achievements which, according to the original intentions of their creators were meant as an attack against the institution of art. However, this institution proved extremely resilient and absorbed what was supposed to destroy it. Moreover, the shock effect, which was intended to have a significant impact both on art and in social life, turned out not to destroy but rather to enrich the existing art forms and techniques. The German author writes, “after Duchamp, not only can the everyday artefact claim the status of an artwork but the discourse of the institution is moulded by the avant-gardes to a degree that no one could have predicted. Avant-garde categories such as rupture and shock gain admittance to the discourse of art, while at the same time concepts such as harmony and coherence are suspected of conveying a false appearance and a reconciliation with a degraded status quo”²⁰. The failure of the avant-garde as a utopian project concerning life was therefore connected with its success within the framework of institutionalized art.

In these circumstances, should we be talking about the failure of the avant-garde, or rather about its victory, albeit different from the one we were expecting? The answer to this question depends on the role that we attribute to the utopian theories developed by the artists. If we consider them, as Bürger assumes, to be a constitutive component of the movement, designed to be truly turned into reality, then undoubtedly the avant-garde has failed, regardless of the importance attributed to its works. The recognition it is currently enjoying, being both the subject of research in the field of art history and taken into account in popular culture (e. g. in advertising), is rather ironic. The avant-garde can be also seen as an example of a lofty failure, one of the many in the history of culture. However, I believe that a different approach to its programme is also possible.

Talking or writing about the success of the avant-garde, we usually concentrate on the works themselves, disregarding the intentions of the artists expressed in their manifestos or other programmatic texts. As specific works are taken into consideration, we place them in our museum of imagination and decide on the arrangement of the museum halls. We discuss the appropriate placement of the avant-garde in books on art history. However, the basis of the created configurations are the works themselves, considered independently of their theoretical background.²¹ Such an approach is different from that described by Bürger, although it still deprives the works of their connection with life. They are subject to objectification because of their separation from theory. How they have emerged, the issues they are meant to resolve, and how they can influence the decisions

²⁰ P. Bürger, *Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde ...*, op. cit. p. 705.

²¹ Such practices are regarded as postmodernist and can be found even in serious institutions.

made by the later artists is not recognized. Their theoretical content and potential impact are therefore underestimated. The programme included in the works, which may contribute to their life in later realizations, is undervalued. From this point of view, the field of pedagogy may be an exception. The avant-garde's ideas and assumptions have been adopted by some university teachers as part of their teaching practice. I am thinking not so much of the art history classes, but of the practical courses in painting, sculpting, new media or intermediary studies. The students of such courses are acquainted with the achievements of avant-garde artists not with the focus on their role in destroying art institutions, but rather on the artistic challenges which they provided. The issues discussed in Bürger's book, such as assemblage and coincidence, are not meant to overturn the "system of depiction" but to broaden its impact. They do not lead to a "holistic impression", but at the same time they are not something that would completely take an executed painting or sculpture outside the area of art and towards practical life.

It could be argued that such pedagogical use of the avant-garde's achievements is a betrayal of its principles. However, despite the allegations in the theoretical writings of the avant-garde artists that each new direction in art is academised, that Cubist and Futurist "academies" are promptly emerging, one can observe that many artists are interested in the pedagogical consequences of their achievements. One can even say that pedagogization is inscribed in the principles of the avant-garde, even as understood by Bürger. After all, what else is the desire to reject institutionalized art and revolutionize life, if not an attempt to educate? On the other hand, the attempts made by Walter Gropius (Bauhaus), Alexander Rodchenko (*Vkhutemas*) or Władysław Strzemiński (the State School of Fine Arts in Łódź) to create art schools are undoubtedly linked to the pedagogical reform. Here, we cannot speak of the failure of the avant-garde. However, one might wonder whether we are faced with a reduction in its assumptions and a depletion of what constituted the essence of the concept. At this point, we are once again faced with the question of the role of theory in the entire acquis of the avant-garde. I believe that the writings of the artists and art critics associated with them are an integral part of this project.

In his book, Bürger hardly mentions any theoretical statements by the authors he is studying. He tries to make an impression that the ideas and assumptions he is writing about are gleaned from the works themselves. However, a careful reading of the avant-garde theory reveals clearly that the analyses carried out by the German author were motivated by the content of the Dadaist, Surrealist and Constructivist manifestos. The content of these texts is even richer than the assumptions reconstructed in the book, concerning the attack on art institutions and the revolutionization of life. Should we thus expand our way of thinking about the role of theory in avant-garde art?

I took a step in that direction in my 1991 book *Problemy intelektualizacji sztuki w tendencjach awangardowych* [The intellectualization of art in avant-garde

tendencies].²² My understanding of the word “intellectualization” in the title was twofold. On the one hand, I drew attention to the rich theoretical achievements of the avant-garde artists and analyzed them. On the other hand, I sought out the symptoms of theoretization in the works themselves. I described the presence of theory in the practical creative activities as theorism. I wrote that I understood this concept as “reflection in art on art itself”.²³ This phrase, perhaps not the most fortunate one, resembles Joseph Kosuth's slogan “art as a definition of art”²⁴, but within the concept of theorism, it was understood much more broadly. The reflection was to cover not so much the area of art understood autonomously, but the whole range of the theoretical issues arising within the avant-garde. Among the theoretical questions for which visual equivalents were sought in various avant-garde trends, the book also covered the issues which Bürger had identified in his avant-garde concept – the tensions between “illusionism” and abstraction in Cubist collages, the role of chance in Dadaism and Surrealism – but also the “idiotism” proclaimed by Tristan Tzara. An avant-garde work of art was treated as a kind of experiment consisting of a practical (artistic) part and problem assumptions, sometimes taking the form of author's commentary in the form of written text.

One of my sources of inspiration when working on the issue of theorism in avant-garde artists' work was the belief that the reason for the creation of the work should be the program. It may include a change in the relationship between art and life, an attack on social institutions and the revolutionization of human existence, but it may also be an attempt to change the inherited concept of an artistic piece or the relationship between art and other areas of culture. Władysław Strzemiński articulated this issue, drawing attention to the necessity of referring every issue solved while painting to the solutions applied by earlier artists. “Without comparison and juxtaposition we may underestimate and forget about many important and lasting values”²⁵, he wrote. Moreover, without such a reflective approach, according to Strzemiński, art is reduced “to performing mechanics, to the recipe for making works modern at any cost”²⁶. The founder of Unism

²² G. Sztabiński, *Problemy intelektualizacji sztuki tendencjach awangardowych*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 1991.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

²⁴ J. Kosuth, *Art after Philosophy*, in: idem, *Art after Philosophy and After. Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. By G. Guercio, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. and London 1993, p. 24. The difference concerns the fact that Kosuth only considered reflection on art important (he wrote that “art's only claim is for art”; *op. cit.*, p. 24) questioning its references to the issues of life (religion, philosophy of being, social problems, etc.). Besides, he challenged the role of artistic “morphology”, that is issues pertaining to form. For example, he believed that while the issue of the definition of art was indeed present in avant-garde painting (such as by Jackson Pollock) it was tentative and unclear.

²⁵ W. Strzemiński, *Sztuka nowoczesna a szkoły artystyczne*, in: idem, *Pisma*, ed. Z. Baranowicz, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1975, p. 159.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

criticized those artistic activities that are undertaken without any theoretical motivation. "This way", he wrote, "the Constructivist school, which was intended to expand its influence and raise the level of modern art, instead becomes a means of undermining and impoverishing modern art"²⁷. Strzemiński was referring to situations in which Constructivism became stylistics. It ceased to be a solution to theoretical problems related to a specific painting or sculpture. It lost its function as a "laboratory of forms". It no longer asked questions about how new types of shapes and their arrangement can affect the way a person functions when they are incorporated into functional objects. In these circumstances, Constructivism became a method of producing objects with specific properties, providing decorative motifs that lost their theoretical context. In such a form, according to the founder of Unism, it depleted art without bringing elements of a new life into it.

The end of theory

In 1985, Victor Burgin, a well-known artist and art theoretician, published his book *The End of Art Theory*²⁸. The title issue was elaborated in particular in the last chapter. The author starts with recounting how the meaning of the word "art" evolved in European tradition. He starts with ancient Greece, then discusses medieval and modern views, drawing attention to the gradual increase in the importance of art theory. Initially, painting or sculpture served only as examples in the reflections on the issues of "beauty" or "representation". Thus, there was no theory of art in the contemporary sense of an "explanatory scheme of ideas"²⁹. It was not until the mid-16th century that the situation changed and painting began to be described as both a theoretical and a practical discipline. However, Kant made a distinction between "science" as an expression of concepts and "art" as an expression of feelings. Since the Enlightenment period, there has also been a firm belief that "'good common sense' is the fundamental most important quality in an art critic"³⁰. Romanticism attempted to overturn this view, introducing a wave of irrationalism into art. However, the two seemingly contradictory tendencies ultimately merged. In the eighteenth century, a modernist concept of the specific character of visual arts was developed. As a result, institutions supporting aesthetic autonomy began to be established. As a result, both narratives about art (Enlightenment and Romantic) ceased to be treated as opposing, and realistic, expressionist and formalist theories rarely appeared entirely in isolation.

In the context of the discussed historical transformations, Burgin does not attribute a special role to the avant-garde. He believes that the departure from the artistic quietism and social withdrawal, which characterized former concepts

²⁷ Ibid., p. 160.

²⁸ V. Burgin, *The End of Art Theory: Criticism and Postmodernity*, Macmillan, London 1986.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 144-145.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 150.

of art, appeared only as a result of the French events of May 1968. On the wave of demands for democratization at that time, art opened up to the contemporary world. The seemingly “self-evidently eternal verities of Art, inherited from the Enlightenment and Romanticism [...] were rigorously interrogated”³¹. However, this did not lead to their demise, nor did the disappearance of artistic institutions occur. The debates themselves, however, “were not silenced, they continued in the margins of the art. institutions and, in exile from the increasingly conservative ‘art magazines’, they took up residence in other journals (particularly, the newly-emerging reviews of ‘cultural theory’)”³². Art was considered there to be outside of the great tradition, while taking into account references to “micro-political” movements, such as the women's liberation movement or the Black Power movement, ecological, anti-nuclear, anti-psychiatric movements, etc. Thus, it is not the theory of art that came to an end, but the Enlightenment-Romantic art theory. It saw the artist as an individualist expressing himself in an autonomous work. A turn towards post-Enlightenment and post-Romantic theories occurred, based on relations with Marxism, psychoanalysis, semiotics and feminism. It was common for these different concepts, Burgin writes, to reject the conviction that a work of art has its source in the artist's thoughts and feelings. The artist “does not simply ‘create’ – innocently, spontaneously, *naturally* – like a flowering shrub which blossoms because it can do no other. The artist first of all inherits a role handed down by a particular history, through particular institutions, and whether he or she chooses to work within or without the given history and institutions, for or against them, the relationship to them, is inescapable”.³³ Thus, creativity takes place in the area of discourses, and thus is opposed to earlier concepts of authorship. Of course, in the 18th and 19th centuries, artists also dealt with issues relevant to their time. However, this reference was made through individual subjectivity, expressing the private way of experiencing events and problems. Besides, it also occurred in an aesthetic aura that created a distance from them. At present, the relationship with regard to the addressed issues has become direct. Theoretical premises concerning art are either revoked or become a subject of critical activity of artists.

Thus, the great theory ends, which for centuries has determined the way of understanding artistic activity and influenced the behaviour of the audience. Nowadays, art cannot be theoretically justified. Burgin links this fact with the post-modern crisis of legitimacy. Referring to Lyotard's reflections on contemporary problems of the justification of science, he points out two possibilities that have so far been taken into account: “art for people” and “art for art's sake”. Neither of these options is convincing today, nor is either valid for current art.³⁴ This

³¹ Ibid., p. 161.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 158.

³⁴ This problem is analogous to the nineteenth-century crisis of representation, discussed by Fredric Jameson (cf. *ibid.*, p. 179).

problem did not occur in modernist concepts. For example, Clement Greenberg's concept of art can be seen as the culmination of the Enlightenment project to organize knowledge in the framework of independent areas, including art. The author wrote that he considered Kant to be the first modernist. Moreover, he attached great importance to justifying the role of form in art and emphasized the significance of the "medium" considered from the point of view of the evolutionary continuity of means of artistic expression. Today, according to Burgin, theories that legitimize art are outdated. The "de-legitimization" of the main "narrative of *Art*" has taken place. In contrast, art is based on "*local narratives*", which can no longer be accepted as always binding, but "must be continually in process of writing and revision"³⁵.

In his attempt to analyze art after the "end of theory", Burgin refers to the concept of discourse understood in line with Michel Foucault's concept presented in his *Archaeology of Knowledge*³⁶. The change associated with this is to involve a transition from emphasizing the role of falsification towards "generating an effect". According to the traditional epistemological approach, theories are sets of concepts and theorems referring to a specific field of reality and are considered to be truthful or false by virtue of a confrontation with it. There are no such limitations in the concept of discourse. Discourses are not the result of expressive activities, through which someone expresses ideas, but have a constructive character, creating "effects of truth" and thus forming a social world³⁷. The concept of discourses does not dispute the fact that reality exists, but stresses that social access to it is shaped by categories present in discourses. Burgin believes that this concept is in line with the aforementioned Lyotard's observation on the crisis of legitimacy in science, and considers a consequence of the rejection of epistemology to be the replacement of the question "is this discourse true" with the question "what is the effect of the truth effect of his discourse"³⁸. As a result, a specific problem, such as sexism, is not a state of affairs that exists on its own, independently of the fact that it has been described in the feminist discourse. It is a construct of this discourse, the aim of which is to bring about specific social effects and change interpersonal relations. Knowledge created by the discourse is therefore meant to serve a mobilizing and "strategic", not ontological, function³⁹.

Burgin refers the problem of discourse to the considered great theory of the Enlightenment-Romantic art and combines it with the issue of artistic institutions,

³⁵ Ibid., p. 180.

³⁶ M. Foucault, *Archeologie du savoir*, Editions Gallimard, Paris 1969.

³⁷ Therefore, the concept of discourse analysis is referred to as „social constructivism“. (cf. M. Jorgensen, L.J. Philips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, SAGE Publications, London 2002).

³⁸ V. Burgin, op. cit., p. 187.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 187.

which still support it today. He writes that one should “recognize the art institution as a *discursive institution*”⁴⁰ and deem it to be always ideological. The consequences are far-reaching. Contemporary art does not refer to reality, it is not rooted in its ontology, it does not attempt to transform it, as avant-garde artists assumed. The artist ceases to perceive his role as a “builder of the world” and sees himself as a “social actor” who identifies himself with the “subject positions”. He does not aspire to truth, but to dominate – to make the discourse to which he feels attached a hegemonic project⁴¹. In such a situation, Burgin believes that “art [...] today is that which is in essence nothing but a blank slate upon which the critical discourse may be inscribed”. There is no theory of art, since art has become an operative field for discourses”⁴².

Thus ends the theory of art. The contemporary category of “art” emerged in the mid-16th century with the isolation of *homo significans* from *homo faber* and recognition of art as a *theoretical practice*. “This theoretical status of art – Burgin writes – was conformed and consolidated in the discursive-institutional constructions of the eighteenth century (the academy, art history, criticism and so on) to form the foundations of the modern art institution”⁴³. Taking this point of view into account, one can conclude that the avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century was a revolt against the institutions and their theoretical foundations, but it did not change the very model of thinking about art itself. The avant-garde theory was considered to be important as it was supposed to serve as a basis for artistic activities and set the scope of formulated goals. The post-WWII neo-avant-garde reinforced these tendencies. This later became one of the reasons for the attacks directed against the avant-garde approach to art. It was accused of excessive theorizing, “cerebrality”, departure from visual specifics and spontaneity of action. “the apparent ‘emergence’ of theory in the art world of the late 1960s (which so scandalized the self-appointed guardians of art’s intellectual Innocence)”, Burgin wrote, “was therefore simply a resurgence of that which had been repressed in the ideologies of (a degraded) late-Romanticism”⁴⁴. This trend was brought to an end by Postmodernism, within which theorism was replaced by the incorporation of art into the world of discourses. Concluding his deliberations in 1985, Burgin wrote that “‘Art theory’, understood as those interdependent forms of art history, aesthetics, and criticism which began in the Enlightenment and culminated in the recent period of ‘high modernism’, is now at an end”.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 192.

⁴¹ I am referring here to the characteristics of the theory of discourse by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe presented in the book by Marianne Jorgensen and Louise J. Philips., op. cit., p. 2451.

⁴² Ibid., p. 200.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 203.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

I started this paper by pointing out the external factors determining the continued existence and functioning of the avant-garde model of art. However, the role of the new theories evidencing the innovativeness inherited from the avant-garde is now being neutralized in the context of the “discursive economy” characterizing contemporary culture. The “dialectic apparatus” operating on its basic levels transforms the artists’ critical statements into affirmative ones by placing them within the frame of institutionalized art. As a result, the avant-garde concepts are incorporated into a system in which they become one of the elements of the production and circulation of cultural resources. Their rebelliousness is neutralized, and their radical proposals do not interfere with the processes of the “discursive economics”, but instead seek to uphold them. The absorption of the avant-garde theories by the cultural apparatus is tantamount to the ongoing death of the avant-garde. Theories thus give the avant-garde a kiss of death.

Burgin took the most radical stance on the avant-garde’s theorization of art. He considered it a continuation of the theoretical tendency initiated in the 16th century, reinforced during the Enlightenment and modified in the Romantic era. In his opinion, the avant-garde did not thwart the underlying foundations of this concept of art, but merely modified it. The change took place in Postmodernism, with the end of theory and the opening of art to different discourses. However, should it not be concluded based on these concepts, in which “death”, “life”, or “end” are a recurring theme, that a different metaphor ought to be sought and used? It might perhaps invoke a different vision – giving hope to the avant-gardes in Postmodernism or to avant-gardes after the avant-garde.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Auslander Philip (1993) *Books. Review by Philip Auslander*, “The Drama Review” vol. 37, no 3, pp. 196-201.

Burgin Victor (1986) *The End of Art Theory. Criticism and Postmodernity*, London: Macmillan.

Bürger Peter (1984) *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, transl. from the German by Michael Shaw, Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Bürger Peter (2010) *Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of “Theory of the Avant-Garde”*, “New Literary History” 2010, 41, p. 696.

Foucault Michael (1969) *Archeologie du savoir*, Paris: Editions Gallimard.

Jorgensen Marianne W., Philips Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, London: SAGE Publications.

Kosuth Joseph (1993) *Art after Philosophy*, in: idem, *Art after Philosophy and After. Collected Writings, 1966-1990*, ed. By G. Guercio, Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press.

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

Scarpetta Guy (1985) *L'impureté*, Paris: Figures/Grasset.

Strzemiński Władysław (1975) *Sztuka nowoczesna a szkoły artystyczne*, in: idem, *Pisma*, ed. Z. Baranowicz, Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich.

Sztabiński Grzegorz (1991) *Problemy intelektualizacji sztuki tendencjach awangardowych*, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.

AWANGARDA: SZTUKA JAKO TEORIA (streszczenie)

Punktem wyjścia artykułu są pytania sformułowane w 1993 roku przez Philipa Auslendera dotyczące tego, czy awangarda jest możliwa w postmodernizmie, albo czy sam postmodernizm można uznać za nową fazę awangardy? Przedstawiciele sztuki awangardowej przypisywali istotną rolę teorii. Dlatego próba odpowiedzi na zadane pytania podjęta została w nawiązaniu do trzech możliwości, jakie łączono z awangardowym teoretyzowaniem. Pierwsza została omówiona w nawiązaniu do książki Paula Manna *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*. Polega ona na wskazaniu, że dziś sztuka funkcjonuje w ramach „ekonomii dyskursywnej”. Teorie awangardowe, opozycyjne wobec artystycznego status quo, w istocie podtrzymują funkcjonowanie tego aparatu, stając się „dyskursywnie produktywne”. Zatem zamiast do odnowy, przyczyniają się do śmierci awangardy, wchłonięcia jej przez kulturowy „efekt wymiany”. Druga możliwość, określona jako „teoria – życie”, zostaje rozwinięta na przykładzie tekstów Petera Bürgera. Uznał on, że podstawowym dążeniem awangardy był atak na instytucję sztuki i zrewolucjonizowanie życia jako całości. Odnowa ta była zapowiadana w tekstach i realizowana w dziełach sztuki, które stawały się sposobem podjęcia i próbą rozwiązania problemów teoretycznych. Zjawisko to określiłem jako „teoretyzm”. Trzecia omówiona możliwość to „koniec teorii”. Została ona przedstawiona w nawiązaniu do książki Victora Burgina o tym samym tytule. Angielski autor uważa, że w XX wieku nastąpił upadek koncepcji sztuki kształtowanej od okresu Renesansu, a uformowanej w czasach Oświecenia i Romantyzmu. Sztuka obecna rozgrywa się nie w obszarze teorii, a w sferze dyskursów tworzących „efekty prawdy” i pełniących funkcje mobilizującą i strategiczną, nie ontologiczną. Artykuł kończą uwagi na temat zmiany metafor („śmierć”, „życie”, „koniec”), które są stosowane w związku z awangardą i ewentualnych konsekwencji tej sytuacji.

Słowa kluczowe: awangarda, teoria, dyskurs, Paul Mann, Peter Bürger, Victor Burgin.