

The Avant-Garde System

By Pamela Bianchi

In a desire to write a total history, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel proposes a novel sociocultural and transnational approach to the artistic avant-gardes. Beyond a mere history of styles, the avant-gardes appear in her book as genuine political and social events, caught in complex networks of influence.

Reviewed : Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, *Les avant-gardes artistiques 1848–1918. Une histoire transnationale*, Gallimard, Folio histoire, 976 p.

Using a historiographical and multidisciplinary approach, Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel proposes a rewriting of the history of the avant-gardes in which these no longer appear merely as artistic movements, but as genuine political and social events. In properly contextualizing the issues, the author does not content herself with presenting a history of styles; she also highlights the network of influences that gave rise to the avant-garde system. Thus, as she moves from the need for a new etymological definition of the term to the interactions between national and international scenes, and from the ideological and political connection between the social events of the time to the development of the press and the literary avant-garde, Joyeux-Prunel writes a new history: that of the avant-garde system.

From the very first lines, artistic, social, transnational, geopolitical and literary influences are brought into play so as to offer a sort of “horizontal history,” a global history, or a total history:

A history of the avant-gardes [proposed] from a sociocultural perspective, which summarizes, over the long period, the findings of isolated monographic studies, and which gives them a more global and comprehensive reach by means of new research questions and studies. (p. 19)

The objective is to connect, decenter, and intertwine the play of avant-gardes, in “[...] a play of scales and back-and-forth between the local and the international, between monography and macrohistory” (p. 42). This is accomplished through the structuring of a network of strategies, markets and reflections, which helps to disclose the various identities of the avant-gardes between 1848 and 1918.

Aware of the scope of such research, Joyeux-Prunel readily reveals her methodology, questioning herself and the reader throughout the book. This allows her to explore the avant-gardes through an innovative sociocultural approach:

How did these generations succeed each other? Can we subscribe to the linear history suggested by a formalist approach to the history of art? [...] Should we even believe the idea that the avant-garde was constituted against the academic tradition of the time, given that the latter was seemingly in full crisis in the 1860s? [...] How can we write one more history of the avant-garde in the visual arts without succumbing to the permanent temptation of judgment of value and taste? (p. 21)

Armed with a list of bibliographical references of more than 200 pages, Joyeux-Prunel proposes a rigorous and detailed study of the avant-gardes, which she supplements with targeted and always contextualized examples and analyses of artworks. Thus her scientific (and sometimes fictionalized) approach and her interest in transnational research enable her to present a novel reading of the avant-gardes.

From the outset, we discover the main arguments that drove the avant-garde project and that punctuate the progression of the book: the rejection of academicism, the relation to the public, to the market, to tradition, to the press and to art collectors, but also the ambiguous connection between the notions of modernity and avant-garde. Indeed, the author develops the analysis chronologically, which lets the reader follow the historical stages of the avant-garde system: Thus we recognize the constitution, around the late 1880s, “of a modernist front” (p. 43) that was opposed to dominant institutions, and that towards the end of the century became autonomous from art academies in crisis. Owing also to the structuring of an international and even global network, the early century became the scene of an avant-garde “explosion” (1905-1908). This led in 1910 to a change in attitude and approach, whereby the avant-gardes moved towards a sort of political activism: “[...] Could one be a member of the artistic avant-garde without being a member of the political avant-garde, without taking sides in history?” Lastly, whereas the First World War imposed an artistic and cultural pause, the demand for innovation of the following years laid the foundations for abstraction, collages and theatricalizations, which resulted in the experiments of the 1920s.

The Moderns against the Ancients? (1848-1899)

Using an approach at once synchronic and diachronic, Joyeux-Prunel creates a dialogue between artists, politicians, writers, art dealers and collectors, while paying meticulous attention to details, references, names, lists and specifications (p. 68, 135). In doing so, she brings into tension several parallel histories that crisscrossed and influenced each other throughout the period concerned. In the first part of the book, the author draws on several analytical regimes to provide a general but precise overview of what made the history of Impressionism. She simultaneously traces the outcome of this movement and the disillusionment experienced by its actors, without forgetting the human aspect of the issue, which, as it were, can be summed up in this sometimes neglected question: “How to survive while remaining independent?” (p. 80). After pondering over the concept of *avant-garde*, from its emergence to the paradoxes it contains, she proposes an incisive analysis of Impressionism and of its relation to the Salon.

Thus, the emergence of the Parisian *avant-garde* was intimately connected to the radical contrast between the hopes of 1848 and the political restriction to which all modes of expression—artistic as well as literary—were subjected by the Second Empire. (p. 50)

Not only does Joyeux-Prunel analyze the Impressionist movement at length, she also extends her research to the context of the time, stressing the ways in which Impressionist demands overlapped with the French art system. In addition to dating the emergence of the *avant-gardes*, she structures her study around the causes and consequences of the crisis of the artistic milieu, while also underlining the attitudes and strategies adopted by the Moderns. In doing so, she reveals the ambivalent relationships that existed between artists (and their careers) and the Salon (with its laws and its rejected) (p.64). Likewise, in the third part of the book, she stresses the tension between a national outlook and a strategic, international and cosmopolitan approach.

At the same time as they ridiculed the values of the academic system and challenged its institutions, the Realist *avant-gardes* launched into a systematic critique of the political context, which was marked by the last surge of academicism: namely, the context of the national spirit. (p. 66)

Finally, the author insists on the contradictory aspect—intransigent and adaptable at once—of Impressionism. From Pissarro’s financial difficulties to Monet’s increasing standing, Joyeux-Prunel traces a history of problems, strategies (supported by writers and collectors) and ideological temptations, once again without forgetting the political context of the time, which was characterized from 1879 on by an eclectic and liberal turn (p. 118).

The Time of “Secessions”

The second part of the book examines the period 1885-1905, as well as the emergence of a new avant-garde founded on the acceptance of Impressionism at the Salon. But while the time of Secessions marked the acceptance of modern art,

[...] did it not also mark the loss, for the avant-garde of the 1860s and 1870s, of its social, economic and political independence? And while there was room for new avant-gardes, could one still be more modern than the Moderns, and be recognized as such? (p.150)

The author explores the Moderns of Brussels, Paris and London in order to lay out the elite strategies of the period. She mentions specific cases of exhibitions, groups of artists (the Thirty-Three in Paris), Salons (the Twenty in Brussels) and galleries (Grosvenor Gallery in London) managed by artists who, being totally independent of the market logic, sought to take over from past generations of avant-gardes. She then tackles the European Secessions (National Society of Fine Arts, Berlin, Munich, Free Aesthetics, etc.) by proposing an analysis in which national cultures and cultural internationalism intersect. Thus, she moves from the National Society of Fine Arts—construed as a model for other modernist elites—to the Russian and German Secessions—driven by the rejection of provincialism and conservatism—and finally to the more widely developed Vienna Secession.

Joyeux-Prunel subsequently broadens the context of the study. She develops the topic from a social perspective, stressing the links between the new avant-gardes, the galleries, and especially the press and magazines, which came to impose a “dominant conception of the stakes of artistic struggle, of the rules to follow and of the places to frequent” (p. 183). This allows her to highlight often similar profiles, styles and aesthetic pursuits, which all converged in a sort of “bourgeois, and even aristocratic sociability” (p. 184) characteristic of these new Moderns. Thus we can speak of avant-garde snobbery and of a modern art that had become a market more than an ideology. Better still, the author emphasizes a sort of paradox running through this period, in which, as though marking a sort of pause, there was a move away from the aesthetic polemics that had been initiated since 1850. Between 1895 and 1905, a modern art took shape whose “[...] structures were more rigid than those against which the generations of Realists and Impressionists had risen” (p.188).

In this perspective there emerged new artistic trends: Neo-Impressionists, Symbolists, Nabis, synthesizers, etc., took their place in a society where Impressionism had by then gained recognition. In addition to analyzing the modalities of formation of independent groups, the

author sheds light on interdisciplinary connections. Her focus shifts from the growing political and ideological orientation of innovators to the alliances created with literary circles, through the setting up of groups of artists ever more attentive to contemporary social issues. To this must be added a form of individualism, which sometimes resulted in rivalries, competition and commercial strategies (p. 213):

But while, in the years 1885-1895, rival “isms” had proliferated and modernism had begun to be institutionalized via specific Salons, the next decade seems to have been calmer. [...] Were “the young” of the years 1885-1890 concerned with consolidating their trajectories, gathering at the doors of the consecrating institutions of modernity? (pp. 239-40)

As a result of this situation, and in an artistic context marked by the establishment of Symbolism and Post-Impressionism, there arose the question of the recognition of the applied arts (p. 282). Under the impact of the Second Industrial Revolution, the applied arts were taking part in a broader questioning of the factory in favor of manual and artisan labor—a questioning that was openly pursued, for instance, by the Arts and Crafts movement. In this perspective, Joyeux-Prunel’s transnational and multicultural approach fuels her study: The latter moves from the internationalization of the applied arts to their evolution in relation to common preoccupations (exhibition, statutory re-evaluation, sale, conquest of a new public, etc.), and to the intersection of the international (Belgian, German and English) avant-gardes of the early twentieth century.

The Explosion of the Avant-garde and the International Art War (1903-1914)

Again we see Joyeux-Prunel’s multidisciplinary approach when she ponders over “the state [...] of the young generation of European artists [French Fauvists, German Expressionists, Italian Futurists, etc.]” (p. 316). As she analyzes the motivations and causes that fueled rapid artistic innovation among the avant-gardes between 1905 and 1914, she describes the “avant-garde explosion” as a situation that reflected the European crisis of modern art:

Whoever were the artists included in the avant-garde of the years 1905-1914, the period preceding their transition to the avant-garde was one of crisis, whereas for the Post-Impressionists it had been merely one of malaise. (p. 316)

Around 1900, alongside an artistic youth affected by the social crisis that was increasingly highlighted in the press (*L’Humanité*, *Tendances nouvelles*, etc.), Joyeux-Prunel observes the emergence of new horizons of artistic innovation, such as the creation of the Salon d’Automne in Paris in 1903 and the appearance of new art dealers, young amateurs and fresh magazines.

In particular, the author focuses on defining and studying the forms taken by the crisis: from the Fauvist quest for the foundations of painting, which escaped the realm of “[...] the societal and the historical to [become] more social” (p. 339), to the Secession crisis in Germany and the emergence of Expressionism and Germanic painting. She continues by addressing the renewal of the Parisian scene, which unfolded in a climate of general competition between artists. Thus, following a careful examination of specific artists and artworks (*Les Femmes d'Alger* by Picasso, *Decorative Panel for a Dining Room* by Matisse), she concludes by presenting the critical issues of the time, such as the “*querelle du nu*” (quarrel about the nude) of the years 1905-1908, the compromises made with the market and art dealers, and, finally, the turn to still life (p. 368) and to nature in general (for instance, with Braque).

In this context, the author deploys a historiographical approach that allows her to properly trace the formation (“explosion”) of the avant-garde in the early century, but without sacrificing complexity to an ontology of the avant-garde:

After the late-century pause, the time of the avant-gardes had arrived. In this accelerated and tumultuous time, those who aspired to conquer the future succeeded each other at incredible speed between 1910 and 1914... The international art war, which pitted these movements against the present but also against each other, was fueled by growing international diplomatic tensions. (p. 392)

In so doing, Joyeux-Prunel introduces the question of the mediatization of the pictorial avant-gardes in relation to the geopolitical context of the time. The case of Italian Futurism was, in this respect, emblematic of a new awareness characterized by a mix of international mobilization and nationalist discourse (p. 397). Through describing the role of Futurists vis-à-vis the media and their desire to impose themselves in Paris, she contextualizes the emergence of French Cubism and, consequently, the questioning of the ambivalent relationship between cultural (Parisian) nationalism and internationalism. Joyeux-Prunel then proposes an incisive analysis of the European avant-gardes, from the Netherlands to England through “peripheries” like Romania and Hungary. While structuring her study around the cultural power of the Parisian system, she describes a sort of international decentering, which explains how Paris ceased to be the ideal venue for the exhibition and sale of new artworks. The specific examples she provides, such as *The Blue Rider* or *Der Sturm*, remain grounded in a multidisciplinary methodology that enables her to focus on the issue at hand while also contextualizing it socially.

Thus, Paris was no longer a fertile ground for innovation. This not only encouraged artists to look elsewhere, but also prompted the capital’s art dealers to take an interest in foreign markets. This was the case, for example, of Ambroise Vollard, Eugène Druet and Daniel Henry Kahweiler, who contributed to exporting and consolidating foreign networks of contemporary painting lovers and dealers (p. 482). The author critically analyzes this new public, bringing it into relation with French collectors. In this respect, Joyeux-Prunel’s analyses of media strategies reflect her objective and historiographical approach. Thus, while her initial focus is placed on German and Central European amateurs, it then shifts to more specific cases, such as, for example, the *Armory Show*. The latter indeed promoted a new type of exhibition event that

disrupted the art system and the artistic influence of Paris. Joyeux-Prunel moves on to describe a climate—already widespread among the European avant-gardes (in Germany, where a sort of anti-French ideology persisted, but also in Russia, Great Britain and Italy)—in which French art went from being the main reference to being the target of new, international attacks.

The author emphasizes that, in this international artistic milieu, there was a questioning not only of painting but also of the values of modernity. In so doing, she provides a general analysis of the social, political and literary context devoted to speed, current events, violence and noise which leads her to the eve of the First World War, a time when “[...] avant-garde practices seemed to be running out of steam” (p. 529).

Between Fire and Order

The war constitutes a gap in many syntheses devoted to the avant-gardes, as if that period had not mattered, except for Dada. (p. 537)

On the one hand, the war imposed the almost complete cessation of artistic activity (the avant-garde ideologies were paralyzed by the idea of purification and that of a return to order and to reason which the war implemented). On the other hand, the press (*Le Mot*, *L'Élan*) and (modern) art were clearly important in the conflict: “The first problem [was] to find the right balance so as to associate the libertarian spirit and the concern for artistic innovation with patriotic demands” (p. 538). In this context, the author analyzes the social and political stakes of the First World War in order to specify the fate and role of the period’s avant-garde artists. In addition to noting the shame experienced by those who did not participate in the conflict when others were sacrificing their lives, but also the way some highlighted their presence at the front to defend their aesthetic positions, the author observes that there was a pause in the artistic life of Paris (and more generally of Europe): There no longer were exhibitions, Salons, literary criticism, cultural debates, etc. The period nonetheless favored the appearance of “second fiddles” (p. 549), namely new actors and magazines of the art scene that took advantage of the places left vacant by artists gone to the front.

While the first year of the war stifled the innovative spirit of the avant-garde, the years 1915-1916 coincided, on the contrary, with an artistic renaissance. The latter was reflected in an aesthetic and avant-garde revolution in small magazines, and in the incentive to return to a resolutely modern French art (p. 559). This was a sort of new beginning, especially for the generations of Futurist and Cubist artists who “flourished at the front” (p. 564). In the context of this renaissance, the resumption of exhibitions and debates also coincided with the recovery of the art market, which was then interested in Cubism:

Thus, in contexts where politics was primary, the avant-garde took new directions. In France, a classic and patriotic vision of the art of tomorrow was adopted. In Germany, one dreamed instead of socialism. (p.654)

The analysis continues with a transnational examination of the avant-gardes, in Central Europe and Germany in particular. Thus Joyeux-Prunel is able to recast the issue at the international level, yet while continuously tracing the connections to the Paris market. Indeed, unlike what happened in France, the war in Germany did not spark an anti-modernist polemic, but accelerated the assimilation of the Expressionist avant-garde into Germanic culture. In so doing, the author sheds light on the ideological paradoxes of a politicized market, and on the outbreak of a revolution at once political and intellectual.¹

“Between the various returns to the Parisian order, the German revolutions, the exiles of some and the travels of others” (p. 710), Joyeux-Prunel analyzes what she describes as “diasporas of despair.” The exile to neutral countries was, in this sense, the symptom of a general disillusionment experienced by the majority of avant-garde artists. Lastly, through an examination of the New York avant-garde, the nostalgic group of Barcelona, Duchamp’s urinal and the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, the author manages to introduce Dadaism and the different international avant-gardes of the war and post-war periods in the conclusion to her study. Echoing the introduction to her book, Joyeux-Prunel ends with new questions:

Could one still think of new forms, of new ways of making art? Did one have to search for such forms, to continue making art? Or, more simply, was one to abandon the illusion of permanent innovation, and hence the core of the avant-garde ideology inherited from the previous century? (p. 714)

The history written by Joyeux-Prunel ends with a conceptual impetus that testifies above all to the openness of the avant-garde system: a system that cannot be reduced to its main protagonists, but whose components can be found in a rich and constantly evolving sociopolitical context. Thus, innovative spirit, intermingling, reciprocal influences, dialogues and strategies become the real protagonists of a parallel and perpetually moving history whose multidisciplinary character makes it also topical and contemporary.

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¹ As an example, see the *Novembergruppe* of 1918.