

Introduction

Avant-Gardes in Crisis

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“To encounter the history of avant-garde poetry,” begins Cathy Park Hong’s 2014 polemic, “is to encounter a racist tradition.”¹ What Hong calls the avant-gardists’ “delusion of whiteness” is a belief, propagated by artists and critics alike, that aesthetic experimentation flourishes only when it is shielded from matters of racial identity.² “The avant-garde has become petrified, enamored by its own past, and therefore forever insular and forever looking backwards,” Hong concludes; “Fuck the avant-garde. We must hew our own path.”³ Surveying high-profile accounts of the avant-garde, from Peter Bürger’s classic *Theory of the Avant-Garde* to Marjorie Perloff’s canonization of white experimental poetry, we find ourselves agreeing with Hong.⁴ All too often, *avant-garde* has served as shorthand for a certain dogma around experimental work—a dogma that, at its worst, disguises whiteness as post-identity. Although Hong urges us to give up the avant-garde label altogether, we would be better off refusing the constrained definitions promoted by Perloff, Bürger, and likeminded critics. Rather than bury the avant-garde as a concept, we argue that we cannot speak of it without engaging the genealogies that these critics deem disposable. In the period covered in this collection, spanning the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, avant-garde radicalism, we contend, is inextricable from minoritarian aesthetics and politics.

Avant-Gardes in Crisis: Art and Politics in the Long 1970s seeks to restore the historical and political contexts for the questions raised about the avant-garde since the 1970s. As such, this collection casts the avant-gardes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as responses to a crisis in the reproduction of life. This is in part a crisis of resource distribution, one that pertains to the exacerbation of economic inequality and the coeval dissolution of social services, destruction of unions, and mass incarceration. Such policies have come to be grouped under the catchall term *neoliberalism*. Although neoliberalism, as a school of thought and a set of recommendations made by a transatlantic network of economists, dates back to the 1930s, the crisis of the 1970s issued from, and in turn justified, the widespread implementation of neoliberal policies, with deleterious effects for marginalized populations.⁵ This crisis in resource distribution was accompanied by a crisis in resource depletion. The oil crises of 1973 and 1979 marked bottlenecks in the supply of energy to the Western economy. The political and economic conflicts labeled “oil crises” hide a more colossal disaster: a climate crisis precipitated by such factors as an overreliance on fossil fuel. Theorists of precarization observe that the collapse of unemployment services, the rising cost of health care, the toxification of environments, and other threats to survival amount to a historical transformation whose metrics include the wearing out of populations.⁶ This wearing out is uneven: in the long fallout from the 1970s, vitality is managed along axes of race, gender, sexual orientation, class, citizenship status, disability, and age. Together, the contributors to this collection argue that an avant-garde concept attuned to patterns of resource concentration and attrition clarifies the contemporary interplay between art and politics.

In framing the long 1970s as a crisis in the reproduction of life, we combine the codes of political economy, specifically its Marxist tradition, with those of biopolitics, generally attributed to Michel Foucault. These critical idioms have not always cohabited harmoniously. Recent Marxist theories of aesthetics pin the evacuation of labor from critical debates on, among other factors, the widespread adoption of biopolitics as a paradigm for understanding the subjugation of bodies and control of populations.⁷ According to this logic, discourses of biopolitics, in trading labor for “biopower” and “human capital” as categories of analysis, have been complicit with “the rise of neoliberalism as an antilabor discourse.”⁸ While we devote much attention to artistic labor, we maintain that questions of political economy are not incompatible with questions of biopolitics, especially when the latter have to do with a management of resources that invigorates privileged populations

and exhausts marginalized ones. As Melinda Cooper has demonstrated, the political-economic crisis of the 1970s amplified conservative ideologies and practices of exclusion and exploitation that both preceded and exceeded it.⁹ Approaching the crisis of the long 1970s on political-economic *and* biopolitical terms allows us to chart with specificity the conditions in which minoritarian artists have labored.

The term *long 1970s* has been used to designate a variety of economic and political transformations, both global and domestic. For Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager, and Helle Porsdam, the long 1970s encompass a series of shifts in the world order that foreshadowed the end of the Cold War, from the first international economic crisis since World War II, to the liberalization of capitalist markets, to United States–Soviet nuclear parity, to the East–West détente process.¹⁰ The US historian Judith Stein argues that in the 1970s, the Age of Compression, driven by the assumption that capital and labor should prosper together, gave way to the Age of Inequality, driven by an ethics claiming that the promotion of capital would eventually benefit labor.¹¹ In *Avant-Gardes in Crisis*, we use the term *long 1970s* to suggest, as Jefferson Cowie has done before us, that “within the gloomy seventies we can find the roots of our own time.”¹² We, in the twenty-first century, are still dealing with the unfinished business of the 1970s. Art is still grappling with the economic and political aftershocks of that “pivotal decade.”¹³ Throughout a collection whose archive spans the 1960s to the 2010s, the seventies perform a metonymic function. The decade stands in for the historical process through which minoritarian art has become an index of, and a tactic or strategy for moving through, an accelerated crisis in the reproduction of life.

Hong was not the first to pronounce the avant-garde dead. As Paul Mann demonstrates in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, declaring the avant-garde dead is endemic to avant-garde criticism in the long 1970s; Bürger himself, as we will see, has made a similar argument. From its origins, the avant-garde was bound to notions of progress.¹⁴ The 1970s mark a moment when the very notion of historical progression is thrown into disarray as the economy stagnates and resource extraction reaches its limits.¹⁵ In the 1970s, it is not just one form or another of the old order that refuses to hold. Instead, the entire system undergirding oppositions between new and old orders is no longer operative. The longer this crisis unfolds, the more obsolete appears Bürger’s version of avant-garde radicalism, inherited from early twentieth-century movements like surrealism, constructivism, and futurism. Everything ends in the 1970s: the institutions against which Bürger’s

avant-garde struggled and, more importantly, the material conditions under which such oppositions could register as historically significant.

From our contemporary standpoint, the avant-garde is a problem of the 1970s. Art criticism devoted to avant-garde anti-institutionality proliferated in that decade; meanwhile, the institutional grounds of art and criticism were dramatically shifting. Yet, debates about the avant-garde have seldom considered how the larger crisis initiated in the 1970s enabled, forced, constrained, or provided a framework for experimentation in the literary, visual, and performed arts. The economic shocks of the 1970s and concurrent attacks on the welfare state constricted the institutions of artistic production and circulation. As Leigh Claire La Berge explains, labor's declining share of social wealth has been felt acutely in the arts. While schemes of professionalization like the MFA have enabled artists to conceive of themselves as individuals with artistic labor to sell, this labor has been "decommodified," meaning that it is less and less compensated by a wage.¹⁶ It is also the case, however, that the economic shocks of the 1970s ignited new possibilities for aesthetic production, particularly as cheap rents provided an informal supplement to artists' income and as rising austerity provoked vibrant debates among activist-inclined artists like the Nuyorican poets. Paradoxically, then, crisis imperils artists but prompts new avant-gardes. "A crisis," Mike Sell notes, "is an imminent movement that marks, after the requisite unsettling and reconfiguring of social institutions, language, aesthetics, and so forth, the birth of new criteria."¹⁷ No recent decade is more synonymous with crisis than the 1970s. After fifty or so years of unsettling, we search here for new criteria.

Our search takes us not only to the gallery, museum, and classroom but to a variety of public and private sites where artists have reacted to crisis by improvising new parameters for living and working. Within those sites, we find, in Mann's words, "earthworks that do not trail lifelines to the gallery, clandestine associations of writers, correspondence networks that conceal themselves from the economy at all costs."¹⁸ Following Mann's lead, John Roberts and Gregory Sholette point to the existence of a vast realm of aesthetic production in the shadow of the official institutions of the academy and the artworld. Roberts calls this realm a "second economy."¹⁹ Borrowing a term from physics, Sholette calls it "dark matter": a space for artists who reject artworld demands of visibility or have no choice but to be invisible.²⁰ Roberts and Sholette agree that it is within this avant-garde realm, however supplementary or invisible it may be, that genuine innovation and even, in Roberts's ambitious terms, revolution can be brought about. "The avant-

garde does not exist as a given thing,” Roberts writes, “but rather as a set of unnamed possibilities.”²¹ We understand Roberts and Sholette’s notions of second economy and dark matter to be gesturing to *minoritarian* aesthetic production: artistic production by subjects whose life and work take place on the fringes of legitimizing institutions, or whose inclusion within such institutions remains provisional.

The concept of the avant-garde, Marc James Léger argues, has a particular purchase on our thinking in times of crisis because it explicitly asks whether it is possible to be radical or to disturb the established order.²² Ben Hickman goes further: it might be in the avant-gardists’ best interest to label the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries a crisis, insofar as the term opens the period up to critique.²³ While recognizing that crises can be manufactured to justify extralegal acts and further disenfranchise oppressed populations, we assert that crisis, by destabilizing or defamiliarizing normative ways of living, prompts artists and critics to demand alternatives to unlivable conditions.²⁴ Such alternatives emerge with particular force in the work of artists working in minoritarian spaces. They also emerge from the work of artists working across national borders. James M. Harding has suggested that the avant-garde is a transnational phenomenon, where *transnational* means “both the processes of global hegemony and the practice of counterhegemonic resistance.”²⁵ Even though many of the figures whose work is analyzed in this collection have transited through the US at one point or another, the following chapters underscore the transnational constitution of the avant-garde. The essays retrace avant-gardes and crises across the US, Central America, Germany, Japan, Belgium, and France, in addition to exposing the colonial apparatus supporting what are widely accepted as national traditions.

Institutionality and Anti-Institutionality amid Institutional Collapse

In troubling the whiteness of the avant-garde, Hong takes up the terms of a long debate with origins in the social struggles of the late 1960s and 1970s, when writers, artists, and activists developed innovative rebukes to the institutions of literature, visual art, and theater that had flourished during the economic expansion of the immediate postwar era.²⁶ In this context, the term *avant-garde* became a charged site for interrogating the legacy of modernist experimentation in terms of its political valence and its relation

to the institutions it sought to critique. Debates on the avant-garde took shape across venues, including the journal *October*, which printed many a polemic on anti-institutional art.²⁷ Such debates have lived on in retorts to Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place's conceptual poetry—retorts whose proliferation in the mid-2010s more or less coincided with the publication of Hong's essay in the journal *Lana Turner*. The now-defunct Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo, for example, used the humorous argot of the internet age to denounce white male hegemony within US poetry as well as the importation of US cultural models into Mexican poetry—two phenomena encapsulated by the portmanteau *gringpo*, for *gringo poetics*.²⁸

Recent debates around the avant-garde have generally been cast as offshoots of the canon wars, or the struggle between defenders of a white, male canon of so-called “great books” and critics who have asserted that this canon marginalizes nonwhite and nonmale authors. The critic Dorothy Wang laments that the canon wars led to “the firm clicking into place of the terms ‘identity,’ ‘identitarian,’ and, most overtly, ‘identity politics’ as the antithesis of . . . literary value and critical rigor.”²⁹ For Wang, the problem of the avant-garde is, in the end, a problem of literary institutions:

Poetry by racialized persons, no matter the aesthetic style, is almost always read as secondary to the larger (and more “primary”) fields and forms of English-language poetry and poetics—whether the lyric, prosody, rhetorical tropes, the notion of “avant-garde”—categories all too often presumed to be universal, overarching, and implicitly “racially unmarked.”³⁰

Wang paints an illuminating portrait of the disciplinary siloing whereby minority poetry appears supplementary to literary studies' “proper” objects. But the university is not the only institution that has shaped avant-garde production, circulation, and reception in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The university has enjoyed a slightly longer half-life than other institutions that fell into crisis in the 1970s—a fact admittedly hard to discern from the contemporary vantage point of the humanities' decimation, amid which the labor of some of this collection's contributors is not even indirectly compensated through the structures of tenure and promotion. As the canon wars raged in the last decades of the twentieth century, life outside the university was becoming untenable.

The crisis of the 1970s and its attendant disruptions across institutions, modes of living, and particularly the social movements of the 1960s have

remained hidden in plain sight in discourses of the avant-garde. As Wang observes, the fact of a writer's close association with a social movement often obscures their commitments to experimental aesthetics. Wang offers, as a premier example, the writer Amiri Baraka, whose work has been "endlessly inventive," but who has been typecast as "stuck in the 1960s."³¹ It is also true, though, that Baraka's innovations were enabled by the fiscal crises of the long 1970s. Baraka's revolutionary arts center Spirit House took shape as Newark lost 24 percent of its manufacturing jobs between 1958 and 1970.³²

A similar case can be made for Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*. "While [*Dictee*] is considered as seminal as *Tender Buttons* among Asian American circles," Hong notes, "it's still treated like a fringe classic in the avant-garde canon."³³ Hong draws attention to *Dictee's* status as a text that refracts an attention to Asian American—specifically Korean American—identity through the avant-garde's formal innovation. And yet, Cha's work is seldom, if ever, understood in terms of the crisis-driven downtown New York scene from which it emerged. As rents dropped because of the ongoing fiscal crisis, artists moved to the city in droves, developing enclaves, first in SoHo and then in the Lower East Side, in which experiments in literary, visual, and performed arts proliferated. The multimedia form of *Dictee* reflects Cha's immersion in these cultures. At the least, as Sue J. Kim has demonstrated in her reading of Cha's edited anthology *Apparatus*, Cha engaged the cutting-edge aesthetic theories of her moment—theories that were circulating in New York.³⁴ Moreover, Tanam Press, which published *Dictee* alongside a range of innovative books, was enabled, as founder Reese Williams has reflected, by the economic freedom tied to the crisis of the 1970s.³⁵ *Dictee*, then, brings Cha's concerns as a Korean American female artist to "debates on the politics of avant-garde art forms" that took place among a diverse group of artists initially drawn to the city by cheap rents.³⁶ Tracking the impact of the crisis of the 1970s on the avant-garde reveals the artificiality of the dichotomy, cultivated by disciplinary divisions, between avant-garde and "identity" art.

Questions of institutionality have long been at the heart of debates on the avant-garde. While they have taken place in a range of sites, both central and peripheral to the artworld, these debates have, to an impressive extent, coalesced around Bürger's keystone *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger argues that the historical avant-gardes of the 1910s and 1920s criticized, rather than prior artistic movements and schools, art as an institution and its development in bourgeois society.³⁷ For Bürger, the historical avant-gardes aimed, but failed, to merge art with the praxis of life. Yet, this failure fulfilled a pedagogical

function: it made visible the normative frame of art as an institution and its influence on the social import of artworks. As Bürger puts it in a 2010 essay, “The failure of the avant-garde utopia of the unification of art and life coincides with the avant-garde’s overwhelming success within the art institution. One could almost say: in their very failure, the avant-gardes conquer the institution.”³⁸ In the 1950s and 1960s, the artists of the “neo-avant-gardes,” no longer in a position to assert art’s autonomy from its institutions, turned the historical avant-gardes’ chief techniques (collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture) into “internal aesthetic procedures.”³⁹ The avant-gardes, it seemed, had run out of steam.⁴⁰ For Bürger, once the revolutionary moment of the early twentieth century had passed, the avant-garde could only repeat its earlier moves as it ran in circles. Bürger’s account, like others of its ilk, tends, as Harding observes, to privilege “artistic innovation over and above political struggle,” locking the avant-garde into doomed repetitions of politically neutralized artistic gestures.⁴¹

Bürger does not provide any evidence of crisis’s alleged irrelevance at midcentury. More troubling still, in his late-career writing, Bürger reduces the period since the 1970s to an extended artistic and political status quo.⁴² In light of the frequent use of the term *crisis* in relation to the 1970s, how could Bürger contend, either in 1974 or in 2010, that the context for the avant-garde was no longer one of crisis? Bürger, we offer, was looking in the wrong places. The reason Bürger cannot decipher an avant-garde in the 1970s onward is intimately linked to Hong’s critique. Bürger believes that it is possible to determine whether an artistic movement is *either* a success *or* a failure because he holds a narrow view of what a crisis is, of who counts as a subject of crisis, and of what it looks like to mediate a crisis.⁴³ A crisis in the reproduction of life that penalizes marginalized people simply does not fit Bürger’s paradigm, calibrated as it is for the white male artist imbued with revolutionary fervor. What is more, Bürger’s conflation of crisis aesthetics with anti-institutionality is ill-fitted to a historical period during which some institutions are crumbling faster than they may be opposed. Bürger’s analysis builds toward a “gotcha” moment when the use of institutional criteria to evaluate a work of art invalidates its claim to autonomy. But what happens when there are fewer and fewer institutions to sell out to?

This is not to say that Bürger’s claims—or the claims of critics, like Hal Foster, who followed his lead—were unfounded.⁴⁴ Channeled through the narrow corridors of success and failure, the avant-garde did appear corralled within institutions in the immediate postwar moment, as the economy expanded the markets and institutions for art, such that avant-garde work of

modernist orientation became a part of a certain artworld firmament. However, just as women, minorities, and radicals were either dismissed or attacked in the US of the postwar boom, artists who fell under one or more of these rubrics mostly struggled *outside* artistic institutions.⁴⁵ For Bürger, the avant-garde is, as Roberts puts it, a “placeholder for art’s autonomy.”⁴⁶ Autonomous art, according to Juliana Spahr’s pithy definition, “is free from outside interference, from the market, from the government.”⁴⁷ The view that autonomy decreased in the 1950s and 1960s is parochial. When we pay attention to the art made amid the struggles for *political* autonomy of minority groups, for instance, we realize that institutional exclusion rushed some avant-gardes into partial aesthetic autonomy—a tendency intensified by the institutional bust that succeeded the postwar boom.⁴⁸ Our claim is not, of course, that in the 1970s art became outright autonomous; for one, blockbuster exhibitions of contemporary art in corporate-sponsored museums prove that the institutional extraction of value from the avant-gardes is ongoing. Instead, the polarity of autonomy-versus-institutionality, wherein standing outside of institutions registers as deliberate and freeing, strikes us as anachronistic amid the crisis in the reproduction of life catalyzed by the 1970s. While notions of plural avant-gardes, as Harding notes, have become commonplace, much remains to be said—and much is said in our collection—about the economic and political circumstances that disrupted the institutionalization of the avant-garde bemoaned by Bürger.⁴⁹ Taking Bürger’s historical materialism seriously, we call for a mapping of the contemporary avant-gardes that better reflects their conditions of emergence. This mapping promises to show that the 1970s inaugurated, rather than a post-avant-garde status quo, a moment when, as Sell puts it, “the avant-garde has achieved ubiquity.”⁵⁰

Minoritarian and Radical Avant-Gardes

If we are to counter the logic of exclusion that Hong denounces, how are we to define the avant-garde? Sell’s solution is to tie the avant-garde not to a specific genealogy but more flexibly to a commitment to political resistance. “The avant-garde,” Sell writes, “is a minority formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal, or alternative ways; in particular, by challenging the routines, assumptions, hierarchies, and/or legitimacy of cultural institutions.”⁵¹ Elisabeth A. Frost submits a similarly open definition, whereby the avant-garde comprises “any artistic practice that combines radical new forms with radical politics or utopian vision.”⁵² Following these critics, *Avant-Gardes in*

Crisis: Art and Politics in the Long 1970s places the adjectives *minoritarian* and *radical* at the heart of a consideration of the contemporary avant-gardes.

Radical art advocates thorough social and political reform or revolution. By labeling the contemporary avant-gardes *minoritarian*, we seek to center the contributions of artists from historically subordinated groups. A *minoritarian* concept of the avant-garde upends the epistemologies that have ratified a white male canon. The term *minoritarian* also refers to art that exceeds prestigious or permanent media. The contemporary avant-gardes go beyond painting, sculpture, film, and poetry and include theater, dance, performance art, fiction and nonfiction prose, and ephemeral interventions.⁵³ As Gabriele Schor reminds us, the two definitions of *minoritarian*—as identity and medium—often prove inextricable; in the 1970s, feminists turned to photography, film, and video to “make their mark in the art world outside the male-dominated medium of painting.”⁵⁴ By dwelling on the convergences and divergences between the two meanings of *minoritarian*, the contributors to this collection outline the imbrication of art and politics in the long 1970s. Our motivation in generating concepts fit for the contemporary avant-gardes is not presentist. In fact, a focus on the political interventions of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century avant-gardes helps to clarify retroactively the politics of the so-called historical avant-gardes.⁵⁵

To underscore the importance of a study of the avant-garde that treats radicalism and minoritarianism as bound but not isometric, we now turn to “Fuck the Avant-Garde,” a 2019 essay by Rachel Greenwald Smith. Smith reads Hong’s pronouncement as the avant-garde gesture par excellence. In their illiberalism, manifestos that say “fuck the avant-garde” are, in Smith’s view, more avant-gardist than the self-proclaimed avant-garde artists who hold on to liberal myths of “recognition, justice, and equality” and, in doing so, prove “complicit with the most egregious injustices of the dominant culture throughout the postwar period.”⁵⁶ We agree with Smith that Left critics who condemn the avant-gardes on the basis of their failure to live up to their radical ambitions implicitly suggest that more committed avant-garde praxes would be desirable. But by equating critique with manifesto, and manifesto with avant-garde, Smith ends up emptying Hong’s argument of its content. Indeed, if we reduce all Left criticism of the avant-garde, including Hong’s essay, to an illiberal “fuck the avant-garde,” then we fail to be accountable to the differently situated individuals and groups behind this criticism, and thereby lose track of the avant-garde’s relation to *minoritarian* perspectives.

Likewise, boiling down the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo’s intervention to a stauncher avant-gardism than the one exhibited by its targets would erase the specificity of the collective’s critique of white supremacy

and patriarchy. It would also ignore the coalition's attacks on nonwhite and nonmale poets. In Trisha Low's estimation, the coalition attacked "more people of color and queer women than straight white men."⁵⁷ Low expresses anger at Kenneth Goldsmith for appropriating Michael Brown's autopsy report, and at Vanessa Place for tweeting Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind*: "I'm mad at Kenny and Vanessa for making some racist poems that aren't even good art, I'm even madder that they don't understand that they have to be accountable for the hurt they've caused and that sometimes, you just have to say you're wrong."⁵⁸ Yet, Low, a Chinese writer who has lived in Singapore, London, Philadelphia, New York City, and the San Francisco Bay Area, refuses to disavow her ties with conceptualism and its white leaders. Low maintains that it is not because an artistic family is chosen that it can be unchosen, and so she decides to grapple with her position *within* conceptualism's legacy. "I feel implicated, complicit," she admits; "I don't just get to walk away from that guilt. I won't let myself."⁵⁹ In no way a straightforward defense of conceptualism, Low's rejoinder to the Mongrel Coalition hints at a racial, gender, and sexual geography of the avant-gardes whose complexity exceeds a critical paradigm wherein the loudest voices of dissent qualify as the most avant-gardist. Instead of folding *minoritarian* into *radical*, this collection examines the interplay between the two qualifiers amid a crisis whose impact is unevenly distributed.

We contend that the avant-gardes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are *in crisis*, in that artmaking both responds to political, economic, social, and environmental crises and reveals a crisis of confidence regarding aesthetic resistance's very possibility. Experimental writing, Tyler Bradway argues, "actively [rethinks] the chiasmus of politics and poetics through their formal experimentation."⁶⁰ A focus on the avant-gardes allows us to map out how experimentation reconfigures the relation between poetics and politics *across media*. Influential views of the avant-garde in such disparate domains as poetry studies and art history are united by their shortcomings, which is to say their insistence that radical subjects should be able to relinquish their identity. Accordingly, we situate our counterargument—that the contemporary avant-garde is a minoritarian formation—in the movement across established medium and media boundaries.

Becoming Minor in the Long 1970s

One response to the uncertainty of the 1970s—a response offered by critics like Perloff and the October Group—was to hold on to, and extend, the

lineage celebrated by Bürger. Surveying the art of the decade, Rosalind Krauss, in the 1979 essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field,” worries that the category of sculpture has become “infinitely malleable.”⁶¹ “The category,” Krauss continues, “has now been forced to cover such a heterogeneity that it is, itself, in danger of collapsing. And so we stare at the pit in the earth and think we both do and don’t know what sculpture is.”⁶² That loss of bearings drives the remainder of Krauss’s piece, in which she ponders how the viewer can live with the uncertainty prompted by the dislocations of nonsculpture. Krauss’s solution, one that her students Craig Owens and Foster later take up, is to rescue formlessness by recourse to semiotics: “The expanded field,” she concludes, “is ‘generated by problematizing [a] set of oppositions’ between marked sites and axiomatic structures, sculpture and site construction.”⁶³ Hereafter, the avant-garde will consist of a movement between oppositional poles, enabling aesthetic production to become, once again, “rigorously logical.”⁶⁴ What seemed malleable or squishy finds its structure. It is no accident that most of Krauss’s examples involve large-scale interventions: Richard Serra’s plates of lead, Robert Smithson’s mounds of slag, Alice Aycock’s tremendous *Maze*. One may be forgiven for reading “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” as a meditation on the category of bigness.

The works discussed in *Avant-Gardes in Crisis* operate in a more minor mode and on the scales of the small and the quotidian. Contributors center short poems, ephemeral exhibitions, repressed or outright censored works, and minor works by major artists. Sianne Ngai lays a foundation for a study of minor-key avant-gardes in her theory of the cute. Ngai describes the “cuteness” of the avant-garde as, paradoxically, that which meditates on art’s powerlessness while retaining “aesthetic power” by resisting a complete reabsorption into commodity culture.⁶⁵ Cuteness, that is, displays “aesthetic power *made available* by art’s social ineffectuality.”⁶⁶ For Ngai, it is by acknowledging its own ineffectuality that the cute maintains a longer shelf life than harder-edged versions of the avant-garde. Sophie Seita takes the little literary magazine to be exemplary of Ngai’s avant-garde cute. Cherished by the Dadaists and ubiquitous in today’s literary communities, the little literary magazine is the rare artifact to travel across the avant-gardes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As a cute object, the avant-garde magazine, Seita argues, invites the mix of care and sadism charted by Ngai: “The avant-garde little magazine demands we pay attention, with care; it is an object that we might wish to be politically stronger at the same time as we believe we can no longer reject it because it is too intimately ours.”⁶⁷ Cuteness clears room for a set of inquiries about the avant-garde that allow

it to recede from Bürger's stringent requirements and from the heroism often attributed to avant-garde interventions. Cuteness, whose gendered and raced manifestations Ngai tracks from Yayoi Kusama's polka-dotted phallus pillows to Harryette Mullen's homage to Gertrude Stein's own examination of lesbian domesticity in *Tender Buttons*, is not only a minor but a *minoritarian* formation of the avant-garde.

According to Ngai, cuteness comes to dominate a set of aesthetic practices that respond to a rough moment in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries when "artfully designed, packaged, and advertised merchandise . . . surrounds us in our homes, in our workplaces, and on the street," and subjects are surrounded by "an age of high-tech simulacra and media spectacles."⁶⁸ But when Ngai announces that the cute avant-garde is an aesthetic of powerlessness, we hear the creaky uncertainty of the 1970s lumber into earshot. The crisis of the 1970s at once denied agency to a large portion of the population and made clear that the distributed power of the welfare state and consensus politics of the Fordist/Keynesian era had been a lie all along. Ngai's formulation of the cute as a "*minor* commodity aesthetic" that calls "up a range of *minor* negative affects [like] helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency" hence constitutes a platform from which to launch our investigation of the avant-gardes in the long 1970s.⁶⁹ Pushing a limit established by Bürger, Ngai contends that through cuteness, the avant-garde contemplates the problem of its own limited effect: "art has the capacity not only to reflect and mystify power but also to reflect on and make use of powerlessness."⁷⁰ Likewise, the insurgent texts and objects taken up in this collection "reflect on and make use of" accelerated powerlessness in the long 1970s.

Genealogies of Crisis

This collection comprises two primary sections, followed by a shorter section that functions as something of a rejoinder. Sections on enclosures and infrastructures construct distinct genealogies of the crisis of the long 1970s, while the last section outlines varyingly upheld commitments to a revolutionary transition out of imperialism and capitalism.

Two pairs of essays—one on property, one on censorship—compose the first section, on enclosures. The authors featured in this section adopt an anticolonial and anti-imperial approach to increased privatization in the long 1970s. The first two chapters, specifically, decode the late twentieth- and

early twenty-first-century poetics and discourses of “nonpossession” and their ties to long histories of dispossession, including settler colonialism, slavery, and segregation. In the first chapter, the quiet polemic “Against Possession,” Sarah Dowling reads Lorine Niedecker’s compact poem “Foreclosure,” written sometime during the 1960s, as both proleptic and recapitulative, speaking to a post-2008 moment while considering the dispossessions of Indigenous peoples in what is currently Wisconsin alongside settlers’ land losses during the Great Depression. “Foreclosure,” Dowling argues, calls for an end to property as a system and imagines, in its ruins, a white selfhood detached from territorial possession and bourgeois liberal humanism. In “The Poetics of Drift: Coloniality, Place, and Environmental Racialization,” Samia Rahimtoola contends that African American poetry’s formal engagement with place-based liberation paves a way through and beyond the colonial binary of possession and dispossession. Rahimtoola follows Dawn Lundy Martin and Ed Roberson’s “drift” through landscapes of urban destitution. At once a decolonial practice of reinhabiting place and an ecological practice of staying with the damage, drift contests the narratives of economic overcoming and environmental repair that seek to redeem Black suffering.

RL Goldberg begins our next dyad, on censorship and the administration of publics, with “*Pansexual Public Porn: Trans Gender Docu-Porn in the Long 1970s.*” In this chapter, Goldberg examines transness in the context of the sanitization of pornography that resulted from the rise of the VHS and the criminalization of public sex. Del LaGrace Volcano’s 1998 avant-garde film *Pansexual Public Porn aka The Adventures of Hans and Del*, Goldberg notes, accentuates the slippage between gender identity and sexual practice found in censorship rhetoric. In doing so, *Pansexual Public Porn* predicates structures of care and recognition on a refusal to separate *public* from *sex*. To end the section on enclosures, Priscilla Layne, in “The Ethics of Provocation: Censoring the Past in German Cold War Punk,” reflects on the illegibility of anti-state art to Germany’s Federal Department of Media Harmful to Young Persons. In 1987, the department indexed the band OHL’s album *Heimatfront* because of its use of Nazi imagery, thus restricting the album’s advertising and sales via child protection laws. Yet, OHL, Layne argues, used such imagery to confront West Germany with the persistence of fascist and authoritarian tendencies. Layne ultimately debunks Bürger’s assertion that the neo-avant-garde cannot be as transgressive as the historical avant-garde: OHL’s punk resists institutionalization by eluding the moral codes of left- and right-wing state politics.

The collection's second section frames the long 1970s as an infrastructural crisis. In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, public infrastructures that had carried some of the burden of the reproduction of life collapsed: social services shrunk, and so did public housing. Meanwhile, corporate-owned infrastructures, such as satellite-based global communication networks, reshaped everyday life. The first two essays included in this section tell a pair of stories about a crisis of medium precipitated by installation art's uneasy ontological proximity to infrastructure within shaky institutions. Andrew Strombeck's "Indexing Post-Fordism at P.S. 1" revisits the 1975 exhibit *Rooms*, held at P.S. 1, in Queens, New York, and hailed as a defining moment of the site-specific art of that decade. Site-specific art has been celebrated for what Krauss calls its "indexicality": an unmediated access to natural and built environments that, for Krauss and others, achieves the rebuke of the institutions of art dreamed up by the historical avant-garde. *Rooms'* coincidence with the New York fiscal crisis, Strombeck contends, highlights a troubling aspect of this rebuke: it occurred at the very post-Fordist moment when life-supporting infrastructures of care, such as public education, were being destroyed by the state. By reading avant-garde discourses through the lens of the economic fluctuations of the 1970s, Strombeck de-idealizes Krauss's criterion of indexicality, proposing that another index—the Consumer Price Index—might better account for the status of art amid the fear of inflation. The next chapter, Jennifer Wild's "Under the Figure of the Palm Tree," turns to the site-specific art of Marcel Broodthaers and Jean-Luc Godard, wherein the palm tree registers the instability of medium specificity and of the institutional structures upholding the idealist functions and historical fictions of art. Whereas Godard's use of the palm betrays an attachment to a Romantic, ahistorical concept of art, Broodthaers's animates an ethics of historical recognition, or an encounter with the museum's function in monetizing and displaying colonial spoils. Wild claims the very desire for such an ethics as an artifact of the 1970s, one that manifests in disparate works by the decade's most influential theorists, from Julia Kristeva to Peter Brooks.

The last two essays on infrastructures zoom in on influential feminist artists who have raised the question of how to relate to one's own body in and beyond the corporatized museum. In "I Felt Like a Machine: Martha Rosler's Aesthetics of Survival," Matt Tierney surveys Martha Rosler's critical and creative writing from the last third of the twentieth century. Tierney reads Rosler's mail art project, *Service: A Trilogy on Colonization*, as an

exemplar of what Rosler calls “person-centered counter practices” and what George Rochberg terms an “aesthetics of survival.” By trading speed and conquest for slowness and play, Rosler develops humane tactics for opposing the mechanization of laboring bodies promoted by a certain avant-garde’s uncritical embrace of science as well as the techno-fascism of “state art.” The systematization of embodiment is also a concern in the section’s last chapter, Shannon Finck’s “Yayoi Kusama’s Immaterial Drive.” In a retrospective essay that spans Kusama’s entire career, Finck refutes the common narrative that posits the end of the artist’s Happenings period, in the 1970s, as a turn away from embodiment, offering instead that Kusama’s more recent work nostalgically holds the memory of her early work’s tactility. The Infinity Mirror Rooms, emblems of Kusama’s late career, offer infrastructures of mourning, in which spectators living in the age of digital reproduction can remember the body as a seat of experience and a medium for protest in the years leading up to the crisis of the 1970s.

Whereas the collection’s first two sections narrate the crisis of the long 1970s as a series of limits that avant-garde artists have inventively reframed, the last section considers the avant-garde commitments that have emerged in spite, or in full dismissal, of such limits. In “*Sandinista!* The US Avant-Garde’s Response to Central American Upheavals in the Long 1970s,” Javier Padilla studies Language poetry’s relation to the *poesía comprometida* or “poetics of commitment,” which became the hallmark of Central American poets’ response to regional upheavals, specifically the failed Salvadorian rebellion of the 1970s and the successful 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. Hannah Weiner, Carolyn Forché, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Padilla argues, developed a tactical poetics of “political tourism” that, in imposing some distance between the poet and the subject of Central America’s revolutions, accurately describes the US poet’s relation to the outside world. In the collection’s final chapter, “The Making of New Narrative: Gay Liberation and the Poetics of Revolutionary Agency,” David W. Pritchard, too, relays a poetics of commitment. Pritchard’s is located in the origins of the experimental writing movement known as New Narrative. Positioning New Narrative as an extension of both Gay Liberation and the New Left’s project of revolutionary transition out of capitalism, Pritchard deciphers in Bruce Boone’s poem “Karate Flower” an “oppositional language” that structures revolutionary agency amid global economic crisis.

An ekphrastic afterword by Jean-Thomas Tremblay closes the collection. Methodologically, the afterword takes inspiration from Brian Glavey’s insight

that “hyper-mimetic ekphrasis,” a certain “minoritizing” avant-gardism that runs from modernist literature to queer theory, “blurs the line that separates description from narration” and “stresses the rewards of forming extremely close attachments to aesthetic objects without abdicating strategies of contextualization and critique.”⁷¹ Weaving the prior chapters’ themes into a close description of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Untitled*, a tiny sculpture produced in 1980, Tremblay sketches an avant-garde aesthetics of commitment that refuses to disentangle a critique of resource concentration and attrition from a critique of attendant systems of domination.

We hope that our collective commitments, as editors and authors, resonate loudly and clearly across this collection’s pages. *Avant-Gardes in Crisis* refutes the notion that experimentalism grants artists and critics an exemption from political considerations. If we seek to develop a minoritarian and radical concept of the avant-garde, it is because, as the crisis of the long 1970s rages on, this concept—indeed even an antagonistic relation to this concept—continues to magnetize the utopian fantasy of an alignment between political, intellectual, and aesthetic revolutions.

Notes

1. Cathy Park Hong, “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde,” *Arcade* 7 (2014): <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/delusions-whiteness-avant-garde>.
2. Hong, “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde.”
3. Hong, “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde.”
4. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Peter Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of ‘Theory of the Avant-Garde,’” trans. Bettina Brandt and Daniel Purdy, *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 704; Marjorie Perloff, “Avant-Garde Poetics,” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., ed. Roland Greene (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 110–113; Kent Johnson, “Marjorie Perloff, Avant-Garde Poetics, and ‘The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,’” *Chicago Review* 57, nos. 3–4 (2013): 209–215. Other works that discuss the avant-garde in terms of a largely white, European tradition include Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981); Matei Călinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).
5. Relaying the views of the George Jackson Brigade, an underground group of working-class former prisoners, Stephen Dillon remarks that the 1970s heralded

new forms of racialized and gendered value and disposability within a neoliberal-carceral state. Stephen Dillon, *Fugitive Life: The Queer Politics of the Prison State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 10, 13.

6. Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Bojana Cvejić, Isabell Lorey, Jasbir Puar, and Ana Vujanović, “Precarity Talk: A Virtual Roundtable,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 56, no. 4 (2012): 166.

7. See Leigh Claire La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 20–21. Sianne Ngai rehearses La Berge’s argument in *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 34–35.

8. Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick*, 35; La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork*, 21.

9. Melinda Cooper, *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2019).

10. Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager, and Helle Porsdam, “Introduction: The ‘Long 1970s’: New Perspectives on an Epoch-Making Decade,” in *The “Long 1970s”: Human Rights, East-West Détente, and Transnational Relations*, ed. Poul Villaume, Rasmus Mariager, and Helle Porsdam (New York: Routledge, 2016), 1.

11. Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), xii.

12. Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: New Press, 2010), 11.

13. We borrow this phrasing from Stein, *Pivotal Decade*.

14. Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 70–71.

15. We find Mann’s language in *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* telling in the context of environmental crisis: “The rhetoric of the new in which the avant-garde is so deeply implicated has also been polluted by this progress” (70–71).

16. La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork*, 4, 16.

17. Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 46. John Roberts, in *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Verso, 2015), similarly observes that “the experience and mediation of crisis and decline is indivisible from the judgements of value and critical materials that art is able to bring to bear on its own traditions and representation of the world, what we have so far called realized reflexivity” (53). On the avant-garde’s entanglement with crisis, see also James Martin Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013); Ben Hickman, *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde: Poetry and Real Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

18. Mann, *Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*, 142–143.

19. Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, 10.

20. Gregory Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 1.

21. Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, 260.

22. Marc James Léger, "This Is Not an Introduction," in *The Idea of the Avant-Garde, and What It Means Today*, ed. Marc James Léger (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 1.

23. Hickman, *Crisis and the US Avant-Garde*, 2–3. On the relation between critique and crisis, see Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press), 19.

24. Jordy Rosenberg and Amy Villarejo dwell on this tension in "Queerness, Norms, Utopia," *GLQ* 18, no. 1 (2012): 1–18.

25. James M. Harding, "From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance," in *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, ed. James Martin Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 20.

26. See La Berge, *Wages Against Artwork*, 4; Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1986).

27. See Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

28. Carmen Giménez Smith, "Make America Mongrel Again," *Poetry Foundation*, April 19, 2018, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2018/04/make-america-mongrel-again>; Tim MacGabhann, Mariana Rodríguez, and John Z. Komurki, "Goldsmith, Place and What Gringpo Means for Your Reading," *The Quietus*, May 24, 2015, <https://thequietus.com/articles/17912-kenneth-goldsmith-venessa-place-michael-brown-appropriation-gringpo-mongrel-coalition>.

29. Dorothy Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 12.

30. Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, xix–xx.

31. Wang, *Thinking Its Presence*, 21–22.

32. See Komozi Woodard, *A Nation Within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 74–78.

33. Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde."

34. Sue J. Kim, "Apparatus: Theresa Hak Kyung and the Politics of Form," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005): 143–169.

35. Williams recounts, "It was possible to move to New York and rent a large, spacious loft, and pay \$250 a month. What that meant is that there were just hundreds of creative types living there, being able to have kind of an unusual life that they could afford. If you wanted to publish books, then you had space to put all the boxes in. There was kind of a freedom because of the economic situation." Reese Williams, Interview with Peter d'Agostino, "Library Lecture: Reese Williams," *TUTV*, February 6, 2015, <https://vimeo.com/118927793>.

36. Kim, "Apparatus," 163.

37. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

38. Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 705.

39. Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 707.

40. In "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," Bürger sums up, "While the historical avant-gardes could rightly consider the social context of their actions to be one of crisis, if not revolution, and could draw from this realization the energy to design the utopian project of sublating the institution of art, this no longer applied to the neo-avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s" (712).

41. Harding, *Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 165.

42. Harding, *Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 706–707.

43. Richard Schechner, too, relies on criteria of success and failure in a simplistic and positivist account of the avant-garde: "Innovation and excellence are in an inverse relationship to each other. When innovation is high, excellence is low; and vice versa. This is not always true, but it operates as an overall tendency. It makes sense because when people experiment, most of what they try fails." Richard Schechner, "The Conservative Avant-Garde," *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 899.

44. Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Gardes?," *October* 70 (1994): 5–32; Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*, 43.

45. Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*, 43.

46. Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, 56.

47. Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 16.

48. Williams, Interview with Peter d'Agostino. Blake Stimpson and Gregory Sholette argue that the social upheavals of second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have kept alive, while transforming, the collectivism dreamed up by modernism: "It is nothing other than this old dream of actually existing autonomy, of autonomy realized, of autonomy institutionalized, that haunts now with new vigor as a ghost from the past, but it does so not on the basis of the sheer strength of principle but instead by drawing its renewal and revitalization, by drawing replenishment of its lifeblood, from those strike forces of collectivization that are peculiar to our moment now." Blake Stimpson and Gregory Sholette, "Introduction: Periodizing Collectivism," in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Blake Stimpson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 4.

49. Harding, *Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 9. Harding's point is specifically about performance art, but the term *avant-gardes*, in the plural, also appears in the introduction to a special issue of *New Literary History* edited by Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski. See Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski, introduction to *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): v–xv.

50. Mike Sell, "Resisting the Question, 'What Is an Avant-Garde?,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 754.