





# A Concise Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes

For a concise edition of his legendary arts dictionary of information and opinion, the distinguished critic and arts historian Richard Kostelanetz selects entries from the 2018 third edition. Typically he provides intelligence unavailable anywhere else, no less in print than online, about a wealth of subjects and individuals. Focused upon what is truly innovative and excellent, Kostelanetz also ranges widely with insight and surprise, including appreciations of artistic athletes such as Muhammad Ali and the Harlem Globetrotters and such collective creations as Las Vegas and his native New York City. Continuing the traditions of cheeky high-style Dictionaryists, honoring Ambrose Bierce and Samuel Johnson (both with individual entries), Kostelanetz offers a “reference book” to be enjoyed, not only in bits and chunks but continuously as one of the ten books someone would take if he or she planned to be stranded on a desert isle.

Individual entries on **Richard Kostelanetz’s** work appear in various editions of *A Reader’s Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster’s Dictionary of American Writers*, *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who’s Who in America*, NNDB.com, Wikipedia.org, and Britannica.com, among other distinguished directories. He lives in New York, where he was born.



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# **A Concise Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes**

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**Richard Kostelanetz**

With contributions by Richard Carlin, Mark Daniel Cohen, Geof Huth,  
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For my colleagues, the critical historians of the avant-gardes  
in all the arts.



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## Author's note

After completing in 2018 a third edition of my *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (1993, 2000), I decided to extract those about more familiar examples, initially because I've long thought that such a book should exist. In the course of graduate studies in intellectual history, I decided to focus upon the best, and then upon the more innovative. This bias has informed much of my writing in the half-century since. Thankfully, Ben

Piggott and his associates at Routledge have agreed to my proposal.

May I urge readers to check out my larger book, if not through your own purchase then by a visit to a good library. That's one reason why I reprint here both the preface and introduction to the third edition.

—Richard Kostelanetz, 14 May 2019



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## Preface

*It takes approximately twenty years to make an artistic curiosity out of a modernistic monstrosity, and another twenty to elevate it to a masterpiece.*

—Nicolas Slonimsky,  
*Lexicon of Musical Invective* (1953)

My principal reason for having done, later redoing, and now redoing again a quarter-century later a book of this title would be to defend the continuing relevance of the epithet *avant-garde*, which has frequently appeared in my own critical writing. A second reason is that I enjoy reading cultural dictionaries myself and own a goodly number of them; but as my library has lacked any volume resembling a dictionary of *avant-gardes*, the first reader for any book emblazoned with that title would be myself. A third reason is that I've come to think there is only one art, called Art, and thus that dance, literature, etc., are merely categorical conveniences, designed to make the history and the material of Art more accessible to students and other beginners.

My basic measures of *avant-garde* work are first esthetic innovation and then initial unacceptability. Add to this my own taste for art that is extreme, unique, distinct, coherent, witty, technological, and esthetically resonant. (An artist's courage in the choice of subject, such as scatology, say, or child abuse, is not *avant-garde* if the artist's esthetic is traditional. Nor is the first painting by a three-handed dwarf *avant-garde* by virtue of the peculiarities of its author.) It follows that the most consequential artists, in any medium, are those who make genuine discoveries about the possibilities of art. The best *avant-garde* art offers, much like the best traditional art, enlightened intelligence and heightened experience.

Though one often hears about "the death of the *avant-garde*" or "the crisis of the *avant-garde*," usually from cultural conservatives or publicists with cemeteries to defend, it is not the purpose of this book to engage in an argument I take to be irrelevant at best. Though most entries here feature modern *avant-garde*

activities, major historical precursors, some of whom worked centuries ago, are acknowledged as well. While the epithet *avant-garde* is applicable to other cultural domains, we've tended to favor arts, broadly considered. My second editor, a dance aficionado, proposed including the basketball player Daryl Dawkins for epitomizing "the slam dunk," which is measurably a monumental choreographic innovation, though not commonly regarded as such. My more recent editor made his unique contribution as well, and I included the man whose alternative choreography changed competitive high-jumping. One recurring theme is that *avant-garde* doesn't always come pretentiously dressed.

Proclaiming the *avant-garde's* death is no more acceptable than the claim, from another corner, of one or another group to represent "*the avant-garde*" to the exclusion of all others. The plural *avant-gardes* in the title is appropriate, as this book contains entries on individuals or developments representing opposed positions, if not contrary esthetics. As I warn in the entry on Pluralism, beware of anyone or any group declaring itself the sole *avant-garde*, especially if they exclude or ignore people doing work that is roughly similar or closely related. Be even more wary if they try to sell you anything, intellectual as well as physical. Suspect it to be a road map directing all traffic to a dead end.

This book is inevitably critical, not only in judgments but in the intelligence behind my selections, because it is impossible to write selectively about the *avant-gardes*, with any integrity and excellence, without seeming opinionated. (If you don't like opinions, well, you're welcome to read a bus schedule or any country's tax code.) Given how much information is now

commonly available on the Internet, I've tried here to offer guidance and secrets, along with insight and wit, not available anywhere else. This new edition wouldn't be worth anyone's reading or purchasing otherwise.

One concern of any writer wanting to tell truths is how much truth he or she can tell (or, conversely, fearing how much cannot be told). The best reason for writing a book, rather than, say, magazine articles, is that the critic fortunately need not worry about his publishers' constraints and biases that are customarily (if not necessarily) hidden. If this book didn't surprise or offend, I would surmise that a putative reader had barely looked at its pages. Oh, yes, if any reader likes something in this book, please consider telling someone else. That's how a book survives years after its initial publication.

Because this *Dictionary* was written not just to be consulted but to be read from beginning to end, it eschews abbreviations that interrupt attention and minimizes dependency on cross-references. My literary ambition encourages stylistic variety over uniformity, even risking stylistic affectations here and there. I also cultivate the avant-garde value of SURPRISE, not only in my selections but my prose. Some of the stronger circumlocutions are collected in an ON DEMAND book titled *Artful Entries* (2018).

I would have liked to have produced more entries on avant-garde artists new to the 21st century, who are true heroes at a time when the idea of an esthetic vanguard has been subjected to all sorts of Philistine attack, and apologize now particularly to those individuals, whoever you are, whose names will be featured in, yes, yet future editions.

Just as most of the first edition of this book was written in several months, so it was rewritten in 1999 and then again recently within a comparatively short time. Both then and now I have typically drawn largely upon my capacious memory and sometimes upon earlier reviews and notes that were generally made when I first experienced something important. In writing critically about art (or in editing anthologies or even returning to restaurants), I have learned to trust my memory to separate the strongest work from everything else. One reason for my faith in memory is that it does not lie to me, which is to say that no matter my personal feelings toward an artist, no matter what reviewers might have said about his or her work, no matter what other factors might try to influence me, one working principle remains: If I cannot remember an artist's work distinctly or I cannot from memory alone characterize it, it probably was not strong enough.

It follows that only art already lodged in my head will appear in my critical writing. One of my favorite ways of testing the true quality of any well-known

artist's work is to ask myself, as well as others, whether any specific work[s] can be identified from memory? (No peeking or cheating allowed.) Thanks mostly to their professional hustling, many artists' names are more familiar than their works. Quite simply, what my memory chose to remember for me became the basis for this *Dictionary*. In the back of my mind was the image of the great Erich Auerbach (1892-1997), a German scholar living in Istanbul during World War II, writing his grandly conceived *Mimesis* (1946) without footnotes, because useful libraries were far away.

*[Apollinaire] had an uncanny instinct for detecting genius and for seeing the revolutionary quality of a new idea of work of art. . . . He was frequently accurate and perceptive to an astounding degree; and in his choice of who or what was significant he seems in retrospect to have been nearly always right.*

—Edward F. Fry, *Cubism* (1966)

Another assumption is that what distinguishes major artists from minor is a vision of singular possibilities for their art and/or for themselves as creative people. Trained elaborately in intellectual history, which for me was mostly arts history, I necessarily focus upon the best. ("Cultural history," by contrast, focuses upon what's been popular, sometimes with only a certain group of people.) As a historian, I think I can discern the future from the past and thus direction in high cultural produce. Because I don't often read newsprint, I can claim resistance to, if not an ignorance of, transient promotions and fashions of many kinds. I necessarily learned early to respect unique cultural excellence and now think that from the beginning of my critical career, more than fifty years ago, I've established a strong record of identifying new excellence that survives. Guillaume Apollinaire has been my hero, as I respect the fact that he, born Wilhelm Kostrowicki, was commonly called Kostro, just as I'm called Kosti.

Because I resist doing anything professional, even a dictionary entry, that anyone else can do better, I recruited colleagues to write as many entries as possible. These colleagues' names appear after the entries (which are otherwise mine); it is not for nothing that their names also accompany mine on the title page. From the late Nicolas Slonimsky, I drew upon texts already published, thanks to our common publisher. Within the entries, names and sometimes words set in all caps receive fuller treatment in an alphabetically placed entry.

My model arts lexicographer, who deserves the dedication of this third edition as well as its predecessors, was the great Slonimsky, who, incidentally, preferred

the epithet “Lectionary” to “Dictionary” because the former term refers to reading, the second to speaking. (The first edition of this book appeared before his centenary, 28 April 1994.) Another model for the writing of concise remarks is Ambrose Bierce, an American author too opinionated to be “great,” but whose best writing (see the entry on him) is nonetheless remembered. All of us who write dictionaries, whether authoritative or satirical, are, of course, indebted to the British writer Samuel Johnson.

This *Dictionary* differs from others in the arts in emphasizing decisive esthetic characterization over, say, a recital of institutional positions held, teachers or students had, influences acknowledged, friendships made, or awards won. My implicit rules for writing entries on individuals were that they should be at least one hundred words long and that each entry should portray a person or concept distinctive from all others. One self-test was whether I could nail a subject in a particularly way—not simply frame her or him with common details but uniquely nail them. More than once I discarded a draft, including some about personal friends, because the results would look suspiciously deficient for failing either of these two requirements. (No one is done a favour if made to look less. I considered appending their names here, if only to honor them, but feared that such acknowledgment might have an opposite effect.) Obviously, a book with avant-garde in the title ignores those who have spent their lives trying to be acceptable to one or another orthodoxy (including some earlier avant-garde).

As this book’s publisher contractually limited the number of words it would accept, I necessarily removed some previous entries; but rather than consign them to a dustbin, I decided to collect them into a book tentatively titled, *Earlier Entries*, available from Archae Editions at Amazon.

I am also grateful not only to Richard Carlin for commissioning the first two editions before reprinting

the second in paperback, and now to Ben Piggott for contracting this latest revision for Routledge and Laura Soppelsa for expediting production. May I thank again Douglas Puchowski, now for finding illustrations, and then my literary associate Shoshana Esther Stone, who has come to oversee every word written by me.

Because this book covers several arts, documentation is meant to be more useful than consistent or pseudo-definitive. For instance, following Slonimsky’s example, Douglas Puchowski and I tried to include complete birthdates and death dates, down to months and days whenever possible, acknowledging that sometimes so much detail was unavailable (particularly about individuals not yet customarily included in such compendia). To preserve an illusion of pristine research, we could have removed entries whose documentation was incomplete – by and large people whose loss would not be noticed – but instead decided that the inclusion of unfamiliar names was more important. Some people alive when this was drafted have no doubt since passed on.

A book with so much detail about contemporary figures will surely contain misspellings and other minor errors of fact, as well as unintentional omissions. If only to prepare for the possibility of a fourth edition, the author welcomes corrections and suggestions, by email, please, if they are to go into a single repository, c/o his eponymous website. No kidding.

Since the author is an American who spent a year studying at King’s College, London, and writing for London media, he freely mixes British orthography with American to a degree that partisans of one style or the other might find disagreeable. Consider, instead, appreciating his transatlantic catholicity. Because this book contains more proper nouns, including names, than can be successfully indexed, it also appears as an ebook whose search mechanism should be able to locate whatever details the reader would like.

—Richard Kostelanetz





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## Introduction

*The avant-garde consists of those who feel sufficiently at ease with the past not to have to compete with it or duplicate it.*

Dick Higgins, “Does Avant-Garde Mean Anything?” (1970)

*The avant-garde cannot easily become an academy, because avant-garde artists usually sustain the quality which made them avant-garde artists in the first place. The styles they develop will become academic in other hands.*

Darby Bannard, “Sensibility of the Sixties” (1967)

The term “avant-garde” refers to those out front forging a path previously unknown, a route that others will take. Initially coined to characterize the shock troops of an army, the epithet passed over into art. Used precisely, avant-garde should refer, first, to rare work that on its first appearance satisfies three discriminatory criteria:

It transcends current esthetic conventions in crucial respects, establishing discernible distance between itself and the mass of recent practices; it will necessarily take considerable time to find its maximum audience; and it will probably inspire future, comparably advanced endeavors.

Only a small minority working within any art can ever be avant-garde; for once the majority has caught up to something new, whether as creators or as an audience, those doing something genuinely innovative will, by definition, have established a beachhead someplace beyond. Problems notwithstanding, avant-garde remains a critically useful category.

As a temporal term, avant-garde characterizes art that is “ahead of its time” – that is, beginning something – while “decadent” art, by contrast, stands at the end of a prosperous development. “Academic” refers to art that is conceived according to rules that are learned in a classroom; it is temporally post-decadent. Whereas

decadent art is created in expectation of an immediate sale, academic artists expect approval from their social superiors, whether they be teachers or higher-ranking colleagues. Both academic art and decadent art are essentially opportunistic, created to realize immediate success, even at the cost of surely disappearing from that corpus of art that survives merely by being remembered. Both decadent art and academic art realize their maximal audience upon initial publication.

One secondary characteristic of avant-garde art is that, in the course of entering new terrain, it violates entrenched rules – it seems to descend from “false premises” or “heretical assumptions”; it makes current “esthetics” seem irrelevant. For instance, Suzanne Langer’s theory of symbolism, so prominent in the 1940s and even the 1950s, hardly explains the new art of the past four decades. Relevant though Langer’s esthetics were to the arts of Aaron Copland and Martha Graham, among their contemporaries, theories of artful symbolism offered little insight into, say, the music of John Cage or Milton Babbitt, the choreography of Merce Cunningham, or the poetry of John Ashbery, where what you see or hear is generally most, if not all, of what there is. This sense of irrelevance is less a criticism of Langer’s theories, which seventy years ago seemed so persuasively encompassing, than a measure of drastic artistic difference between work prominent then and what followed.

One reason why avant-garde works should be initially hard to comprehend is not that they are intrinsically inscrutable or hermetic but that they defy, or challenge as they defy, the perceptual procedures of artistically educated people. They forbid easy access or easy acceptance, as an audience perceives them as inexplicably different, if not forbiddingly revolutionary. In order to begin to comprehend such art, people must work and think in unfamiliar ways. Nonetheless, if an audience learns to accept innovative work, this will stretch its perceptual capabilities, affording kinds of esthetic experience previously unknown. Edgard Varèse's revolutionary *Ionisation* (1931), for instance, taught a generation of listeners about the possible coherence and beauty in what they had previously perceived as noise.

It follows that avant-garde art usually offends people, especially serious artists, before it persuades, and offends them not in terms of content, but as Art. They assert that Varèse's noise (or Cage's, or Babbitt's) is unacceptable as music. That explains why avant-garde art strikes most of us as esthetically "wrong" before we acknowledge it as possibly "right"; it "fails" before we recognize that it works. (Art that offends by its content challenges only as journalism or gossip, rather than as Art, and is thus likely to disappear as quickly as other journalism or gossip.)

Those most antagonized by the avant-garde are not the general populace, which does not care, but the guardians of culture, who do, whether they be cultural bureaucrats, established artists, or their epigones, because they feel, as they sometimes admit, "threatened."

Though vanguard activity may dominate discussion among sophisticated professionals, it never dominates the general making of art. Most work created in any time, in every art, honors long-passed models. Even today, in the United States, most of the fiction written and published and reviewed has, in form, scarcely progressed beyond mid-20th-century standards; most poetry today is similarly decadent.

The "past" that the avant-garde aims to surpass is not the tradition of art but the currently decadent fashions, for in Harold Rosenberg's words, "Avant-garde art is haunted by fashion." Because avant-gardes in art are customarily portrayed as succeeding one another, the art world is equated with the world of fashion, in which styles also succeed one another. However, in both origins and function, the two are quite different. Fashion relates to the sociology of lucrative taste; avant-garde, to the history of art. In practice, avant-garde activity has a dialectical relationship with

fashion, for the emerging remunerative fashions can usually be characterized as a synthesis of advanced art (whose purposes are antithetical to those of fashion) with more familiar stuff. Whenever fashion appears to echo advanced art, a closer look reveals the governing model as art from a period recently past.

The term "avant-garde" can also refer to individuals creating such path-forging art; but even by this criterion, the work itself, rather than the artist's intentions, is the ultimate measure of the epithet's applicability to an individual. Thus, an artist or writer is avant-garde only at certain crucial points in his or her creative career, and only those few works that were innovative at their debut comprise the history of modern avant-garde art. The term "avant-garde" may also refer to artistic groups, if and only if most of their members are (or were) crucially contributing to authentically exploratory activity.

The term is sometimes equated with cultural antagonism, for it is assumed that the "avant-garde" leads artists in their perennial war against the Philistines. However, this Philistine antagonism is a secondary characteristic, as artists' social position and attitudes descend from the fate of their creative efforts, rather than the reverse. Any artist who sets out just to mock the Philistines is wearing an old hat and thus not likely to do anything original.

Esthetic conservatives are forever asserting that "the avant-garde no longer exists," because, as they see it, either academia or the general public laps up all new art. However, it is critically both false and ignorant to use a secondary characteristic in lieu of a primary definition. Avant-garde is an art-historical term, not a sociological category. The conservative charge is factually wrong as well, as nearly all avant-gardes in art are ignored by the public (and its agents in the culture industries), precisely because innovative work is commonly perceived as "peculiar," if not "unacceptable," not only by the masses but by those who make a business of disseminating culture in large quantities. Indeed, the pervasiveness of those perceptions of oddity is, of course, a patent measure of a work's being art-historically ahead of its time. Those who deny the persistence of the avant-garde are comparable to those who deny the existence of poverty, each by its fakery implicitly rationalizing retrograde attitudes and perhaps the retention of tenuous privileges.

Because the avant-garde claims to be prophetic, the ultimate judge of current claims can only be a future cultural public. For now, future-sensitive critics should proceed under the assumption that in their enthusiasms they might, just might, be askew.

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# A

## ABRAMOVIC, MARINA

(30 November 1946)

Born in Belgrade just after World War II, she attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade before beginning a career mostly of stunning PERFORMANCE and installations. Initially she explored themes of pain and duration, especially on herself. In *Rhythm 0* (1974, in Naples), she invited spectators to use on her a range of instruments including knives. Moving to Amsterdam in 1975, she met Uwe Laysiepen (1943), a German known as Ulay. In their thirteen years together they did many prominent performances, including *Relation in Space* (1976), where they crashed their naked bodies into each other for an hour. In *Night Crossing* (1981), they abjured talking and eating for more than two weeks, repeating this performance in various venues, mostly notably in Australia, where it was also called *Gold Found by the Artists* (1981). They concluded their collaboration with *The Lovers: Walk on the Great Wall* (1988), where they started at opposite ends of the Chinese landmark, one crossing the Gobi Desert and the other treacherous mountain tops, until meeting on a bridge in the Shaanxi Province. After the legendary couple split, Abramovic returned to solo performances, including *Biography* (1992–96), a theatrical retrospective of twenty-five years of previous performances. In *Cleaning the Mirror* (1995, New York), clad in a long white shift, in a dank and dark basement, she scrubbed obsessively at large cow bones, removing bloody refuse that soiled her dress, creating, in RoseLee Goldberg's judgment, "a metaphor for ethnic cleansing in Bosnia [that was] an unforgettable image of grief for her times." Seriously entrenched in her particular art, Abramovic in 2005 presented at New York's Guggenheim Museum *Seven Easy Pieces* in which she redid wholly on her own classics initially performed by other artists

mostly (e.g., Vito Acconci, Valie Export [1940]). In 2010 she became the first performance artist to merit a retrospective at New York's MUSEUM OF MODERN ART.

## ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

(c. 1948)

If only because it emphasizes esthetic qualities, this term has come to be the most acceptable epithet for the innovative painting that became prominent in NEW YORK CITY in the late 1940s (and was thus sometimes called the NEW YORK SCHOOL). Drawing not only from SURREALISM but from JAZZ-based ideas of improvisatory gestural expression, certain artists laid paint on the canvas in ways that reflected physical attack, whether in the extended dripped lines of JACKSON POLLOCK or in the broad strokes of FRANZ KLINE. "Action painting," another epithet once popular for this style of painting, was coined by the critic Harold Rosenberg, who theorized that these abstractions represented the artist's mental state at the moment(s) of composition. One esthetic common to such painting was "all-over" composition, which is to say that the activity could be just as strong near the edges of the canvas as in the center, purportedly in contrast to the more hierarchical focusing typical of traditional art.

WILLEM DE KOONING's work is customarily placed within this term, even though his best paintings acknowledge figuration and focusing; so are BARNETT NEWMAN and AD REINHARDT, perhaps because they were roughly the same age as the others (and resided mostly in NEW YORK CITY), even though their art proceeded from decidedly nonexpressionist premises. A European epithet for comparable painting was ART INFORMEL.

## ABSTRACTION

(c. 5000 B.C.)

This term generally defines artwork, whether visual, aural, or verbal, that neither represents nor symbolizes anything in the mundane world; but, because pure abstraction is primarily an ideal, the epithet also refers to work that at least approaches the absence of identifiable figurative representation. Although some commentators make a case for abstraction as a new development in the history of visual art, such a generalization necessarily depends upon ignorance of Islamic art that traditionally observes a proscription against graven images. (Those arguing for modern abstraction as a development dismiss such Islamic art as “decorative.”)

Abstract art in the West became avant-garde in the 20th century, precisely because various styles of representation had been dominant for centuries before. Within modern abstract art are two divergent traditions, one emphasizing structure and the other favoring expression; examples of both of these traditions appear not only in painting and sculpture but also in music and dance. One reason behind the oft-heard piety that “painting is more advanced than poetry” is that abstraction became more acceptable among visual artists than among writers in our century.

## ABSURD, THEATER OF THE

(c. 1961)

The epithet comes from Martin Esslin’s brilliant 1961 book of the same title. In the plays of SAMUEL BECKETT and Eugène Ionesco, and to a lesser extent others, Esslin (1918–2002) identified nonsensical and ridiculous events that have sufficient metaphysical resonance to suggest the ultimate absurdity, or meaninglessness, of human existence. Reflecting philosophical existentialism, absurd writing represents an advance on the literature incidentally composed by the existentialist philosophers. If the latter sought a serious surface, the theatrical absurdists favored dark comedy in the tradition of ALFRED JARRY. The innovation was to *demonstrate* the theme of absurdity, in contrast to an earlier theater, identified with Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80) and Albert Camus (1913–60), where characters debate it.

By contrast, at the end of Ionesco’s *The Chairs* (1952), a particularly neat model of the convention, a hired lecturer addresses a nonexistent audience in an indecipherable tongue. This is the absurd surface. Because the lecturer’s message is supposed to represent the final wisdom of a 95-year-old couple, the meaningless message becomes an effective symbol for

the metaphysical void. In a more familiar example from SAMUEL BECKETT, two men wait for a mysterious Godot, who obviously is not coming. On the strictly theatrical influence of absurd theater, the *Cambridge Guide to Literature in English* (1988) says:

The carrying of logic *ad absurdum*, the dissolution of language, the bizarre relationship of stage properties to dramatic situation, the diminution of sense by repetition or unexplained intensification, the rejection of narrative continuity, and the refusal to allow character or even scenery to be self-defining have become acceptable stage conventions.

(Thanks for this summary.)

Fifty years ago, I found a similar absurdist style in certain early 1960s American fiction by John Barth, Joseph Heller (1923–99), and Thomas Pynchon, among others. What seemed awesomely original and true in 1960s theater and fiction, now strikes most viewers as dated.

## ACOHERENCE

The literary equivalent of ATONALITY, not quite abstract, acoherence describes writing that makes sense, that organizes itself, not with an ostensible subject or an identifiable theme but around consistent diction, certain literary forms, style, and upon other qualities unique to language. Its masters were GERTRUDE STEIN and, reflecting her influence, John Ashbery. Once the latter became a professor at an American university, acoherence began to appear in the works of writing programs’ alumni, nearly all born after 1960, their names too numerous to mention, few (if any) of whom could do it as well, though their books, as often “prose” as “poetry,” often appeared with encomia from each other.

## ACTION PAINTING

See ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM.

## ADORNO, THEODOR

(11 September 1903–6 August 1969; b. T. Ludwig Wiesengrund)

Essentially a philosopher, sometimes classified as a social theorist, he also wrote books about music that are admired by some and loathed by many. They are filled



with sentences that are hard to decipher and thoughts that, even if understood, seem to go nowhere. Often Adorno is simply wrong, as when he opens a paragraph with the declaration that “Stravinsky also asserts his right to an extreme position in the modern music movement,” because IGOR STRAVINSKY spent most of his career separating his work from esthetic extremism. Plentiful Adorno references to both Karl Marx and SIGMUND FREUD contribute to an illusion of critical weight. As Adorno writes in pretentious, jargonious [*sic*] language that is meant to impress with its cumbersome sentences and highfalutin diction, rather than communicate from one person to another, his books on music in particular are valued by people who don’t know much about the subject. It could be said that their principal implicit theme is the intimidating power of Teutonic language and perhaps the intellectual privileges (aka indulgences) available to those who wield it. Some people have a taste for this kind of criticism, just as others have a taste for S&M. So be it. Adorno reportedly advised the German author Thomas Mann (1875–1955), likewise an exile in America during World War II, on the musical intelligence in the latter’s novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947), which may or may not account for that book’s musical irrelevance. The music that Adorno composed, which is sometimes mentioned to enhance his authority, is tonal and thus closer to Alban Berg (1885–1935) than to ARNOLD SCHOENBERG. (In truth, I wrote this entry only because my initial publisher insisted that this *Dictionary* should acknowledge Adorno. If only because his name is still remembered, it appears in this third edition.)

## AFRICAN ART

From the first decade of the 20th century, African art attracted avant-garde visual artists for its alternative ways of portraying the human body, particularly by elongating features. Some of the FAUVES collected it, as did HENRI MATISSE who by 1908 owned more than one dozen African sculptures. African representational restructuring later influenced CUBISM, one of whose practitioners particularly appreciated its incorporating “twenty forms into one.” More than others, PABLO PICASSO exploited African esthetics so profoundly and prolifically. The summa of its influence came when the German critic Carl Einstein published *Negerplastik* (1915), which analyzed its formal qualities. As early as 1935, New York’s MUSEUM OF MODERN ART mounted an exhibition mostly of sculpture, as well as publishing a catalog, *African Negro Art*. Oddly, neither African music nor African literature had a fraction as much influence upon Western avant-garde practice.

## AFTERIMAGE

This is an honorific developed in the visual arts that is applicable to other arts. In the former, the term identifies what stays in the viewer’s mind after the work containing it is no longer visible. Such surviving presence measures the strength of that image. I once heard the American painter Ben Shahn (1898–1969), near the end of his life, say that he wished he’d made films instead of paintings because of their greater leverage at implanting afterimages. The musical analogies are melodies and even arrangements that stay in listeners’ heads. In literature, consider the value of lines or characters so strong they are remembered. Conversely, whatever lacks such surviving presence, what’s not remembered, was ipso facto probably not worth remembering.

## ALBERS, JOSEF

(19 March 1888–25 March 1976)

First a student and then an instructor at the BAUHAUS, Albers emigrated to America soon after that legendary German school was closed by the Nazi authorities, teaching first in North Carolina at BLACK MOUNTAIN COLLEGE until 1949, and then at Yale University until his retirement. Intentionally restricting his imagery to rectangles within rectangles, which he considered scrupulously neutral shapes, Albers created paintings and drawings based primarily upon the relationships of shapes and of colors. His series “Homage to the Square” reportedly includes hundreds of paintings that are not only distinctly his, but they also suggest alternative directions, as only the best teacher’s art can. That his book *Interaction of Color* (1963) has gone through several editions, one posthumously revised by the art historian Nicholas Fox Weber (1947), testifies to its value.

Perhaps because Josef’s art was so unique, while he held an academic position bestowing professional power, his work was included, ‘Tis claimed, in several *hundred* group exhibitions. The fact that little need be said about his art should not diminish any estimate of his achievement.

## ALI, MUHAMMAD

(17 January 1942–3 June 2016; b. Cassius Marcellus Clay, Jr.)

Defensive boxing wasn’t his invention, but he took its choreography to a higher level. He was among the few star boxers flexible enough to bend backwards to



escape a punch and among the few heavyweights to “dance,” which is a boxing honorific for being light on his feet. Among Ali’s defensive strategies, after setting up in a familiar offense stance, was stepping backward with his left foot, thus moving out of his opponent’s normal punching range. When the other guy necessarily moved forward to reset himself, Ali punched without risking return punishment. As a defensive fighter whose skin rarely cut, he could also “take punches,” as it’s said, until, as in his classic “Rumble in the Jungle” with mighty George Foreman (1949), his opponents punched themselves into exhaustion, becoming easy prey for Ali’s knock out. Watching him perform was a theatrical pleasure rarely duplicated in his sport. (Those coming close include Jorge Páez [1965], whose mother reportedly owned a circus in border Mexicali; and “Prince” Naseem Hamed [1974], whose fortes were striking costumes and grand entrances.) Early in his storied career, Ali displayed voluble wit. By its end, however, he was mute in public, probably as the result of taking too many strong punches.

## ALLEN, WOODY

(1 December 1935; b. Allan Stewart Konigsberg)

His single most inventive film was his first as a director, *What’s Up, Tiger Lily?* (1966), which must be seen to be believed. Taking Japanese action footage, made only a few years before, Allen made a fresh English soundtrack entirely about something else – Jews searching for the world’s best egg salad recipe. This unpretentious formula becomes the platform for rich gags, some of them exploiting Asian stereotypes (in a move probably less acceptable now); others, incongruous juxtaposition.

Though Allen was only 30 when it appeared, *Tiger Lily* came in the wake of a rich precocious career in comedy that began when he was 17 – scriptwriting for network television shows, providing captions to *New Yorker* cartoons, taking the stage as a stand-up comedian where he successfully developed the persona of a neurotic, nervous, intellectual, Jewish nebbish. (This varied in crucial respects from his actual self-confident personality.) By any measure, no American had a better education in comedy to prepare him for yet greater comedy.

Two qualities special about *Tiger Lily* are that it doesn’t depend upon his persona and it realizes mediumistic invention to a degree that Allen never tried again. *Tiger Lily* is screamingly, continuous funny, at the level of the best Marx Brothers, who were Allen’s initial heroes. Only where the producers insert songs

by the Lovin’ Spoonful, a fair folk-rock group popular at the time, does this film fall down. Perhaps that last unfortunate experience prompted Allen to retain final creative control of his later films.

Perhaps because he felt more responsible for earning enough money to make yet more films, his later films were less courageously innovative. He got serious; and though Allen didn’t get far in college, he made movies for those who did. No doubt over-(or under-) educated, I fell asleep in too many later Allen films; though, if prompted, I recall some inspired comedy in his *Bananas* (1971), which was long ago. Nobody else once worthy of an entry here has made the desire to make yet more (and more) films the principal focus of his career.

Of his writings, the most original are “ballets” that he has published here and there over the years.

In his personal life, Allen successfully challenged the politically correct proscription against intergenerational marriage with his sometime partner’s adopted daughter. Surviving negative publicity, they have remained tight for over two decades. Time tells its own truth.

## ALTERNATIVE SPACES

(1970s)

This has been the preferred American epithet for galleries that exhibit art and sponsor performances without the expectation of a profit. Many were founded in the wake of largesse made available by the National Endowment for the Arts and its imitators in many states, initially to serve artists who found commercial channels closed. In 1977, the NEA funded fifty-nine of over one hundred that had applied. Perhaps the largest and most famous, PS 1 in Astoria, New York, took over a vacated public school (thus the “PS”) that was among the largest in NEW YORK CITY. While its former auditoriums and gymnasiums were used for exhibitions and performances, the sometime classrooms housed smaller shows or became studios mostly for artists from abroad. (I had in 1979 an exhibition of my BOOK-ART in a ground floor corner space that must have been a principal’s office, because it housed a machine for making bells ring throughout the building.) In one of its top-floor classrooms, PS 1 permanently houses JAMES TURRELL’s *Meeting* (1986), a masterpiece whose roof can be opened to exhibit the changing late afternoon sky. Thousands of artists from around the world, avant-garde and otherwise, have benefited from the existence of such alternative spaces.

## AMBIENT MUSIC

(c. 1920)

Ambient or background music was first suggested as a possible art form by ERIK SATIE. He described his concept of “furniture music” (*musique d’ameublement*) as “new music [to be] played during intermission at theatrical events or at a concert, designed to create a certain ambience.” In the 1930s, the Muzak Company was founded to transmit, by radio, soothing background music that would be appropriate for offices and factories. These selections were psychologically tested either to encourage more productivity or to ease stressful situations (e.g., the ever-present Muzak heard while sitting in the dentist’s chair). A common nickname for this type of overly pleasant background music is Elevator Music.

In the postwar years, American composer JOHN CAGE reintroduced Satie’s notion of music to be played as a background accompaniment to other activities. This idea has been most actively espoused by composer/producer BRIAN ENO who took the term “ambient music” from Cage. Eno’s background music is supposed to be both “interesting as well as ignorable,” in the words of critic Stuart Isacoff (1949). The most famous example of Eno’s ambient work is *Music for Airports*, which, ironically, has been used as Muzak in several major airports.

Another development in background music briefly flourished in the late ’50s and early ’60s, mostly in the hands of eccentric sound composer Esquivel. His creations, now known as “space-age bachelor pad music,” combined electronic sounds with futuristic background music. This music was designed to be played in the homes of forward-looking young men, anticipating the advances of the space-age. As pure kitsch, this music was briefly revived in the late 1990s.

—Richard Carlin

## ANIMATED FILM

(c. 1900)

It is my considered idiosyncratic opinion that animation in film has always constituted an avant-garde. Since film extended from photography, where anything resembling animation has always been scarce, animation has from its beginnings necessarily reflected discoveries about properties that made film different from photography. Whereas representational films were shot scene by scene, most animation was produced frame by frame. Movement on screen comes

not from moving the camera or the actors but from changes made on a drawing board by hand.

Throughout the history of film production, animation has always been a sorry sister. It is said that the producer in charge of cartoons at WARNER BROTHERS, where some of the best animation was achieved, arrived at screenings with the epithet “Roll the trash.” And the censors at the time didn’t examine animated shorts as closely as feature films, allowing, say, the eroticism of the Fleischers’ *Betty Boop* to go into movie houses, where such sensuous moves by human beings in feature-length films would have been forbidden. Few critics at the time acknowledged the WARNER toons, which didn’t earn much critical writing until the 1970s. Only in 1985 did the MUSEUM OF MODERN ART mount a retrospective of Warner work. The only animated film ever to command much critical respect at its premiere was Walt Disney’s feature-length *FANTASIA* (1941), which is indeed a masterpiece.

Curiously, the development of animated film created a precondition for video, which at its truest is not a representational medium, like most film, but something else, containing as it does the potential to generate its own imagery and to process electronically (and thus easily) prerecorded pictures.

Though I’ve read many histories of animated film, I don’t consider any of them to be critically smart. Nonetheless, I recommend the thick Giannalberto Bendazzi’s *Cartoons* (1995) for its international information. The anthology *Frames* (1978), assembled by George Griffin, himself a distinguished animator, presents a page or two of credible sample images from American animators. I reprint all their names, not because they are familiar but because, decades later, they aren’t, though many probably should be: Jane Aaron, Martin Abrahams, Karen Aqua, Mary Beams, Lisze Bechtold, Adam Beckett, Gary Beydler, David Blum, Lowell Bodger, Barbara Bottner, Robert Breer, Ken Brown, Carter Burwell, John Canemaker, Vincent Collins, Lisa Crafts, Sally Cruikshank, Larry Cuba, Jody Culkin, Howard Danelowitz, Carmen D’Avino, Loring Doyle, Irra Duga, Eric Durst, Tony Eastman, David Ehrlich, Jules Engel, Victor Faccinto, Roberta Friedman, Paul Glabicki, Andrea Romez, James Gore, Linda Heller, Louis Hock, Al Jarnow, Flip Johnson, Linda Klosky, Ken Kobland, Candy Kugel, Maria Lassing, Kathleen Laughlin, Carolina Leaf, Francis Lee, Jerry Lieberman, Anthony McCall, Frank & Carolina Mouris, Eli Noyes, Pat O’Neill, Sara Petty, Dennis Pies, Suzan Pitt, Richard Protovin, Kathy Rose, Peter Rose, Susan Rubin, Robert Russett, Steve Segal, Maureen Selwood, Janet Shapero, Jim Shook, Jody Silver, Lillian & J. P. Somersaulter, Robert Swarthe, Mary Dzilagyi, Anita Thacher,

Stan Vanderbeek, Peter Wallach, and James Whitney. Consider this invisibility to be an indication of how avant-garde nearly all film animation must be, even in America.

## ANTHOLOGIES (OF THE AVANT-GARDE)

(1896–)

The great printed collections of emerging avant-garde materials draw from disparate sources to establish persuasively the existence of a body of works previous not seen together. As literally a choice gathering of flowers, anthologies initially introduce, if not publicize; eventually, they canonize. The exemplar for proto-EXPRESSIONISM was *Der Blaue Reiter Almanach* (1912, The Blue Rider) and DADA was Richard Huelsenbeck's *Dada Almanach* (1920; English, 1966 & 1994). Historically, SURREALIST literature benefitted from Andre Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1940, *The Anthology of Black Humor*). For earlier French vanguard writing, the classic was Remy de Gourmont's two-volume *Le Livre des Masques* (1896, 1898) that was brilliantly reworked and later translated as *The Book of Masks* (1994).

Among the other classic anthologies of emerging avant-gardes was *Poètes à l'Écart* (1946, Offside Poetry), edited by Carola GIEDION-Weckler; Robert Motherwell's *The Dada Painters and Poets* (1951; second ed., 1989); Eugen Gomringer's *konkrete poesie* (1960, 1996); Franz Mon's *Movens* (1960); La Monte Young and Jackson Mac Low's *An Anthology of Chance Operations* (1963, 1971), which features early FLUXUS along with JOHN CAGE's early influence; *Happenings, Fluxus, Pop Art, Nouveau Realisme Eine Dokumentation Herausgegeben* (1965), edited by Jürgen Becker (1932) and Wolf Vostell (1932–98), who also brilliantly designed its pages; Mary Ellen Solt's *Concrete Poetry: A World View* (1968), which became most valuable for its international scope; Jean-François Bory's *Once Again* (1968) for visual narrative; Peter Weibel and Valie Export's *Wien: Bildkompendium Wiener Aktionismus und* (1970) for Vienna Actionism; Eugene Wildman's *Experiments in Prose* (1969), whose only competition for representing radically innovative fiction is an anthology of mine; Alan Sondheim's *Individuals* (1977), which features a brilliant introduction often typical of such avant-garde selections; Gerhard Rühm's *Die Wiener Gruppe* (1985) for certain Austrian poets; Geof Huth's modest *pwoermds* (2004) for linguistic inventions. There are other consequential

anthologies of new avant-garde work, including a few edited by me. (Having composed anthologies, I like to read those that are thoughtfully *edited*, rather than *compiled* where, for two negative red flags, selections appear in alphabetical order by author or chronological order by birthdate.)

## APOLLINAIRE, GUILLAUME

(26 August 1880–9 November 1918; b. Wilhelm Apollinaris de Kostrowitzky)

Born of a Polish mother who brought her fatherless sons to Monaco, where they received a French education, Kostrowitzky, known even into his adult years as “Kostro,” took a French pseudonym for a mercurial literary career that included art criticism, plays, fiction, pornography, and poetry. An early avant-garde text was the *poème simultanée*, “Zone” (in *Alcools*, 1913), in which events in several places are portrayed in adjacent lines, as though the writer were a bird rapidly moving from place to place. To foster perceptions that are not linear but spatial, Kostro simply eschewed punctuation. His second innovation, presaging literary MINIMALISM was the one-line poem, “Chantre” (or “Singer”), which William Meredith (1919–2007) translates as “And the single string of the trumpets marine.” Kostro's third major innovation was visual poems that he called “calligrammes,” in which words are handwritten or typeset to make expressive shapes, which he dubbed “visual lyricism.” For “Il pleut” (or “It rains”), the letters stream down the page, in appropriately uneven lines; “The Little Car” has several shapes reflective of automotive travel; “Mandolin Carnation and Bamboo” incorporates three roughly representational forms on the same page. Some of these handwritten poems have lines extending at various angles, words with letters in various sizes, musical staves, or diagonal typesetting, all to the end of enhancing language. Not only do such poems display a freedom in the use of materials, but Kostro apparently made it a point of principle not to repeat any image. Another, perhaps lesser, innovation he called “conversation poems” (“Les Fenêtres” and “Lundi Rue Christine”), because they were assembled from morsels overheard (and in their spatial leaping resemble “Zone”).

Kostro's best-remembered play, *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (*The Breasts of Tiresias*, 1918, but written many years before), is a satire on sex and genius that Martin Esslin (1918–2002) identifies as a distinguished precursor to the THEATER OF THE ABSURD. Kostro's strongest book of art criticism, *Les Peintres Cubistes*,

*Méditations Esthétiques* (1913, *The Cubist Painters, Esthetic Meditations*), identified a new development as it was maturing. A single essay, “L’Esprit nouveau et les poètes” (“The New Spirit and the Poets,” 1918), is no less valid today than it was when written, because of its emphasis upon surprise as an avant-garde esthetic value.

As an arts critic, Kostro coined “Surnatural” that was later shortened to *surréal*, which stuck, and he championed PABLO PICASSO above all other painters. It should not be forgotten that, in the cultural milieu of Paris at the beginning of the century, Kostro performed invaluable service in bringing together advanced artists and writers and helping them understand one another. As Roger Shattuck (1923–2005) elegantly put it, “He wrote on all subjects, in all forms, and for all purposes. For him there was no separation of art and action; they were identical.” Since I was first called Kostro in a summer camp that had too many boys named Richard, I respect his love of accident and coincidence as I assimilate him, regarding this *Dictionary* as a book that Kostro would have written had he lived long enough, say to my age, and resettled in NEW YORK CITY.

## APPROPRIATION

(1970s)

The filching of bits from earlier art, often without attribution, has become so popular a modernist procedure in literature, music, and visual art that it’s often unnoticed. In music, it’s called sampling. What was new, especially in the 1970s, was reproducing whole works, nearly intact, especially of photographs and then paintings, as well as sometimes literary texts, with the claim that the reproduction belonged to the younger artist. Simple to do, easy to write about, such works generated considerable chatter less among practicing artists than in art magazines and their principal audience of art students. In my judgment, the most profound appropriator was also among the earliest and a most meticulous painter (or repainter), rather than a (re)photographer – Elaine Sturtevant. Everyone after was after.

## ARMSTRONG, LOUIS

(4 August 1901–6 July 1971)

A precocious horn player from an indigent family, he was gigging in black bands around his native New Orleans as a teenager. By 1922 he went to Chicago to

play in Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band, a prominent group, making his first recordings with them in 1923. Quick to exploit the possibilities of records for disseminating his music, initially to black audiences, eventually to a larger multicultural public, he made countless recordings with innumerable assortments of other musicians. By 1925, still in Chicago, he organized his own groups – initially the Hot Five, later the Hot Seven, etc.

Armstrong’s first musical innovations were rhythmic. As the cultural critic Albert L. Murray (1916–2013) put it, Armstrong became:

the intimate beneficiary of ragtime and stride, the shift from the popularity of the 3/4 waltz beat of the operetta to the 4/4 of the fox trot, the one-step, the two-step, the drag, the stomp, the Afro-U.S. emphasis on percussion and on syncopation, the break, stop time, and so on.

On a different sense of time, initially learned in black New Orleans, Armstrong founded an African-American modern music, incidentally becoming more influential than BIX BEIDERBECKE, an Iowa-born German-American cornetist, who epitomized a more Caucasian style of horn-based jazz. (Whereas Beiderbecke died from disease exacerbated by excessive alcohol, and certain later jazz stars succumbed early to heroin, Armstrong’s principal daily recreation/distractedness was reportedly marijuana.) On the strength of his art, coupled with his persistence, Armstrong successfully imported African-American street culture into all of America’s living rooms. Given the strength of racial prejudice, not to mention the practice of segregation, during the first half of the 20th century, this was no easy feat – forging a cultural path that other African-American musicians have since successfully pursued.

Once Armstrong’s reputation as a trumpeter was securely established, he became a successful vocalist, in a gravelly innovative style uniquely his, as his facility to syncopation influenced later singers. One successor, Tony Bennett (1926), often credits Armstrong with inventing uniquely American solo vocalizing. Armstrong even released best-selling disks in which his famous trumpet took a back seat to his voice. One credible hypothesis holds that he always wanted to be a singer, indeed always sang, and regarded his trumpeting as extending his singing voice. Well-managed and generous with his time, Armstrong played in the largest and most prestigious venues around the world and appeared regularly in films and on radio and then television, working steadily until his death.