

Avant-Garde + Rearguard ≠ Complementarity

A review of *Theory of the Rearguard:
How to Survive to Contemporary Art (and Almost Everything Else)*

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Iván de la Nuez is one of those Cuban intellectuals who, as Guillermo Cabrera Infante used to say, has succeeded in appropriating the dream of freedom. *Theory of the Rearguard: How to Survive to Contemporary Art (and Almost Everything Else)*¹ gives evidence of this as a work that, combining sociology and art criticism, has shown a hidden side of things with the sensibility of one who makes a dissection. Five thematic poles articulate the text that to a certain extent is a sort of history of art, if we bear in mind that de la Nuez starts with Duchamp and ends with the draft of an epitaph, in case contemporary art comes to an end.

“The contemporary” is at the center of this text, not as anathema but with a strong analytical intention. It is the focus of this book, as was the question about art in Heidegger; everything turns around it and the answers we may obtain will place us on one side or the other of the problem. What does it mean to be contemporary? Is it possible to go on being contemporary?² Is it a euphemism? Is it possible to go on being contemporary in a world overflowed by the ephemeral?

At the same time, *Theory of the Rearguard* is a book that pretends to leave behind the conceptual framework generated by Bürger’s “Theory of the Avant-garde,”³ an iconic text that has enabled us to understand the “transit” of modern to contemporary art and the latter’s connection with life.

Iván de la Nuez makes a profound dissection in *Theory of the Rearguard*. If the question “what is art” makes no sense today because anything can be art, one would have to ask about the processes that surround the understanding of art or in which way those processes “transmute” into the art object. Ever since 1917, when Marcel Duchamp called his urinal a “fountain,” the fragile line that divided art and life was completely fractured and destroyed. “[...] from the most sacred to the most profane, it is already museum flesh.”⁴ After the “end of art” announced by Hegel and rarefied by Danto as the “death of art,” anything can be “recycled” as art.

Since today it makes no sense to follow Peter Bürger and his 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, de la Nuez outlines a theory of the rearguard, which is, above all, “an exercise that will relocate the thought about art, though not in relation to life, but to survival.”⁵ This

¹Consonni, Bilbao, 2018. www.consonni.org

²“[T]he ‘contemporary’ becomes a euphemism to seek shelter in immortality. A refrain repeated during a century with the objective of not dealing with the end.” P.10.

³Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1974.

⁴de la Nuez, 2018, P.14.

⁵de la Nuez, 2018, P.17.

new location creates a tension among art production, reproduction, marketing and survival.

Survival associated with the rearguard is based on the technological revolution that has overflowed the margins of the image and of imagination. The oversaturation of the image, its overabundance, has led to what I have called “ontological emptying,” an image lacking reason, at least in its ontogenesis. The technology – also as standardization instrument – has played its role in it. Today, not only can anyone be or make “art,” but anyone has the devices to generate an image beyond the fact of whether, ontologically speaking, it has been emptied or not. If the image lacks content or not is irrelevant these days; its ephemeral nature, its ephemeral existence does not need a content to be validated, not in an art gallery or a museum, but in the so-called social platforms.

If, as well-argued by Blanchot in *The Book to Come*, annotated by de la Nuez, “art originates in an exceptional lack,” and “the future art of a life without future would have its advantages.”⁶ In *Theory of the Rearguard: How to Survive to Contemporary Art (and Almost Everything Else)*, de la Nuez challenges this ontological displacement and emphasizes that it is one of the reasons for survival. Since the ready-made comprises everything, or almost everything, the performative quality, the lightness,⁷ the ephemeral, transvestism, being, wanting to be, and simulation all flood the public and private spaces of art and its institutional nature. With the last bang of an aesthetics that began with Duchamp, the grounds of this historical renewal have dissolved in the same way that modernism did. Would it make sense – de la Nuez asks himself – to go on talking about contemporary art? Perhaps the term “contemporary art” is too taxonomic, and after so long it begins to show its conceptual, semiological, but above all ontological cracks. This is, in the end, the reason for the Avant-Garde-Reargarde displacement he proposes.

Moreover, the fact that the new visual order betokened by Joan Foncuberta and emphasized by de la Nuez – although he “refuses”⁸ the term – places us fully, not only in the post-photographic world mentioned by the author of *Pandora’s Camera* but in the vortex of a profound mutation that not only has the power to create an image, but the possibility to create reality. And for that purpose de la Nuez establishes an analytical parallelism of curricular rigor. To understand and explain this process of estrangement and dissolution, de la Nuez proposes a “cycle” that goes from Lyotard and “The Postmodern Condition” to Fontuberta’s “The Post-photographic Condition,” since they both appropriate that transitional dynamic to a still non-existent place derived from the image or from what de la Nuez calls “iconocracy.” In this way, “the more we approach the image, the less we discern.”⁹

⁶Iván de la Nuez, 2018, P. 25.

⁷For more on this point, see Paul Lewis’s article, “‘Our minds can be hijacked’: the tech insiders who fear a smartphone dystopia,” published in The Guardian on October 6, 2017 (<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia>), where he describes how technological devices and social platforms are gradually preventing us from controlling our own minds.

⁸de la Nuez prefers to speak of *iconocracy*, which is a sort of “dictatorship of the image, but which immediately operates as an ecosystem of power and anti-establishment movement.” P. 64.

⁹de la Nuez, P. 67.

The predictions of an announced death do not seem very contemporary. From Hegel to Fukuyama, modernity and its derivations have been one step away from the gallows. Today more than ever its decapitation seems inexorable; if the sharp and profuse bang will separate the head from the body, the latter will continue to walk and – as de la Nuez states – we shall be “certifying that extended wake in which we subsist, skilled like him In the art of shrouding corpses that have been easier to kill than to bury.”¹⁰

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¹⁰Ivan de la NuezPág. 101`