The Half-Life of the Avant-Garde: Introduction

Ryan Bishop
University of Southampton

John W.P. Phillips
National University of Singapore

Abstract
This introduction to the special section ‘The Half-Life of the Avant-Garde: 50 Years On from 50 Years On’ explains why the section is conceived to look back at the century since the First World War. It is designed to offer ways of rethinking the concept and the role of the anniversary, where the First World War constitutes the memorialized event. The organization of the section follows the movement between often hidden or submerged forms of continuity. It attempts to think some of the aesthetic and technological legacies and inheritances of the First World War in its durational 100th anniversary (2014–18) through a specific temporal strategy most succinctly captured in the phrase ‘50 years on from 50 years on’. The entry point is the middle of the 20th century, allowing contributors to work backward and forward by examining links between the three separate temporal frames (1964–68, 1914–18 and 2014–18). The consistency but also the strangeness of critical practices, as world history passes with its violent climaxes and depressions, has unique contours in each frame, with Dada providing an exemplary through-line.

Keywords
avant-garde, William Burroughs, Cold War, collage, Dada, First World War, world fairs

What I call iterability, which repeats the same while displacing or altering it, is all at once a resource, a decisive power, and a catastrophe of repetition or reproduction. In this logic of iterability are found the resources both to cast into doubt oppositions of the type phúsis/tékhnē (and therefore also phúsis/nomos, phúsis/thesis).

(Derrida, 2017: 75)
This special section, conceived to look back at the century since the First World War, was designed to offer ways of rethinking the concept and the role of the anniversary, where the First World War constitutes the memorialized event. The organization of the section follows the movement between often hidden or submerged forms of continuity. It attempts to think some of the aesthetic and technological legacies and inheritances of the First World War in its durational 100th anniversary (2014–18) through a specific temporal strategy most succinctly captured in the phrase ‘50 years on from 50 years on’. The entry point is the middle of the 20th century, allowing contributors to work backward and forward by examining links between the three separate temporal frames (1964–68, 1914–18 and 2014–18). The consistency but also the strangeness of critical practices, as world history passes with its violent climaxes and depressions, has unique contours in each frame, with Dada providing an exemplary through-line.

Whether for them or against them, critical history admits that the Dadaists, in their polemics as well as in their revolutionary art, produced the most consistently radical formulations of the historical avant-garde. Dada encompassed visual art, sculpture, literature and photography, and it established both unique and exemplary spaces for expressions simultaneously of protest, exhibition, and transformative satire (Richter, 1964: 7; Bürger, 1984: 53–7; Kuenzli, 2006: 14; Foster, 1996: 20). Artists who gathered under the Dada rubric had connections with earlier movements like Futurism, Expressionism, and Cubism, and often went on to establish their reputations as part of the chronically divisive auspices of Surrealism. Among the complicated critical responses one discovers enduring controversies of the century (Adorno et al., 1984; see also Frederic Jameson’s ‘Reflections in Conclusion’ in Adorno et al., 1984: 196–213). Fifty years on from the initial moment of the so-called historical avant-garde, Dada became controversial again in the formulations and artworks of a self-styled Neo-Dadaist (Richter, 1964: 203). Dada also foreshadows the discussions of postmodern culture in the early 1980s (Lyotard, 1984: 79–82; de Duve, 1996; Buskirk and Nixon, 1996). To this extent Dada represents the break in aesthetics from modernist regret to postmodernist essay (Lyotard, 1984: 80).

Dada from its beginning with the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, 1916, was mobilized against armed mobilization, and to this end the thought of the end of the war was paramount. Borrowing Heidegger’s thoughts on the notion of ‘end’ (Heidegger, 2015 [1972]: 56–7), which can signify the place of a gathering of extreme possibilities and the direction towards which a historical process is guided, it is possible to see the element of active engagement in the Dada artwork as involving a will to the end of the war. The notion is certainly borne out in the longer history of the artists first involved in Dada and whose work remains influential. If the anniversary of the First World War fundamentally revolves around
memory, then it is worth noting that the ‘mem’ found in ‘memory’ and ‘member’ derive from the same Indo-European root *mem, a root related to the Sanskrit word mas, which means ‘flesh’. Thus dismemberment must occur before remembering can. Dismemberment is the condition that makes remembering possible, and the flesh at stake in the First World War has continued to be at stake throughout the century following though in increasingly immaterial, distanced and lethal ways. That these are legacies of trajectories initiated in specific and mobilized capacities by the First World War – as well as codified and intensified during the slice of the ’60s Cold War moment adhering to the 50 years on from 50 years on demarcation – often is lost in the violence of the amnesiac acceleration produced by these very trajectories in the current moment.

Collage, Cut-Up, Photomontage, Assemblage

What did it do in the Great War, Dada? (Tom Stoppard, Travesties)

After publishing his controversial novel Naked Lunch (1959), William Burroughs began to produce his works using techniques that allowed him to assemble them from different source materials. And, while he never ceased to write, the writings took on an altered status in his literary production. He began to reuse them as material for assembling further texts. The three parasitic books, afterwards known as the Nova trilogy, were not conceived as a trilogy. They are collections of writings, cut up, repeated, re-discovered, reused, and, as their confused publishing history attests, they do not follow a chronological order of production. That one can read The Soft Machine (1961), The Ticket that Exploded (1962), and Nova Express (1964) as different but related individual works attests to both the consistency of Burroughs’s techniques and his attention to their modes of assemblage. He becomes as much the curator of the pieces as he is their author in the traditional sense. These texts were produced in part by the so-called cut-up technique, according to which random fragments of existing text would be combined to produce new texts of elements yielding unexpected effects in their chance encounters. Cut-ups are collages, fragments of word and image colliding. The cut-ups were further developed when, from 1964, Burroughs took thousands of street photographs for collages that sometimes covered whole walls of his New York apartment (and now exist in fragments among art collections). The collages increasingly began to develop in layers, with photographs of the first layer (including shadows from the environment) used to produce further cut-ups, which in turn would be photographed... and so on: photographs of photographs of photographs (see Almer and Sears, 2014). The aim was not merely towards the creation of art works but ultimately as a means of interfering with the space-time continuum.
Burroughs used the cut-up and the camera as machines capable of upsetting the semantic order.

The cut-up technique developed by Brion Gysin and Burroughs during the early years of the 1960s owes much, as they acknowledge, to the tradition pioneered by the collages of Max Ernst, the poems of Tristan Tzara and the photo-collages of Dadaists like Hannah Höch (see Blazwick, 2014), whose interventions mark the emergence, in the second decade of the 20th century, of a collage technique using images and texts to produce provocatively anti-aesthetic treatments of their time. Höch’s *Schnitt mit dem Kuchennesser Dada durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauch-Kulturepoche Deutschlands [Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through Germany’s Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch]* (1919) combines images of contemporary conflict, politics, sport and entertainment merged with elements characteristic of a world subjugated by the machinery of locomotion: a diesel engine, a carriage of the Orient Express, automobiles, turbines, ball-races and gear-wheels. To gaze over this impressively large work is to be reminded of how much the 20th century owes to Dada in the heritage of cultural forms. The photographic collage seems to offer a fitting technique for an aesthetic regime that governs through an overwhelming simultaneity of media: images, words, sounds and spaces that resist anything other than a partial viewpoint. The collages, assemblages, cut-ups and photomontages of the first Dada era set the tone and type for much of what was to follow in numerous avant-garde or activist movements and events of the next 50 or 60 years (e.g. surrealism, constructivism, situationism, Fluxus, pop art, conceptual art, the 1968 demonstrations, punk). Dada furthermore, in its appeal as an international movement whose affiliates were in regular contact, not only in Zurich, Paris, Berlin, Hanover, Cologne and New York, but also in Eastern Europe and Japan, represents a fitting counterpoint, as its forceful opposition, to a world war that raged at the time of its inauguration: pacifist yet revolutionary in its brutal intelligence and in its aphoristic and joyful anti-aesthetics.

The New York of William Burroughs, significantly changed since the arrival of Duchamp, Man Ray and Picabia in 1912, presented a world dominated not only by the locomotive machine but even more by the rapid growth of electronics, televisions, and cameras. Computers in the background of corporate offices, calculators, office machines (many bearing the Burroughs family name), stationary equipment, recording and other devices designed to enhance daily life and business efficiency, formed the kind of technical environment that one might retrospectively preview in works by Dali, Duchamp and Picabia from 50 years earlier. The appearance of the affordable camera had taken photography into the home and into the street. The thousands of photographs taken by Burroughs (many of which are lost) seem to merge with the thousands of shots taken by both photographers and the public, echoing Tristan
Tzara’s claim that art is for everyone and prompting Susan Sontag to observe that: ‘photography has become almost as widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing’ (Sontag, 1977: 8).

On one hand, the use of the cut-up technique reactivates the ability of the collage to serve as a form mobilized towards social disruption, critique or protest, or even as a device purely for generating new experiences of artistic production. But, on the other hand, such techniques are now ubiquitous in a wide variety of artistic and cultural settings and integral to a spirit of the time that can mobilize them in a more obviously utopian direction towards the idea of a world-of-tomorrow. In Burroughs the cut-up, selected from thousands of sheets of raw material, serves a different end. One has to read attentively to assess the extent of Burroughs’s cultural intervention, which is difficult where the pleasure in the reading experience follows the trace of unexpected divergences and senseless repetitions. An archival eye, a will to organization, might be better suited in resistance to the effects of the cut-up, to a sense of how a sentence undergoes its erosion in stages. Burroughs is less interested in the future as a way of imagining a new world than he is in suspending the stable order of the temporal dimension experienced by the human being, by the soft machine. He is more interested in rendering uncertain the time-binding schematism of past present and future as a formal order significant of the symbiosis that language, the word, has achieved in its viral infection of the human body. Burroughs argues that the word, in its original form as writing, inhabits the human as a virus at the cellular level and that one of the qualities that marks the human out from the other animals is the viral ‘time binding’ effect: ‘A symbiotic relationship has now been established and the virus is now built into the host which sees the virus as a useful part of itself’ (Burroughs, 1970: 5). His texts are in part attempts to mobilize a resistance to the ultimately deadly infection.

The conspiratorial strand that runs throughout Burroughs’s work allows one to situate it among the paranoid Cold War motifs of its time. And if one acknowledges the allegorical and fabulous capacities of his fictional structures, some further connections stand out. Nova Express (first published in 1964) reworks material that may have started out as a science fiction adventure narrative but is presented – in the title and its typography as well as in the organization of the text itself – in the parodic form of a cosmic news sheet (the Nova Express). His own filing system follows the model of date stamped files and fiches of newspaper archives. But its parody is also directed against the reactionary media, the ‘fake’ news, like that of Lord Beaverbrook and the Daily Express, like those of the magazines Time and Life. The novel mixes several voices, not only in the manner that fiction facilitates: it shifts between an apocalyptic tone warning of the end and laconic voices typical of the science fiction noir; but it also intersperses texts in the register of scientific discourse (medical, psychological, mathematical). These are often cut directly from
the discourses themselves and pasted in before being further treated by cut-up or ‘fold in’ techniques. The chapter ‘This Horrible Case’ is in part a collaboration with the mathematician Ian Sommerville (who also provides technical notes elsewhere). A version of its first chapter, ‘Last Words’, exists as a recording Burroughs made in 1960, in which he takes the opportunity to effectively air these different voices. The text therefore merges discourses and media in circulation, but also includes: a myth of origin (infestation by the alien life form writing); developing knowledge in epidemiology (the viral infection); science fiction (alien invasion); legal drama (the case for and against the aliens/language); psychological thriller; statements about the machinery of biotechnical science; and a formal logic that exceeds the normal experience of the space-time continuum. The theme is simply stated but complex and diffused: it addresses the moment when the host lifeform after millennia of parasitic infection for the first time sees its parasite.

**Exhibition**

These qualities disturb and reorient not only the function of the informative culture industries, institutions of media and education in their rational representation of the historical past, but also the utopian promise inherent in the corporate world and in visible developments in technoscience and the military. Burroughs appears today as the unseen shade of the future in relation to other events of his time. *Nova Express* was first published in book form in 1964, the year of the New York World’s Fair, at which more than 45 corporations installed exhibits and attractions allowing spectators, roaming across more than 640 acres of the Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, to discover, to witness and to enjoy a new world of technologies developed to enhance life. Businesses included General Electric, Ford, General Motors, Chrysler, Disney, IBM, Bell Telephone, US Steel, Pepsi Cola, Seven Up, Dupont, RCA, and Westinghouse. The connection between the avant-garde and the idea of a ‘World’s Fair’ is well established. The 1964 fair was itself conceived in repetition of the previous 1939 World’s Fair in New York (at which Burroughs machines featured prominently) and belongs to a tradition of fairs and exhibitions where culture and technology, modernism and modernity, meet.

The art historian Richard Brettell begins his book on modern art (*Modern Art 1851–1929: Capitalism and Representation*) with an account of the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London. His intention is to show that the development of modern art occurs alongside innovations in the ways in which art was exhibited, disseminated, and sold. Which is to say, unremarkably, that the artwork comes into being at this time as an international object of commercial exchange. Any account of the avant-garde is obliged to feature the catalysts, the gallery owners and sponsors who
create the space for it. One doesn’t have to agree with Brettell’s narrative to acknowledge that the connections between the avant-garde and the world’s fair may be located in the senses of the term *exhibition* and in the purposes to which exhibition answers. Dada has its own genealogy of historic exhibitions: the Armory Show of 1913 in New York, at which works by Duchamp and Picabia alongside many European avant-garde works both excited and scandalized the American public for the first time; the first annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in 1917 in New York, famous now as the foil for Duchamp’s Richard Mutt hoax and for the hanging committee’s only rejection, Duchamp’s *Fountain*; and the considerably more politicized First International Dada Fair in Berlin in 1920. These instances, coterminous with war and revolution, situate Dada both within, and at odds with, developing trends of modernity, sometimes reflective of such trends in parodic reduction but also as helping to form or at least contributing to the visible iconicity and intellectual horizon of modernity itself.

The historical avant-garde can seem at once entirely domesticated in its neo-avant-garde incarnations and yet insistently provocative, mildly astonishing, in its ability to leave its spectator speechless. But the common encounter with public sculptures (by Salvador Dali or Henry Moore or any number of international contemporary artists) on the promenade, or at the site of some urban riverside renewal, or beneath towering buildings of a central business district, shows how elements of the visible remains of the avant-garde continue to figure within a mutually supportive sponsorship that combines corporate, public and personal spheres (e.g. *Planet* by Mark Quinn). A central exhibit of the 1964 World’s Fair, the stainless steel *Unisphere* (the world’s largest globe, at 43 m high and 37 m in diameter) signals at once its unintentional alignment with generic constructivism (utopian, monumental) and an apparently ingenuous appeal to the coming space age, candidly in its dedication: ‘Man’s Achievements on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe’.

The world of the contemporary avant-garde plays a more integral role in the World’s Fair thanks to the commission by Philip Johnson, as part of his design for the fair’s New York State Pavilion, for ten emergent artists to produce original works that would adorn the pavilion’s circular Theaterama. The artists (Peter Agostini, John Chamberlain, Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Alexander Lieberman, Robert Mallary, Robert Rauschenberg, James Rosenquist and Andy Warhol) make up a representative (if all male) ensemble of the kind of art (Neo-Dada, Neo-Realism, Pop Art) that was often admired by the prevailing art institutions of the day for its experimental invention but also despised for its evident paucity of talent. Harold Rosenberg (deep into the controversy between abstract expressionism and Neo-Dada) famously wrote in *The New Yorker* that the new art was: ‘like a joke
without humour, told over and over again until it begins to sound like a threat’ (quoted in Richter, 1964: 203). While one can imagine turning such a statement around (it laconically captures some of what John Cage and Robert Rauschenberg achieve in their spontaneous collaborative work), Rosenberg more critically identifies the neo-avant-garde with the corporate fields of marketing and advertising. He writes that it is ‘advertising art which advertises itself as art that hates advertising’, thus summoning, as if from the wellspring of Burroughs, a structure according to which the parasite becomes naturalized as a useful quality of the host lifeform. With the ‘action painting’ of abstract expressionism as the benchmark, the term kitsch is formed (at once dismissive and misogynistic) to describe the escape into rationality of the Neo-Dadaists. Even Raoul Haussmann and Hans Richter, veterans of the historical Dada moment, have little sympathy. Haussmann states: ‘Dada fell like a raindrop from Heaven. The neo-Dadaists have learned to imitate the fall, but not the raindrop’ (Richter, 1964: 203). Nevertheless, each of the ten young artists was asked to fill a 20 ft by 20 ft slot on the pavilion wall. The one hint of controversy is provided by Warhol’s 13 Most Wanted Men (now celebrated for a surreptitious queer poetics that may not have been much evident in its time), which involved silk-screening the enlarged mugshots of the NYPD’s 13 most wanted criminals of 1962 on Masonite panels tiled in such a way as to show the members of this gallery of rogues gazing into each other’s eyes above the fair. For whatever reason (lost now to a history of rumour, misinformation, and speculation but probably more mundane than controversial), the exhibit was painted over in silver before the fair opened.

The evident compatibility between the contemporary avant-garde and the corporate world, on the surface of things, raises a deeper question concerning these (supposedly) disparate spheres. The common factor (variously the popular front, everyday life, the mundane) lies in the appeal to a general public that in the US especially is undergoing specific kinds of cultural formation. It suggests that it is worth excavating a sense of the avant-garde that would not merely be attached to artworks, which historically gather to themselves different kinds of intensity in their material and intellectual manifestations and to particular demands and expectations. But such excavations would also contribute to an understanding of cultural history in its less obviously avant-garde appearances, but which nevertheless gesture to the ethical if not utopian idea of life to come, to an art of survival under the fatal conditions of progressive technics and war.

The Institutional Meaning of the Avant-Garde

The institutional (which is to say determinate) meaning of the avant-garde, presented today in scholarly books, on websites, in galleries and
museums, and on social media, offers a simultaneously reassuring yet perplexing narrative, by which certain writers and artists emerging in the 19th century receive the name *avant-garde* for their ‘fighting spirit’, a rather literal use of the French military term ‘vanguard’. Groups of artists challenging long established concepts and ideas about art, and fighting an entrenched establishment, can be compared with the soldiers of the front line of an army. The hostility directed towards them confirms the battle now waged against the censorship of their art. Museums justify these explanations by the observation that works considered avant-garde in their own time tend to appear quite normal, even classical or established, in the eyes of contemporary spectators. This leads to the further observation that, like life, the avant-garde remains fleeting and momentary.

Is it redundant to ask whether anything from among the apparent ruins of the historical avant-garde endures? In the case of Dada, the chief proponents of this paradoxical anti-movement declared it finished by 1923, though most went on to distinguished careers beyond, or (in Marcel Duchamp’s phrase) ‘in the spirit of’, Dada. Today art institutions regularly celebrate each one with lavishly documented retrospectives and theoretically dense revaluations. The Dada archive increases and expands, essentially incomplete and yet interminably replenished, apparently confirming Peter Bürger’s observation, from 50 years after the self-dissolution of Dada, ‘that it is art as an institution that determines the measure of effect that avant-garde artworks can have, and that art in bourgeois society continues to be a realm that is distinct from the praxis of life’ (Bürger, 1984: 92). If the avant-garde artwork ‘entered a new relationship to reality’, in which the artwork was no longer sealed off from the praxis of life, then the bourgeois institution reintroduces and maintains the separation.

Brettell, in a historicism that nowadays might seem uncommonly dismissive, classifies Dada as the paradigm of anti-art and sums it up as exhausted or foiled inanity. Conjuring images of early 20th-century ‘café culture’, he reads Dada through the lens of Alfred Jarry: ‘The most extreme manifestation of avant-garde café culture was the poet-playwright-philosopher-drunkard Alfred Jarry (1873–1907) whose creation of an anti-order, an anti-doctrinaire doctrine, and, in a sense, an anti-life defined an absurdist strategy that came to be closely associated with Dada’ (Brettell, 1999: 43). The structure of self-cancellation, an art designed to destroy art, to destroy life, provides at least a sense of refusal, against otherwise enthusiastic revisionist readings and the present canonization of these works.

For some it is exactly this force of irreverent intent that endures. Rudolf Kuenzli, in his luxurious and informative Phaidon volume, *Dada*, writes: ‘Subversive and irreverent, Dada, more than any other movement, has shaken society’s notions of art and cultural production
Dada questioned the myth of originality, of the artist as genius, suggesting instead that everybody should be an artist and almost anything could be art’ (2006: 14). Kuenzli, discovering ‘irony’ where Brettell sees only ‘inanity’, identifies the endurance of the Dada heritage as concretized by moments of protest whenever a radical group critiques the ‘dominant culture’: the Dada Cabaret after the Second World War, Situationism and the student protests of 1968, the artwork and performance aesthetic of the punk movements of the 1970s, and so on. He writes evoking the spirit of Henri Lefebvre, for whom the very meaning of modernity lies in its inherent radical negation. Lefebvre had argued that modern artists and writers also begin in negation: ‘Negation is the only way open to them: antitheater, antiplays, antiliterature, antinovels and antipoetry. Unaware of what the roles and rules really are, they take it upon themselves to bring about the dissolution of art’ (Lefebvre, 1995 [1962]: 184). The question of art’s perhaps essential inability to know the roles and the rules of its own game remains unanalysed, but for now we may acknowledge with Lefebvre that this inability itself can be staged. Even Kuenzli lacks the metahistorical irony of Lefebvre, who (in 1962) attributes the continued success of the signs of the avant-garde to a generalized bureaucratic terrorism whereby the negativity of the ‘modern’ (‘the success of advertising campaigns which use it are an indication of its perennial status’) becomes the tool of an intimidation technique: ‘anyone who does not accept it and dares to challenge it is made to appear old-fashioned, out of date and not “with it”. This widespread terrorism . . . intimidates not only the general public but also the genuine or self-styled avant-garde, whose greedy and ambitious factions live in dread of not being top dog’ (Lefebvre, 1995 [1962]: 186). Lefebvre, far from a lone voice in mid-century intellectual populism, locates the paradox of the neo-avant-garde in this uncertain topos where the genuine avant-garde and mere producers of the signs of the new can no longer be distinguished at the point of their emergence. The radical opening and the ignominious closure of the historical avant-garde (the generation associated with Dada) has left in its wake an indeterminate sphere in which the ceaseless repetition of the ‘new’ renders creativity itself obscure – if indeed we still regard creativity, in its connotations of poetic production, as at all at stake.

Brettell at least offers the advantage of ascertaining a wider scope of social implication: ‘Dada’s origins are intertwined with those of the First World War’, he writes, ‘and it was in the relative neutrality of Zurich and New York that artists of various nationalities formed their cells of inanitiy in imitation of the inanities of their world’ (Brettell, 1999: 43). The contest against this apparently one-sided dialectic begins with the existing documents associated with Dada, including the magazines published between 1916 and 1923, which attest to the metre and rhythm of what otherwise would come down to us as a free ensemble of events and
diverse works, loosely aligned artists and writers, and variously motivated independent publishers challenging normality. Brettell attributes the force of the moment to the major historical event of the First World War, against which he treats Dada as a kind of imitation in retreat, an aesthetic negation that inevitably fails to negate the (historical) negation. His image of the ‘cell of inanity’, a doubtless unfortunate coinage, is supposed to describe, for instance, the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, the Exhibition of Independent Artists in New York, and the teeming fairs and exhibitions of post-war Berlin Dada that posed a seemingly futile challenge to the forms of mainstream culture and exchange that prevailed in Berlin social life and in European culture. Hugo Ball, who first set up the Cabaret Voltaire, writes in 1916: ‘the activity and interests of those involved in the cabaret Voltaire [at this stage Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck and Marcel Janco] clearly show that it is aimed at the few independent thinkers whose ideals extend beyond the war and their native lands’ (Ades, 2006: 20). Independence in this sense, alongside that of the international, one of the several consistently affirmed values of the magazines, implies an alternative to the contemporary situation, determined not only by the war and the various instances of nationalism that accompanied it, but also banality in art, the technological privilege in commercial and military activity, as well as prevalent anti-communist aggression in politics. The alternative, an echo of Enlightenment via Nietzsche, is independent thinking. Dada reaches back, in its utopian refusal of the present, to an oppressed populism; and it gestures forward, in formal and structural adventure, to undreamed futures.

**Dada to Data: 50 Years On from 50 Years On**

Between 1946 and 1966 Duchamp worked secretly on his final work, *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d’eau/2° le gaz d’éclairage*, which was eventually installed posthumously, according to his meticulous instructions, in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1969. In some ways *Étant donnés* performs as the culmination of an arc: a consistent if complex engagement lasting a little over 50 years, not only with art but also with a world marked by increasing mechanization and militarization, an engagement whose early thoughts are clearly enough represented in notes recalling a famous afternoon in October 1912. *Étant donnés* literally captures the spectator’s gaze, evoking at once in a field parodic of desire the distant past of its ‘illuminating gas’, to a time before the crisis years of the First World War, and forward with its ‘tricks’ of the eye to the ‘truths of tomorrow’.

When Duchamp added the notes in *The Green Box* to the ensemble of elements constituting *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even* (more often viewed in its form as *The Large Glass*), he included two
pages of notes documenting his thoughts during (and drafted just after) a stormy night journey over the uneven surface of the Jura-Paris road. He was with Guillaume Apollinaire, Francis Picabia and Gabriele Buffet-Picabia. The journey left a significant mark on each of the travellers, whose concerns in the field of art practice were with a shared rejection of conventional and academic art in painting and sculpture, a rejection of an art that carried the sense of an artist’s talent via hand movement in brushstrokes. That year Duchamp accompanied Apollinaire to a now famous performance of Raymond Roussel’s *Impressions of Africa* (1983), which by his own account gave him the idea for *The Bride Stripped Bare*. He also travelled with Picabia to New York, where he introduced him to the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, a moment where the burgeoning avant-garde scene in New York, gathered around photography, begins to welcome the European avant-garde. But the journey also gave rise to a shared intimation of the doom waiting as the storm of war brewed up ahead as if in the headlights as the car fought its way through the reduced visibility of the rainy night. Only Apollinaire was unable to avoid inevitable conscription and his head wound, which left him vulnerable, would lead to his death by Spanish flu in 1918. The car ride with Duchamp and the Picabias as well as a second similarly fraught journey in 1915 inspired him to write ‘Le petit auto’ (the little car), published with his *Calligrammes* and pregnant with yet more intense intimations of the war and devastation to come. The elements of the historical avant-garde seem to come together here – in the narrative of the car ride, the recollections of the passengers, the intimations of an inexorable future against which one must find strategies to survive. Duchamp’s notes for ‘The Jura-Paris Road’ begin: ‘The machine with 5 hearts, the pure child, of nickel and platinum, must dominate the Jura-Paris road’ (Duchamp, 1973: 26). Duchamp and Picabia especially will collaborate with the machine itself, the fifth heart, in their contest with the machine.

The will to end the First World War by using the technologies being used to wage it but to different anti-rational and anti-ends constituted the foundational ethos, strategy and rationale of the Dada movement. It was meant to be as revolutionary as it was idealistic, with the idealism fuelling the revolutionary aspirations. In these ways, the Fluxus movement of the 1960s in the US and Japan echoed explicitly the goals and strategies of the earlier avant-garde. Yet the avant-garde past and present is largely a narrative of goals, ideals and revolutions unfulfilled. The perpetual failures of different avant-garde movements – in their encounters with the state, corporations, the military, capitalism, the university – raise questions about the role of failure as an ongoing and inherent element of what constitutes the avant-garde as such (see Beck and Bishop, 2020). A properly functioning avant-garde can only, in the end, perhaps, maintain at best a parasitical relation to the centre. As with critique or parody
or a host of other interventionist moves, the avant-garde paradoxically reinscribes the power resident in the targeted *logos* or ruling status quo. As such, the failure of the avant-garde seems structurally determined though a necessary means for its survival and continued enactment as well as appeal. If the avant-garde achieved any revolutionary or idealistic goal, of course, it could no longer be avant-garde but that which the avant-garde would need to resist instead.

The avant-garde will have always been about intellectual, political, social, technological and aesthetic relations to temporality or the historical as such, of how the present intends to learn from a past to build toward a disruptive and potentially ideal future. All of these temporal epochs and relations harden into solid and received understandings of them, and for the avant-garde this common-sense solidity is partially what is at stake in its movements. As Hal Foster argues, contra Peter Bürger’s linear and evolutionary model of art history, the neo-avant-garde of the 1960s does not mark failure but rather the continued and continual application of avant-garde principles testing aesthetic experience in the tension between art and life. The 1960s neo-avant-garde is not the farcical return of the heroic past but a project always and only enacted ‘for the first time’ – ‘a first time that... is theoretically endless’ (Foster, 1996: 20). Such a reading suggests that the historical avant-garde can only be effectively operational when worked through the neo-avant-garde, as the critical attributes are dormant until tested: perpetually for the first time in each instance (Beck and Bishop, 2020: 169). Nonetheless, the complexities of temporality as a given and, at the same time, an ideologically constructed historical consciousness of temporality operate fully in any articulation of the avant-garde and underpin its operation and justification.

Selecting specific texts and events from 1964 to 1968 to chart certain trajectories provides the potential for a more oblique and nuanced engagement with the significant role the First World War played in the creation of knowledge over the last 100 years. Slicing the centenary in half and working backward and forward at the same time allows us to avoid simple linear narratives and to use the specific engagements at specific moments to chart a momentum, a technicity, of various concerns and structural repetitions or variations that could easily drop out of standard historical engagements. Further, this links to *the will to end the war* as both a temporal and ontological rupture while also being a continuity, as Foster’s perpetual testing of the avant-garde suggests. The period includes the Burroughs and Duchamp moments mentioned earlier as well as the tumults of 1968, of course. The section’s temporal strategy – while embodying and performing the preoccupations of the avant-garde in relation to historical theorization, enactment and project – provides an opportunity to understand the events of that moment in relation to earlier trajectories from both the First and the Second World War as
well as exploring how those phenomena resonate (or not) in the present while allowing us to think 1968 outside of its own often somewhat delimited debates, self-representations and obsessions.

The ‘Long War’ (the First World War as ongoing in the present) and the long shadow of the war provide the thesis, or theme, of this section: how the war becomes constitutive of thought itself in the 20th and 21st centuries. In a concerted manner, the First World War establishes not only some of the art movements constitutive of the avant-garde operative for over a century but also disciplines, such as psychoanalysis and moments of social science experimentation. Within it and resultant from it are those threads that led to the centrality of technoculture in philosophy, critical theory, social inquiry, governance, perception and sensing (human and machine), weaponry, urban space and the arts. Calculation and control of populations and terrain through tele-technological means of many kinds, often honed in colonial settings, makes its initial full-blown appearance on the world stage with the First World War. Working from the mid-‘60s backward and forward underscores the massive intensification and repetitions of the Long War operative in Cold War strategy, technics and desires. That these drives and structures continue beyond the various kinds of fallout from 9/11 and other 21st-century conflicts offers a different anniversary engagement with First World War centenary examination and memorialization. Our perspective here is largely cultural and theoretical. We are interested in the ways in which the Long War infrastructure, technologies, and attitudes continue to shape and inflect responses to large-scale political and technological issues. The contributors to the section present multiple means for taking these critically to task.

Ryan Bishop’s article ‘The Eames Office, the Cold War and the Avant-Garde: Making the Lab of Tomorrow’ (2020), focuses on the design office of Charles and Ray Eames, responsible for, among other things, the IBM pavilion of the 1964–5 World’s Fair. In Bishop’s analysis, the Eames’ office did not only mobilize a repertoire of experimental techniques as a propaganda machine for US ideals and values, but in doing so it helped to shape what Bishop refers to as the Cold War nomos, ‘a speculative techno-utopianism shot through with nuclear dread and constructed through planetary-scaled universal computation’ (2020: [4]). Adapting the term nomos (which evidently suits its milieu) from Carl Schmitt, whose attempts to describe how land is ‘divided and situated’, leads to the formalization of the nomos in the establishment of a Cold War ethos. While this nomos is characterized by the posthuman geopolitics underpinning the arms race, its ‘soft’ side (progressive, entertaining) is presented at the World’s Fair. Bishop’s analysis of the Unisphere reveals ‘a specific geopolitical imaginary emergent and operative in the mid-1960s that became the US vision of itself on the world stage’ (2020: [6]). At the core of Bishop’s argument we learn that the techniques of the
avant-garde allow the Eameses, in collaboration with avant-garde practitioners, to forge a vision of the future using an inherited (even high-jacked) iconicity of the avant-garde past. The role of the Eames office as a kind of art and technology lab serves as the space in which, for example, the furniture, the architecture and the cinema of the moment is forged, having been influenced by some of the key avant-garde practitioners in these fields, like Abel Gance, who as an affiliate of Dada produced forceful experiments in narrative cinema. The establishment of the Cold War nomos therefore rests on an intricate domestication of avant-garde practice, and, in the screens and information technologies of the post-Cold War era, continues in an amplified manner.

John Beck and Mark Dorrian (2020) begin their article with a moment in cinema that belongs to an early stage of the historical Cold War era. The Beginning or the End (1947) was the first feature film made about the design and deployment of the atomic bomb. They begin their analysis by focusing on the fictional newsreel footage that dramatizes the burial in a time capsule of a copy of the film and a projector to show it on. The scene, with its funereal overtones yet grim optimism that, even in the face of catastrophic destruction, the germ of civilization will endure, recalls the ceremonies surrounding the interment of the Westinghouse time capsule at the New York World’s Fair in 1939. Beck and Dorrian thus explore the complex relation to war and to temporality of the phenomenon (or phenomena) of time capsules. They at once anticipate and work through the challenge posed to futurity by the threat of global conflict. As a container, the capsule attempts to deliver and control the reception of a legible inventory of the present, yet the principle of selection and the impossibility of predicting how information might be received in the deep future – if it is received at all – threatens this aim. They refer to the cut-up method of Burroughs and Gysin to suggest that the dilemma faced by time capsule curators is one of control. By reading the time capsule through the cut-up, anticipated catastrophe can be seen to be functioning proleptically in the present and already active as a challenge to the capsule as proof against disaster.

Brandon Hookway, in his article, ‘Psychological Apparatus, Automatism, and the Making of the Experimental Subject’ (2020), follows a different lead by considering the sense of experiment in the establishment of what he calls ‘the experimental subject’. In his account we find a parallel history. But in explicating it Hookway forms some strong speculations regarding the present situation with subjectivity and experiment. In the progress of the avant-garde, the movement is from experimental science (in, e.g., naturalism) to experimental techniques (in Cubism and Futurism). In the contemporaneous development of psychology the sense of experiment becomes attached to a preconscious subject that is seen as the raw material for experimental science. In this respect psychology proceeds along lines established also for the avant-garde in its earlier incarnation as a kind of naturalism. But it stumbles, as
does the avant-garde in its more developed state, over the increasing threat of the mechanized environment. The experimental subject is regarded as independent of conscious will or intention and instead is a figure of unconsciousness. In relation to the techniques of the early 20th-century avant-garde, faced with mechanizations of life, today’s technoculture of experimentality is characterized by the drive to hold all that it can see as subject to experiment. In this way it continually opens up new territories to test, model, and exploit.

In Shannon Mattern’s article the implicit connections between Dada and data, between the fate of the avant-garde and the historicity of information technology, becomes more explicit. Her analysis of the role of the small, moving parts of information, the way cards are sorted, files organized, and data processed during a long century of development, reveals periodic recurrences, repetitions, and expansions, as the visibility of small scale information systems scales up to inspire a perennial fantasy attached variously to administrative, urban, global, or space age projections, myriad ways of producing a sense of order in the midst of evident chaos. ‘The Spectacle of Data: A Century of Fairs, Fiches, and Fantasies’ (2020) takes as its point of entry the New York 1964-5 World’s Fair, at which bits and fragments of information on display contributed to its space age theme. The article then excavates the cultural history of the fair itself, in the earlier 1939-40 World’s Fair and the many expos and exhibitions that preceded them. The ubiquity of data organization throughout the period (which is connected to the epo-chal influence of the Civil War and the two world wars of the 20th century) reveals a hidden cultural history of the small moving parts of information. The modular and expandable card index has continued to inspire data ordering throughout the century, perhaps reaching its apotheosis in the invention of the sticky Post-It note in 1980. Mattern concludes with a survey of the trends that have in some way or another mobilized the model of the card system, including Marshall McLuhan’s generative Distant Early Warning Cards (created in 1969) and the oblique strategies of Brian Eno (from 1975).

ORCID iD
Ryan Bishop https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0164-3457

References
Ades, Dawn (ed.) (2006) The Dada Reader: A Critical Anthology. London: Tate Publishing.
Adorno, Theodor, Benjamin, Walter, Bloch, Ernst, Brecht, Bertolt and Lukács, Georg (1977) Aesthetics and Politics, ed. and trans. Taylor R. London: NLB.
Almer, Patricia and Sears, John (2014) Taking Shots: The Photography of William S. Burroughs. London and Munich: Prestel.
Beck, John and Bishop, Ryan (2020) *Technocrats of the Imagination: Art, Technology and the Military-Industrial Avant-garde*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Bishop, Ryan (2020) The Eames Office, the Cold War and the avant-garde: Making the Lab of Tomorrow. *Theory, Culture & Society* 37(7–8).

Blazwick, Iwona (ed.) (2014) *Hannah Höch*. London: Prestel.

Brettell, Richard (1999) *Modern Art 1851–1929: Capitalism and Representation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bürger, Peter (1984) *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Shaw, Michael. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Burroughs, William (1970) *The Electronic Revolution*. Berlin: Expanded Media Editions.

Burroughs, William (2013 [1964]) *Nova Express: The Restored Text*, ed. Harris, Oliver. New York: Grove Press.

Burroughs, William (2014 [1961]) *The Soft Machine: The Restored Text*, ed. Harris, Oliver. New York: Grove Press.

Burroughs, William (2015 [1962]) *The Ticket That Exploded: The Restored Text*, ed. Harris, Oliver. New York: Grove Press.

Buskirk, Martha and Nixon, Mignon (eds) (1996) *The Duchamp Effect: Essays, Interviews, Round Table*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Derrida, Jacques (2017) *The Beast and the Sovereign, Vol. II*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Duchamp, Marcel (1973) *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Sanouillet, Michel and Peterson, Elmer. Boston: Da Capo Press.

Duchamp, Marcel (2009) *Étant donnés: Manual of Instructions* [with a preface by Anne d’Harnoncourt and an introductory essay by Michael R. Taylor]. New Haven: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press.

De Duve, Thierry (1996) *Kant After Duchamp*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Foster, Hal (1996) *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Heidegger, Martin (2015 [1972]) *The History of Being*, trans. McNeill, William and Powell, Jeffrey. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Hookway, Brandon (2020) Psychological apparatus, automatism, and the making of the experimental subject. *Theory, Culture & Society* 37(7–8): 115–132.

Kuenzli, Rudolf (2006) *Dada*. London: Phaidon.

Lefebvre, Henri (1995 [1962]) *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes September 1959–May 1961*, trans. Moore, John. London: Verso.

Lyotard, Jean François (1984) Answering the question: What is postmodernism? trans. Durand, Régis. In: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 71–82.

Mattern, Shannon (2020) The spectacle of data: A century of fairs, *fiches*, and fantasies. *Theory, Culture & Society* 37(7–8): 133–155.

Picabia, Francis (2007) *I Am a Beautiful Monster: Poetry, Prose and Provocation*, trans. Lowenthal, Marc. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.

Richter, Hans (2016) *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* [Dada Centenary Issue with a new Introduction and Commentary by Michael White]. London: Thames & Hudson.

Roussel, Raymond (1983) *Impressions of Africa*, trans. Foord, Lindy and Heppenstall, Rayner. London: Calder.
Sontag, Susan (1977) *On Photography*. London: Penguin.
Taylor, Michael R (2009) *Marcel Duchamp: Étant donnés* [with essays by Andrew Lins et al.]. New Haven: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press.

Ryan Bishop is Professor of Global Art and Politics at the Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, where he co-directs (with Jussi Parikka) the Archaeologies of Media and Technology Research Group.

John W.P. Phillips is Associate Professor of English at the National University of Singapore.

This article is part of the *Theory, Culture & Society* special section on ‘The Half-Life of the Avant-Garde’ (TCS 37(7–8), December 2020), edited by Ryan Bishop & John W.P. Phillips.