

**Jale Nejdet Erzen**  
**The “Ready Made” Avant-Garde**

One of the developments most peculiar to the art of the 20th Century is the notion of the avant-garde that has made it necessary, all throughout the century, to reconsider concepts of aesthetics and of creativity. The avant-garde brings into question a great variety of artistic issues, such as artistic expertise, public taste, form, content, autonomy, individuality, etc. However, the one thing that distinguishes the avant-garde from any other artistic approach of the 20th century is its being at first sight, and for the large public, not recognizably like an art object. This characteristic is true not only of the first Impressionists' works which were seen to have forms unfit for being works of art but true as well of abstracts art such as Malevich's minimalist work 'White on White'. Although most 20th century art, from Cubism to Action Painting fits the description of Avant-Garde, some examples such as the 'Bicycle Wheel' of Duchamp (1913) or the 'Three Flags' of Jasper Johns (1958) appear much more removed from a conventional understanding of art than would a painting by Kandinsky or Dali. In other words, the ready-made object assimilated into the art world, or established images from totally different quotidian contexts used in unexpected ways can be considered to more readily fit the description of the avant-garde.

For our day, the notion of the avant-garde is both problematic and controversial. It becomes even more so, when used in contexts such as the Third World, or non-Western cultures, where the necessary conditions for the appearance of the avant-garde do not exist and never did. On the other hand, many artistic terms, definitions or names have acquired new uses and applications today. Under hybrid and pluralist cultural conditions and influences, even the most definable contexts have become blurred and have lost their assumed homogeneity. Therefore, I believe that many concepts such as avant-garde, or aesthetic which are interpreted in varied ways, are and can be used for modified situations today.

The problem introduced in this paper has to do with objects, settings or situations that provoke aesthetic responses without being intended as works of art. In fact, they are reacted to as "artistic discoveries" found within the quotidian. These are objects I have been stumbling upon, since many years and which are amongst things that intrigue me most in Turkey. What are they? For some they may not be worthy of any attention, and are just there to be of some use. I see them as intriguing because, besides the fact that they are aimed at some purpose and function, they give one the impression that there was some aesthetic or strange taste that went into their making. I would like to call them ready-made avant-garde objects.

The general feeling today is that the avant-garde does not and cannot exist anymore in the true sense. Yet there can still be objects which disturb us, make us think about social and aesthetic values from new perspectives, objects which insist on calling on one's attention and insist on a metamorphosis of their identity. Their presence in the environment makes one reconsider concepts of creativity and art, and aesthetic value.

The ready-made as an art product, taking the place of the artist's creative work was, at the beginning of the century, one of the most conspicuous novelties in the art world. It introduced something deeply problematic, and incomprehensible into the art world, especially vis a vis the romantic notions of art of the 19th century. What we have here is different. It also confronts us with qualities that are problematic in terms of definition. Many of the aspects or qualities found in the objects or settings that I am referring to create enigmas; they can be unacceptable from a purely design or formal point of view, and they are also incomprehensible as to their *raison d'etre*.

With the 'traditional' avant-garde the artist's intention assumes priority. It is not what he does, his action and production that counts, but his thought, his evaluation and interpretation. Or, his ability to transform something ordinary into something precious and meaningful elevates the object to the position of art, as in the works of Duchamp.

With the objects I am talking about there are no artists, although there are people who have created them or created the situation in which they become noteworthy. There are, so to speak, in a way two creators of the object, because often these objects are not like the 'fountain' of Duchamp, which, before the artist touches them are just ordinary things. In the case I am talking about, a person already creates a strange object, but without an artistic intention. Then comes the beholder who transforms this into something worth experiencing as an artwork, through his or her gaze and appreciation. As mentioned, for this to occur the object has to have certain characteristics. What happens here (only when we accept the artistic value of the thing that is presented) is that interpretation, evaluating, discriminating and seeing become more important than 'doing': the difference between the artist and the beholder is eliminated. This is not a new. All through history, the technical and work aspect of art was always seen as inferior to its mental value.

However, there is also a contradiction. The ready-made thing that I call avant-garde, is made by someone, often not without some aesthetic concern. Yet this concern is not aimed at creating art, or creating something without practical value, but it is aimed at a practical end. It is there to attract attention, because it is meant to have some commercial value. Often it is the result of a bricolage that has some commercial intent.

Many of these examples are either things that take on an artistic aspect when looked at 'as if' they were art, or they are things that have been made by putting together objects or things in the absence of appropriate tools. Such things cannot be fabricated in industrialized places or contexts, or in areas where such necessities have been taken care of with appropriate technologies and productions.

In other words they are the products of the Third World, of the world of limited economic and technological means. When they are produced in places where there are the technologies and means, then they would become truly avant-garde, because they would not be intended as merchandise of a sort. On the other hand, they can only become artistic through the evaluation of a gaze that is familiar with the contemporary art world. However, if, as it is claimed, all marginality is eradicated in the First World and thus if the avant-garde is no longer possible because everything is consumed and commercialized, then whatever the original conditions of the First World that made the

avant-garde happen, are no longer necessary. In fact, it may be the impossibility of turning everything into a commodity that creates the primary condition for the avant-garde to emerge in the economically poor Third World.

It is also the displacement of the gaze that partly creates such objects. Besides, even if these objects appeal as 'art' or as 'some kind of avant-garde' only to some people, this is not a very different situation than how many objects made with the intention of being art, were viewed in the early 20th century.

These objects can be classified in three groups: there are those which can be found any place, like a group of chairs in light violet color, placed on a balcony, which are scattered in a way that implies a certain dialogue or meeting. However, it is exactly the reason of their being in a 'provincial', 'disorderly', or by Western standards non-sterile environment that they attract attention to their strange order. One can make this clearer by pointing to the fact that in the First World, which is the real context of the avant-garde, the sterile, orderly, mechanical environment does not allow any such 'misfits' or objects that are out of context. Those kinds of objects are created in most cases as works of art. Even when we find 'out of context' objects in the First World, their enigmatic effect is cancelled due to the sterile and orderly atmosphere. An object that disturbs the order is discarded without much delay.

Another group of objects, settings, or implementations that we find fascinating in Third World cultures are ways of doing things which belong to pre-industrialized epochs and which have a ritualistic aura about them for people who have forgotten these kinds of practices. One of the examples I find extraordinary is the picture I took of a group of workmen who have drawn on the ground, the plan of a house in white chalk, and who are in the process of digging trenches where the foundations walls will be built. The drawing on the ground, the digging of the trenches and the simple fact of starting to build a house by hand, stone by stone seems so much out of date, so manual that it looks as if there is an art practice going on. Because such examples are becoming rarer witnessing them becomes similar to witnessing an extraordinary, and for that reason avant-garde art performance.

The third are situations, practices and objects created in the lack of better mechanical equipment or technological facilities. These are intended as mercantile objects or settings designed to attract attention of possible clients. Often they prove to be novel ways of earning some money, such as lotteries or exhibits for better sales. Sometimes there are also situations, habits, or expressions which are peculiar to a culture and which, although they may be understood within their specific environments, seem strange and perplexing to someone from a different context. One can cite a strange lottery device that is made as an assemblage of strange dolls, small bull figures carved of wood, metallic shiny trimming, mirrors, etc. It is hauled through the streets of squatter settlements on a handcart. Another attractive situation I witnessed was a rope tied from a house to a tree across the road, on which bed linen of similar floral designs were hung. Underneath, children were playing and cars were passing. The trees had just been pruned and looked like strange sculpture and the linen with the pinkish and orange floral motifs made the

whole environment look like an art installation. Another example is a roadside sale setup of water melon or oranges, according to the season. Next to it are sold cheap paintings extravagantly framed showing views of mountains, riverbeds and quaint houses. Next to these one can sometimes even see exaggeratedly made-up women sitting and smoking, presumably there also for some kind of traffic. Another wonderful example I witnessed was a brand new red truck, parked on a small neighborhood street, in front of a modest house. It contained a cargo or huge bales made of scraps of colored textiles that looked beautiful. A year ago the Istanbul Biennial had exhibited a similar red truck loaded with colorful balloons. The association made this truck which looked out of context where it was, look even more artistic. Another example was a metal bed that had been discarded, again in a squatter settlement neighborhood. It was standing on a heap of hay. It was bizarre and beautiful. An example that is often seen in provincial settings are the decorated windows of simple grocery shops. Since the packaging is often of simply and colorfully printed cardboard or paper, a window profuse with such articles can look like a special artistic display. Some environmental or settlement solutions in these poor environments can also look like 'primitivist' art which was in the vogue during the heyday of 'arte-povera'. Scrap materials attached together to cover a leaking roof, or to create a balcony or a storage place, sometimes by chance can have the appeal of raw color contrasts, etc. such as in the work of Tapies or Alberto Burri.

What tempts us to call them avant-garde?

First of all because we can take any one of these and place them in a biennale or a gallery without any difficulty; they would be looked at as unexpected, new, interesting, provoking, etc. Within heterogeneous cultures, such as exist in the Third World, there are several status quo. Therefore, these objects easily change identity. This is also what creates their fascination. They are unlike all other things around them. They do not relate to the environment - they stand out. They are alien, unfamiliar, unexpected. They have two faces, a face that the public in that particular Third World environment accepts as practical, another face that they present to someone who comes with aesthetic intentions. Thus they are constantly alternating identity, they have a hidden meaning, ambiguity. They create discomfort. Often, like Jasper Johns' 'Flashlight' they have become integrated with a different material that has transformed them for us into something to be viewed, rather than something practical. One can sense that there was also an aesthetic concern in their making, even if for practical purposes.

These are truly 'uncanny' objects, even if they are produced for practical reasons. It is impossible to call them only 'art' or 'aesthetic' objects. Although the concept of the 'avant-garde' is problematic for the Third World, and even problematic for the present, unless we can find a new category of 'misfit' aesthetics for the Third World, the label 'ready-made' avant-garde seems to be most suited.