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Avant-Pop — Where Do We Go From Postmodernism?

"Now that Postmodernism is dead and we're in the process of finally burying it, something else is starting to take hold in the cultural imagination and I propose that we call this new phenomenon Avant-Pop." So begins "Avant-Pop Manifesto: Thread Baring Itself in Ten Quick Posts." The opening annunciation is not a new one. The question, however, concerns the label which is so bravely taking over. The name itself was appropriated for the literary mode by none other than Ronald Sukenick who in a truly postmodern, or shall we say, Avant-Pop manner plagiarized it from Lester Bowie's 1986 album title. In 1989, referring to Mark Leyner's sudden popularity, Sukenick attributed the latter to the "avant-pop sensibility" present in the author's works. However rash the supposition about Avant-Pop's *coup de etat* may be, the phenomenon certainly cannot be dismissed as a temporary literary fad created by authors desperately seeking attention. Avant-Pop's credibility is constituted by two anthologies (one of them published by Penguin), several collections of essays, an independent press paperback series, and numerous works by a host of new writers. The names which appear most often in the context of the new literary phenomenon include Mark Amerika, Ronald Sukenick, Mark Leyner, Kathy Acker, Derek Pell, Ricardo Cruz, John Shirley, David Blair, Marc Laidlaw, Harold Jaffe and many others. Apart from these, the movement likes to look back in search of its roots and as all radical literary strains credits a number of unquestionably avant-garde authors with being co-creators of its aesthetics, mentioning as diverse fictioners as Robert Coover, Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, William Vollman, Raymond Federman, and William Gibson.

Calling Avant-Pop a movement is actually not very fortunate since both Avant-Pop's spokesman, Mark America, and its chief theorist Larry

McCaffery, insist that AP is not a literary movement proper.[1] According to them, the denomination implies top-down methods of organization and gathering of a group of like-minded individuals who share literary, political, social or generally artistic views. In contrast, McCaffery maintains that Avant-Pop is "an aesthetic sensibility which has recently emerged out of a 'swarm system' of artists who have no leader, no program, no sense of group affiliation."[2] He then adds that this aesthetics is "a set of interrelated thematic concerns, formal impulses, and notions about the composition process."[3] Such a set is specifically designed to counter "the ideologies of consumption and hyperconsumption"[4] which have transformed the contemporary society into the Debordian society of spectacle by means of the "mind-numbing flood of images, values, slogans, [and] archetypes that have inundated peoples' lives and imaginations during the prodigious rise of the Media (or Culture) Industry during the past 40 years."[5] The stress on decenteredness and heterogeneity certainly reminds one of Postmodernism on whose grave Avant-Pop writers envision themselves to be dancing, but upon closer inspection the non-movement shows definite departures from the hateful "p" word.

As the name itself implies, Avant-Pop is a point of interaction between avantgarde and pop culture. Its practitioners continue the tradition of transgressive, radical and visionary literature of the late 19th and early 20th century as well as the golden age of experimental postmodernism of the 1960's. In that respect Avant-Pop follows the paths cleared by Arthur Rimbaud, the Dadaists and Surrealists, Walter Benjamin, the French Situationists, punks, cyberpunks and many other literary and cultural

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[1] Larry Mccaffery, „Reconfiguring the Logic of Hyperconsumer Capitalism," *American Book Review* 17,   6 (1996): 12.

[2] McCaffery, „Reconfiguring the Logic," 12.

[3] McCaffery, „Reconfiguring the Logic," 12.

[4] Larry McCaffery, „13 Introductory Ways of Looking at a Post-Postmodernist Aesthetic Phenomenon Called 'Avant-Pop'," *In Memoriam to Postmodernism: Essays on the Avant-Pop*, ed. Mark Amerika, Lance Olsen (San Diego, 1996): 76.

[5] McCaffery, „13 Introductory Ways," 77.

transgressors. With all of them AP shares the belief in radical art and necessity of its existence in every community. AP writers accept the notion that formal and frequently experimental strategies can and should be used in order to "open up new pathways less clogged with the 'sludge' of conventions and more capable of taking thoughts and perceptions to [new] areas."[6] Accordingly, cut-up, collage, appropriation, graphic arrangement of text on a page, time and space jumps, surreal and jarring language, non-linear, multiple and hypertextual plots, multiplicity of narrative voices (heteroglossia) as well as interfusion and confusion of discourses are Avant-Pop's favorite techniques for ensuring the cognitive estrangement of the reader, thus opening his eyes to reality beyond the media. Simultaneously, however, Avant-Pop artists claim to be well aware of the fact that in the era of hyperconsumer capitalism 'rebellion' and 'fringe' have became yet another commodity available to the general public in the form of "simulated, replicable images"[7].

On the other hand, in their fictions Avant-Pop writers embrace a huge domain of contemporary pop culture, something traditional literary subversors would never venture to do. This essential difference is due to the realization of the extent to which popular culture influences our lives and results from a completely new mode of dependence between aesthetic production and mass culture: i.e. "a feedback loop of information, stylistic tendencies, narrative archetypes, and character representations that are mutually supportive."[8] The revised relationship between the two domains produces texts which on the one hand contain a number of very formal and experimental literary devices and on the other draw their thematic inspiration from such diverse sources as underground industrial and punk music, B-class horror and crime films, MTV, science-fiction subculture, postmodern theoretical writings and fiction, comics, porn movies, cyberpunk literature, urban street subcultures, paperback detective stories, and mass media.

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[6] McCaffery, „Reconfiguring the Logic," 13.

[7] McCaffery, „Reconfiguring the Logic," 13.

[8] McCaffery, „13 Introductory Ways of Looking," 78.

Even though AP writings are so suffused with the above that their fictional realities appear to be pop realities sublime, the stress is put on the awareness of their presence in people's lives: "AP is literally concerned with how to "go with the flow," but in such a way that you have some control over where you're heading."[9] It is also this impulse that distinguishes Avant-Pop from other forms of art which make use of the same elements, such as MTV or the 'alternative' music scene. Avant-Pop practitioners are always on the alert against dangers of going too far into one of the explored territories. In their immersion in pop culture they still retain the awareness of the other half of their label and do not "lose sight of their creative directives."[10] On the other hand, "Avant-Pop artists themselves acquired immunity from the Terminal Death dysfunctionalism of a Pop Culture gone awry and are now ready to offer their own weirdly concocted elixirs to cure us from this dreadful disease,"[11] information overload.

This last self-proclaimed task seems to call for a new type of a writer. According to Amerika, "creating a work of art will depend more and more on the ability of the artists to select, organize and present the bits of raw data we have at our disposal."[12] In that respect AP not only constitutes a grand departure from the postmodern concept of the writer but also ties back directly to his function as the guide and the leader known from the modernist program. Interestingly enough, the alleged death of originality makes the writer lead the way not towards distant and ambitious goals but rather steer through a proliferation of Duchampian readymades and commodities of contemporary culture.

Another of Avant-Pop's main tenets is a shared recognition of the fact that "the age of the composer as an autonomous individual has just about

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[9] McCaffery, "Reconfiguring the Logic," 13.

[10] Mark Amerika, "Avant-Pop Manifesto: 'Thread Baring Itself In Ten Quick Posts," point 3 - document available through Internet Gopher at marketplace.com.

[11] Amerika, "Avant-Pop Manifesto."

[12] Amerika, "Avant-Pop Manifesto," point 8.

come to an end."[13] This awareness has several practical consequences. Firstly, it marks the reliance on "networking", collaboration, and cooperation between various writers and artists. Creative alliances thus formed are greatly facilitated by the rapid development of communication technologies in the 1990s, of which Internet appears to be the most important. The Avant-Pop manifesto openly states that "AP artists welcome the new Electronic Age with open arms" and that because of this warm greeting "the future of writing will feature more multi-media collaborative authoring that will make itself available to hundreds if not thousands of potential associates around the world."[14] So far such cooperations have mostly resulted in mutual book reviews and critical essays which AP writers and theorists write for each other. Nevertheless, this collectivity has also found its way into the perception of the process of reading and the concept of the reader. While one of the postmodern principles was: "I, whoever that is, will put together these bits of data and form a text while you, whoever that is, will produce your own meaning based off what you bring to the Text," Avant-Pop has reformulated the statement into: "I, whoever that is, am always interacting with data created by the Collective You, whoever that is, and by interacting with and supplementing the Collective You, will find meaning."[15]

Secondly, appropriation, sampling or simply literary plagiarism become elevated to the position of an artistic strategy in Avant-Pop. As much as all of these devices have been long used and abused by postmodern writers, it is only Avant-Pop that has made them frontpieces of its aesthetics. Kathy Acker's appropriation of Gibson's "Neuromancer," Derek Pell's piracy of Edmund White and Marquis de Sade, or Raymond Federman's endless appropriations are but the most famous examples of the above practices. Their echoes can be even discernible in some critical writings about AP, whose major example can be Takayuki Tatsumi's

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[13] John Zorn, "John Zorn on His Music," the liner notes to the "Spillane" album.

[14] Mark America, "Avant-Pop Manifesto," point 5.

[15] Mark America, "Hypertextual Consciousness, Virtual Reality, and the Avant-Pop," American Book Review 18, 1 (1996): 10.

"Waiting for Godzilla," McCaffery's rendition of the title of his own anthology - "Storming the Floating World of Postmodern Hyperreality,"[16] as well as one of Jameson's seminal essays - "Reconfiguring the Logic of Hyperconsumer Capitalism." In the context of the whole non-movement the titular reconfiguration of the latter article encompasses not only the main dogmatic tenets of late capitalism, but also cultural references, storylines, character types, plots and motifs taken from literature, advertising, film, television and rock music. Admittedly, most of these elements were also plagiarized in the past by postmodern writers, but the one difference between them and Avant-Popsters is that while the former appropriated them for the purpose of pastiche, the latter do it in recognition of the contemporary mediascape and "the role of the media in constructing people's lives and identities."[17]

Finally, and that is also the logical consequence of the disappearance of a single author, AP writers never acknowledge their borrowings and scrupulously avoid quotation marks considering used materials as parts of a large repository of thought and text without a single owner, which makes such practices even more outrageous and provocative for the literary establishment and mainstream. In Amerika's words "Avant-Pop artists wear each other's experiential data like waves of chaotic energy colliding and mixing in the textual blood"[18] while McCaffery refers to them as "a highly trained team of pop-cultural terrorists."[19]

Albeit since the very beginning Avant-Pop has distanced itself from Postmodernism which the writers claim to be in the process of burying, quite appropriately their program carries all the indistinctiveness and lack of clear-cut boundaries that characterized the predecessor. Nor can one help

[16] As much as the 1991 *Storming the Reality Studio* was a grand celebration of cyberpunk and postmodern fiction, in the 1996 "Storming the Floating World of Postmodern Hyperreality" McCaffery rallies in support of newly-arrived Avant-Pop literature.

[17] McCaffery, „Reconfiguring the Logic," 12.

[18] Amerika, „Avant-Pop Manifesto," point 4.

[19] Larry McCaffery, „Storming the Floating World of Postmodern Hyperreality," *American Book Review* 16, 1 (1994): 5.

noticing that a number of features of the new aesthetics originated in Postmodernism. The difference definitely lies in the approach to the material, especially when compared to 'high postmodernism' as represented by Pynchon, Gaddis or Barth. Still, some of the names that appear among Avant-Pop's practitioners and inspirations have been longed hailed as postmodern writers and critics - something that puts in question the funeral Avant-Popsters claim to be conducting.

In consideration of the above it has been often suggested that Avant-Pop should be viewed not as a brand new, past-severing phenomenon, but as a logical development of Postmodernism. The apparent parallel to the relationship between Postmodernism and Avant-Pop can be discerned in the one between Modernism and Postmodernism, where the transition is viewed in terms of a change in the dominant rather than as a subversive and ground-breaking revolution. With its lofty and catchy manifestos and critiques, explosive mixture of experiment and mass culture, as well as the belief in the power of electronic media and mutual interaction of free-thinking intellectuals, Avant-Pop may seem naive. As it solidifies and matures, it may as well stiffen and by its own logic become yet another hyperconsumer commodity finally giving way to yet another cultural phenomenon.