

Endings and Continuities: Avant-Garde and Meaning-Making

Sanja Bojanić

University of Rijeka, Academy of Applied Arts, Ulica Slavka Krautzeka 83, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4009-4422>
sanja.bojanic@uniri.hr

This article thematizes avant-garde's meaning-making and temporal disruption, emphasizing their role in reconfiguring cultural narratives. Case studies include UbuWeb, Kenneth Goldsmith's radical digital archive, democratizing access to avant-garde works, and Jean-Luc Godard's Two or Three Things I Know About Her, a cinematic intervention destabilizing meaning through fragmented narratives. The analysis incorporates Mark Rothko's artistic formula, which underscores the tragic, sensual, and ephemeral dimensions of meaning-making, and Antonin Artaud's assertion of madness as a legitimate worldview challenging societal norms. By engaging with the materiality of media, from text and images to virtual and AI realities, the paper examines how avant-garde practices end and continue, fostering new modalities of perception and creation. Ultimately, it argues for archives and art as active agents of transformation.

Keywords: contemporary art / avant-garde / cultural narrative / meaning-making / Rothko, Mark / Goldsmith, Kenneth / *UbuWeb* / Godard, Jean-Luc

“Why all these signs around us that make me
doubt language and submerge me in meanings ...”

Jean-Luc Godard



Figure 1: Jean-Luc Godard, Direction and Counter-direction.

Meaning and its contradictions

Temporality is central to avant-garde movements, driving their ability to disrupt and transform. The avant-garde's focus on time—rejecting the past, emphasizing urgency in the present, and envisioning the future—creates a dynamic force for cultural and societal change. This argument supports Henri de Saint-Simon's assertion, where he first uses the term avant-garde: "It is we, artists, who will serve you as an avant-garde: the power of the arts is indeed the most immediate and the fastest" (Saint-Simon 345), establishing the foundation for the avant-garde's temporal action. Actually, Saint-Simon's emphasis on the immediacy and fastest power of the arts encapsulates the avant-garde's method: speed is not merely a tactic but a principle of operation. Rapidity ensures that the avant-garde does not dwell on prolonged critique but acts decisively to maximize impact and operates on two levels. First is the speed of creation, where traditional processes are bypassed in favor of immediacy of engagement. Second is the speed of reception, where shock, provocation, and contiguity disrupt audience expectations, prompting a rapid re-evaluation of norms. The avant-garde does not merely move swiftly; it redefines the experience of time itself. It uses military terminology solely to represent the advancement of the sudden action. Collapsing the past, present, and future into singular gestures thus challenges linearity and compels society to confront temporality as a construct. Haste in the avant-garde transcends mere physical speed; it operates conceptually, embedding immediacy within its actions' symbolic and intellectual gestures. The power of vanguard acts lies in their capacity to create instant ruptures in thought, perception, and action, leveraging temporal disruption to reimagine reality. These acts, indeed, embody the fast and the transformative—they are swift, decisive catalysts for change.

This text does not engage in the polarized debate over whether contemporary art primarily seeks to appease audiences through commercial appeal or if it functions as an exclusive, refined pursuit meant for a select few. Such a division, while prevalent, does not encapsulate the complexities of avant-garde meaning-making, which operates beyond mere marketability or elite legitimacy. Instead, I focus on the temporalities of the avant-garde and how its disruptions and continuities shape the conditions of meaning. The avant-garde is fundamentally a movement through time—rejecting historical fixity, confronting the present urgently, and envisioning futures that may never materialize. This dynamic is central to its interventions, ensuring that it exists not

merely as an aesthetic category but as an active force within cultural discourse. Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979) remains essential for understanding the avant-garde's role within cultural narratives. His critique of grand narratives as outdated and his argument that modernity's universal frameworks have been supplanted by fragmented, localized narratives were key in expressing a postmodern condition that resists singular meaning. Yet, over time, what was once seen as a liberation from overarching systems has given way to a renewed desire for structure.

In contrast to Lyotard's moment, contemporary discourse is witnessing the resurgence of grand narratives, manifesting in political, technological, and artistic realms. Whether through reactionary ideologies, AI-driven knowledge systems, or renewed theoretical totalities, the cultural landscape suggests that fragmentation alone is no longer a sufficient paradigm. The avant-garde, which once thrived on disrupting fixed meanings, now operates in an era where meaning is being actively reconstructed on a grand scale. And, despite this shift, what remains "unchanged" is the avant-garde's paradoxical position: it critiques exclusion while often perpetuating it. Its interventions, though radical in form, remain restricted to a narrow circle—a self-contained sphere where innovation and transgression are primarily self-referential. This insularity does not diminish its impact but reveals an inherent tension: the avant-garde exists both as an engine of disruption and an exclusive domain of discourse. Its gestures, whether rooted in the sexual, the narcissistic, or the grotesque, frequently resemble the surreal excesses of Hieronymus Bosch's earthly pleasures—a universe of indulgence that serves its own logic. This is not a flaw but a defining feature of avant-garde practice: its "selfishness" ensures its resistance to mass assimilation while simultaneously rendering it detached from broader cultural participation. The avant-garde is caught in its contradiction—both as a force of radical meaning-making and an enclave of selective intervention.

Today, one of the most significant challenges is copyright infringement, not only daring legal contexts of artistic works but explicitly addressing the complexity of new (and already old) media in the era of AI. Furthermore, I argue that selfishness is essential to any avant-garde, which must resist easy comprehension, acceptance, or comfort. By its very nature, the avant-garde also confronts the normative structures of meaning-making, presenting itself as an unbearable rupture in established cultural and artistic codes. This disruption can be compared to an inverted interpretation of Humpty Dumpty in *Alice*

in Wonderland: rather than controlling meaning through arbitrary authority, the avant-garde fragments meaning, resists resolution, and paradoxically generates meaning-making. It confronts the medium's materiality—whether text, image, sound, moving pictures, virtual reality, or AI reality—exposing their constructed nature and the tensions between them. By engaging these layers and their intersections, the avant-garde does not simply reinterpret meaning but shifts it entirely, subverting our understanding of creation and perception. Let us forget, Marshall McLuhan's *Laws of Media* (1988) highlights how media do not simply transmit content but actively shape perception, altering how meaning is constructed and experienced. His concept of the "medium as the message" remains fundamental when considering how avant-garde practices engage with evolving technological landscapes. In the digital era, this perspective finds renewed relevance as media increasingly "dictate modes of thought, engagement, and creative production," blurring boundaries between form and content. Building upon this, Wendy Chun's *Updating to Remain the Same* (2016) explores how digital media's materiality and temporality not only shape identity but also create habitual structures, embedding users into repetitive cycles of engagement. Chun's work critically examines how digital systems encode behavior, conditioning perception, and reinforcing patterns that dictate meaning-making within algorithmic environments. Expanding this discussion, Lev Manovich's *The Language of New Media* (2001) investigates how new media challenge modernist fragmentation, revealing the avant-garde's role in reconfiguring meaning through computational, networked, and database-driven forms. His analysis of new media aesthetics situates avant-garde strategies within digital infrastructures, where meaning is no longer constructed through singular artistic ruptures but through fluid, dynamic recombinations, disrupting and reshaping perception in an era of mediated reality.

Endings and continuities directly related to the avant-garde, which are the focus of this paper, help to create meaning in the specific context of new media. The still image from Jean-Luc Godard's film *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967) illustrates through which figures they emerge. What did Godard do, and what was the nature of his intervention in the meaning-making processes?

Before answering this question, there are two dots or queries that should be connected:

1. One is about making meaning out of language, referencing Jean-Luc Godard's intervention to return to reality (or conquer reality) and matching the medium's materiality to reality.

2. The other is in digital archives. My case study is *UbuWeb*, founded in 1996 by poet and conceptual artist Kenneth Goldsmith, as a non-commercial platform that provides otherwise difficult-to-find resources. Its content spans various artistic movements, focusing on twentieth-century avant-garde traditions and the contemporary experimental scene, mainly in the Western world. In 2024, *UbuWeb* ceased to accept new work and is available only for browsing.

Godard, Goldsmith and ... Rothko

Both Godard and Goldsmith should serve as guiding points for reclaiming the realm of the imaginary and revitalizing the meaning-making process that Mark Rothko encapsulates in his artistic formula. That said, let us proceed thoughtfully, one step at a time.

1.

Godard and the concept of “meaning out of language,” alongside the return to reality, represent the first step toward exploring the potential of Goldsmith’s “flipped archives”¹ to aid in this restoration. In his cinematic leap into the twenty-second century, *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* serves as both a film essay and an experimental machine, colliding the meanings of words and objects with overwhelming speed. The director’s knack for weaving a complex web of metaphors,

¹ Kenneth Goldsmith’s “flipped archives” concept refers to a radical archiving approach that subverts traditional institutional models. It prioritizes accessibility, subjectivity, and disruption over conventional preservation and categorization. Unlike official archives that follow strict curatorial and legal frameworks, flipped archives challenge ownership, intellectual property, and established notions of artistic legitimacy. In *Duchamp Is My Lawyer* (2020), Goldsmith articulates how these archives flip expectations by resisting hierarchy, rejecting institutional oversight, and embracing incompleteness and bias. Key characteristics of flipped archives include:

1. Unrestricted Access: They operate outside institutional control, making content widely available without monetization.

2. Subjective Curation: Archival choices are based on personal or collective artistic relevance rather than academic or commercial standards.

3. Legal and Ethical Ambiguity: They challenge traditional copyright frameworks, existing in a gray zone of cultural dissemination.

4. Temporal Disruption: They resist the finality of traditional archiving, keeping content in flux.

paradoxes, and digressions positions Godard to confront the dominance of senselessness. His intervention goes beyond mere critique; it acts as an active disruption, illustrating how art can function as an experience-inducing medium rather than a simple tool for passive consumption. The shattering of meaning in daily life stems from the industrialization of the image, and the tools we use to interpret our experiences—words, signs, and symbols—often fall short, serving as barriers instead of bridges to authentic lived reality. Through his fragmented style, Godard offers endings and continuities that support a continuous process of questioning. At the film's core is the story of a Parisian housewife who turns to prostitution to provide for her family (depicting socio-economic reality). However, this narrative is secondary to Godard's broader concerns with consumer-driven life and the commodification of our experiences. The film's fractured structure reflects industrialized images and their alienation of individuals from reality. The director's juxtaposition, voiceover, and abrupt editing compel viewers to actively engage with the material, challenging passive viewing habits and prompting reflection on constructing meaning. His redefinition of cinematic language emerges from the camera and editing process, with the final cut as his grammar. For Godard, editing transcends mere technicality; it becomes a creative act that generates meaning through the intentional arrangement and interplay of images, motion pictures, and sounds. In his hands, the cut transforms into a gesture, a moment of sense and countersense that demands interpretation. These interruptions unveil to the viewer the instability of meaning and the ideological frameworks supporting visual and verbal communication. They are revelatory.

2.

For those unfamiliar with *UbuWeb*, this Web platform hosts a vast collection of avant-garde materials, including films, poetry, visual art, and audio recordings from movements such as Dada, Fluxus, Surrealism, and other radical art forms throughout the twentieth century. It features artists like John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, William S. Burroughs, Yoko Ono, Vito Acconci, and many others. One of its defining aspects is its open-access model. All materials are free, based on the philosophy that these seminal cultural works should be accessible to the public without commercial or institutional barriers. The archive presents content in various formats, including experimental films,

video art, and other moving-image media. It highlights works by Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Derek Jarman. Additionally, it contains avant-garde sound art, experimental music, spoken word, and poetry performances by La Monte Young and Amiri Baraka. There are also experimental literary works, manifestos, and poetry from Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, and Allen Ginsberg. *UbuWeb* has been praised for democratizing access to avant-garde materials through open-source policies. However, its open-access nature has raised copyright questions, as some materials may be shared without formal permission. This is not unique to *UbuWeb*, as piracy practices are closely linked to nearly any avant-garde movement that establishes a new paradigm. Goldsmith has described *UbuWeb* as operating in a grey area, emphasizing the site's cultural mission over strict legal frameworks. To highlight selfishness, as I mentioned earlier, *UbuWeb* is regarded as a living continuation of avant-garde principles, both in its distribution methods and its radical stance on intellectual property and institutional critique. Goldsmith underscored *UbuWeb*'s role in repurposing media to resonate with the avant-garde's ethos of challenging ownership and conventional art structures.

Although *UbuWeb* is publicly accessible, the public has no say about what goes or doesn't go on the site. We don't take unsolicited submissions; we post work erratically and sporadically, never according to a schedule. And the works that we choose are there because we want them to be there, not because they fulfill any curriculums, quotas, or canons. While we want to expose people to wonderful and underappreciated works of art (and, of course, provide new perspectives on tired notions of the avant-garde), everything on the site is there primarily because it's meaningful to us, for reasons we don't feel the need to explain. And since we don't take any money, we don't have to answer to anybody regarding the content we host on the site. Is that approach biased? Yes. Is it incomplete? Yes. Is it imperfect? Yes. Is it the way we want to do it? Yes. All the way. (Goldsmith 31)

Godard's still from the film and Goldsmith's quote stare impatiently and cheekily at the fragmentation of certain aspects of reality that they believe should be preserved. The approach of *UbuWeb*, as articulated above, resonates strongly with Godard's philosophy and methodology in filmmaking. Both prioritize autonomy, subjectivity, and a deliberate resistance to external pressures or conventions. *UbuWeb*'s curatorial stance—where selections are driven by personal meaning rather than adherence to institutional frameworks or societal expectations—mirrors Godard's defiance of traditional cinematic norms and his

commitment to creating art that reflects his vision rather than catering to audience expectations or market demands. Just as *UbuWeb* rejects the notion of fulfilling curriculums, quotas, or canons, Godard refuses to adhere to narrative coherence, mainstream aesthetics, or commercial viability. Both operate in spaces that are inherently biased, incomplete, and imperfect, yet this very subjectivity becomes a strength. Godard and *UbuWeb* share an ethos of embracing imperfection and incompleteness. This vanguard resistance to hegemonic structures of meaning is also inscribed in their endings and continuities. They are both ready to embrace not only bare disruption. Still, I am uncertain whether nihilism (see Brown)—the era we find ourselves in nowadays, in which *UbuWeb* is no longer active specifically because it can't accept or store new material—can ignite everything given and flip it into an avalanche that restores meaning.

Should we restore that sense (direction) of meaning? Should it follow a countersense or its contradiction? In these flipped archives, those archived materials open the gates, allowing meaning—any sense—to enter. So, what tools are nowadays used to restore meaning? Language, Motion Picture, Image, Sound, AI and LLMs, Deepfake, Open Cloud, what else? Presence or Madness? Whose concept of reality is absolutely legitimate? Maybe Antonin Artaud's assertion that "all individual acts are anti-social" resonates deeply with the avant-garde's temporalities and radical approach to meaning-making. By defending the legitimacy of perspectives deemed mad, Artaud challenged dominant narratives in his own way:

All individual acts are anti-social. Mad people, above all, are individual victims of social dictatorship. In the name of individuality, which specifically belongs to humans, we demand the liberation of these people convicted of sensibility. For we tell you, no laws are powerful enough to lock up all humans who think and act. Without stressing the perfectly inspired nature of the manifestations of certain mad persons, in so far as we are capable of appreciating them, we simply affirm that their concept of reality is absolutely legitimate, as are all the acts resulting from it. (Artaud 32)

Ultimately, Artaud's call for the liberation of those marginalized for their sensibility strongly resonates with Godard's and *UbuWeb*'s rejection of normative structures. These practices remind us that meaning is not fixed but is constantly destabilized and reshaped, a process at the heart of the avant-garde's enduring legacy. For the sake of another premise reflecting on the meaning out of language, here is one anecdote. On May 3, 2024, I heard Julia Kristeva on France

Culture radio commenting somewhat retroactively: “I believe the Western world and its sovereignty should be preserved by safeguarding the book.” By “the book,” Kristeva refers to the analytical tools of theory inherited from the structuralist and post-structuralist periods, particularly from the French *Tel Quel* avant-garde, which, above all, valued *Lettres* (the joy of reading and writing, the thrill of theory or so-called French Theory, very much embedded in the language—exactly where Godard did not find reality). Kristeva critiques the Global South and the colonial forces of the Global South that confine *Tel Quel* avant-garde within the concept that Dick Higgins, in his manner, labelled as masculine: “avant-garde ... as advance troops coming before the main body, white and homogeneous” (qtd. in Goldsmith 10). Kristeva remains entrenched in the twentieth century. As much as the joy of *Lettres* can be cathartic, it always harbors masculinity, the illusion of purity and sincerity. In fact, her 2024 reflection on preserving the book provides a counterpoint to the very avant-garde ethos, illustrating an attachment to language as the locus of meaning. A homogeneity that Godard and *UbuWeb* disrupt by embracing imperfection, fragmentation, and plurality actually asserts that reality lies beyond the constructs of language, thus aligning with Artaud’s anti-social claims. Together, Artaud, Godard, Goldsmith, and Rothko challenge Kristeva’s retrospective valorization of theoretical purity, advocating instead for an avant-garde practice that repositions it as a necessary force for cultural and intellectual renewal in an increasingly fractured world. Naivety and purity go hand in hand with ignorance of the end, sensuality, tension, irony, and *Tyche*. These are Rothko’s words in his 1958 address to Pratt students, which are presented in Figure 2, a facsimile of his notes:

- The recipe of a work of art—its ingredients—how to make it—the formula.
1. There must be a clear preoccupation with death—intimations of mortality... Tragic art, romantic art, etc. deals with the knowledge of death.
 2. Sensuality. Our basis of being concrete about the world. It is a lustful relationship to things that exist.
 3. Tension. Either conflict or curbed desire.
 4. Irony. This is a modern ingredient—the self-effacement and examination by which a man for an instant can go on to something else.
 5. Wit and play... For the human element.
 6. The ephemeral and chance... For the human element.
 7. Hope. 10% to make the tragic concept more endurable.

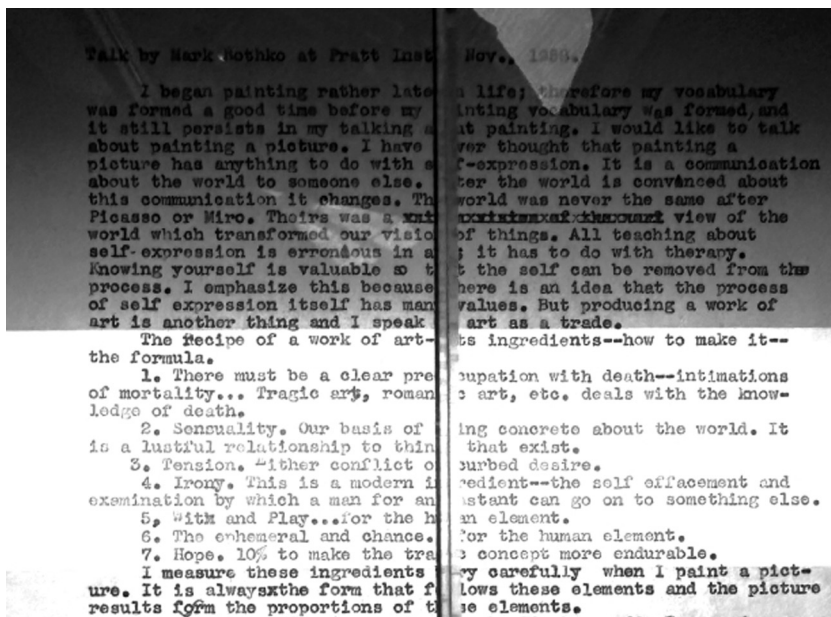


Figure 2: Mark Rothko, Pratt Lecture 1958, Art Formula (facsimile).

“There is more power in telling little than in telling all,” Rothko commented on developing his art formula above. This recipe was more of a pick of an iceberg, adequate for a particular period of Rothko’s belonging to his times when it was necessary to recover from pre- and during-war nihilism after Auschwitz, Nagasaki, and Hiroshima, after decolonial liberation wars and destructions. And what could be read here is that besides a formula for creating art, there is another one for being involved in avant-garde art as a *modus vivendi*. This is why I bring Rothko: through parallel development of meaning in creating art, archives are also a piece of creation or a creative process. As an act of amassing and gathering various pieces in *UbuWeb* through the backdoor, avant-garde archives were not only on the verge of becoming just another form of hoarding. What makes a difference is the process of providing meaning to this specific form of collecting. You take Marcel Duchamp as your lawyer in the context of Goldsmith’s flipped archives and engage with Duchamp’s radical redefinition of authorship, artistic legitimacy, and institutional critique, or you adhere to conventional legal and curatorial structures, prioritizing intellectual property rights and institutional control over cultural material. In this sense, an

archive—whatever is archived—is infused with the knowledge of its end, sensuality, tension, irony, and the fleeting chance of never being utilized for future creations. Considering an interactive relationship, it became clear that this interactivity should forge connections between ideas and actions, words and images, sounds and visuals, interiors and exteriors, all within this form of the *outré-tombe*, present in the past and poised to deactivate meaning in the future. Rothko and Godard, with their understanding of the ending, belong together as much as *UbuWeb*, which is not active but there, with knowledge of the end, sexuality, narcissism, sensuality, tension, and irony. With his art formula, Rothko is, therefore, here to save us from the dissolution of meaning, too. Because, between image and image, there are two regimes: fear of the image and the image of fear, which are the same conceptions of power founded on appropriating the reality and the sensible.

Let us situate this very moment and fragmented atrocities that any vanguard cannot reason. Palestine: fear of the image. Palestine: the image of fear.

What should bring us to our senses? Whose sensibility? Whose loses? This governance by images organizes the visible, which provokes adherence through the submission of the gaze. There is an eruption of distorted meaning. With this daily and constantly renewed cult of visibilities, we are addicted to the visible for eyes that have become blind to the invisible.

Invisible to the bustling crowds at the main entrance on Fifty-Third Street, it's desolate except for the occasional noisy school group or quiet academic researcher entering and exiting. There're no admission fees or snaking queues, only a lonely intern sitting at a desk. If you sign in and take the elevator to the top floor, you'll find the MoMA Library. It was there in the late 1970s that a librarian named Clive Phillpot created a policy unlike any other in the history of the museum. Without asking permission, he decreed that anybody could mail anything to the MoMA Library, and it would be accepted and become part of the official collection. There was no limit to what could be sent, nor were there specifications of size, medium, or provenance. No judgments were made about quality either. The artist could be world famous or completely unknown—it made no difference. (Goldsmith 1)

The key lies in rising above conformity. Questioning something does not mean that you consider everything that came before obsolete. Nothing is obsolete.

Even with the world in an emergency state, then, where we may want every scholarly hand on deck, it is essential to have a moat between academic and political life. This moat is vital to protecting reflection, imagination, and accountability in knowledge production and dissemination. It is essential to protecting an understanding and practice of facticity against indifference to it generated by nihilism but faithful to the complexity of knowledge formation. (Brown 99)

It also lies in the fragility of all seven elements Rothko mentions, particularly the seventh one, which should be a first-aid cure against nihilism. The meaning is fragile and prone to damage by handling. Various components in its making and variable layers may react and age differently. They end and continue acting and reacting differently. None of the mentioned engaged avant-gardists chose not to polish their discourses, which would have destroyed the subtle effects of their endings and continuities in meaning-making processes.

Conclusion

In the guise of conclusion, the avant-garde, as demonstrated by Godard, Rothko, *UbuWeb*, and Artaud, thrives on the deliberate act of destabilizing meaning to reveal deeper layers of sensibility and perception. Fragmented cinematic grammar resists the industrialization of images, inviting audiences to question the visible and engage with the ruptures between words and objects. Painter's formula for art similarly emphasizes tension, sensuality, and irony as tools to counter the nihilism of his time. At the same time, *UbuWeb* exemplifies a flipped archive where meaning emerges from subjective, imperfect curation. The assertion that "all individual acts are anti-social" underscores the avant-garde's rejection of imposed norms, highlighting the legitimacy of fragmented and "mad" perspectives. These examples show how art and archives can transform into active agents of meaning-making by embracing imperfection, temporality, and discontinuity. This framework contrasts with the call for safeguarding the book as a locus of theoretical purity, exposing the limitations of fixed intellectual traditions. Instead, the avant-garde is an evolving practice that bridges ideas, media, and sensibilities. Disrupting hegemonic structures of perception not only resists conformity but also enables new forms of understanding. The enduring relevance of the avant-garde lies between endings and continuities: a radical and essential act of cultural reimagination.

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Konci in kontinuitete: avantgarda in oblikovanje pomena

Ključne besede: sodobna umetnost / avantgarda / kulturni narativ / oblikovanje pomena / Rothko, Mark / Goldsmith, Kenneth / *UbuWeb* / Godard, Jean-Luc

Članek tematizira oblikovanje pomena in časovne prekinitve v avantgardi, pri čemer poudarja vlogo teh procesov pri preoblikovanju kulturnih narativov. Študije primerov vključujejo *UbuWeb*, radikalni digitalni arhiv Kennetha Goldsmitha, ki demokratizira dostop do avantgardnih del, ter film *Dve ali tri stvari, ki jih vem o njej* Jeana-Luca Godarda, kinematografsko intervencijo, ki destabilizira pomen s fragmentiranimi narativi. Analiza vključuje umetniško formulo Marka Rothka, ki poudarja tragične, čutne in efemerne dimenzije ustvarjanja pomena, ter Antonina Artauda in njegovo uveljavljanje norosti kot legitimnega pogleda na svet, ki izziva družbene norme.

Z raziskovanjem materialnosti medijev – od besedil in podob do virtualnih resničnosti in resničnosti umetne inteligence – članek preučuje, kako se avantgardne prakse končujejo in nadaljujejo ter omogočajo nove modalitete percepcije in ustvarjanja. Prispevek zagovarja arhive in umetnost kot aktivne agense za transformacijo.

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