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Avant-Garde and Politics: The Case of the New Student Society in Copenhagen (1922-24)

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Pressen. Kobenhaven. Les communistes très
intensif – moins les artists.
(*Zenit* IV, 26-33, Zagreb, October 1924)

A crucial problem in recent scholarship on the so called “historical” avant-gardes from the first decades of the 20th century (Futurism, Dadaism, Constructivism etc.) is how to account for the political radicalism and utopianism inherent to the avant-garde project. In his *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Peter Bürger made an influential contribution to this discussion by defining the critical mission of the “historical” avant-gardes as a will to “reintegrate art into the practice of life” (1974: 29). In recent research the activist pathos of Bürger’s formula has been subject to criticism, and most contemporary scholars seem to look for new models for approaching the history of the early avant-gardes – either by simply addressing the avant-garde rupture in purely aesthetic terms (as artistic innovations or configurations of styles etc.) or by emphasizing the pivotal role of philosophical ideas (vitalism or occultist thought) for the emergence of the avant-garde aesthetics (cf. Hjartarson). Another important model for describing the history of the avant-garde has been that of the *network*, stressing the organizational dimension and social cohesion of the interwar European avant-gardes as a multiple unity of artist groups and individuals connected to each other by means of personal contacts, travelling exhibitions and little magazines (cf. den Berg 2005). Yet, the network theory clearly does not evade the problem of how to account for the critical project – the political radicalism and revolutionary utopianism inherent to all salient avant-garde formations of the period, from Italian Futurism to Berlin Dada or International constructivism.

In this respect Bürger’s theory – with its distinction between avant-garde and modernism – still offers us a useful tool to describe and distinguish the critical agendas and activist tendencies of the various movements of early European avant-gardes of the first quarter of the 20th century. And it seems to me that his theory still offers a very fruitful approach to narrate the cultural history of the early Nordic avant-gardes. In my paper I want to address this problem of the political implications of the avant-garde project by tracing the short and dramatic life of the Copenhagen activist group known as the New Danish Student Society (1922-24) – as an example of how the aesthetics of

international Expressionism, Dadaism and Constructivism could be integrated into social practice and Communist action.

The New Student Society (1922-24)

The New Student Society (DNSS) was founded in September 1922 by a group of left-wing students and intellectuals comprising, amongst others, lawyer H.R. Brøcker, student of political science Torben Hansen, poets Rudolf Broby and Harald Landt Momberg, and painters Eugène de Sala and Gunnar Hansen. The group's formation was the result of a generational splinter from the (old) Student Society, whose social-liberal agenda, deriving from the "Modern Breakthrough" in Scandinavian culture of the 1880s, could no longer satisfy the radical demands of the youth. This split from the old "cultural radicalism" and its contemporary power bases in the Social Liberal Party (*Det radikale venstre*) and the liberal daily *Politiken*, was motivated not only by political differences, but also spiritual and aesthetic ones. The poets and artists of the DNSS circle were deeply influenced by the Expressionist rupture in the arts, and had many contacts in the international avant-garde network, including Herwarth Walden's Berlin gallery and magazine *Der Sturm*, the Berlin Dada movement (including Georg Grosz), Ljubomir Micić's Yugoslavian *Zenit* group, and Kurt Schwitters's *Merz* magazine. What most characterised the DNSS group, and what most radically distinguished it from the previous generation of "Expressionist" artists and poets gathered around the art magazine *Klingen* (1917-20), was its revolutionary agenda. This prescribed a fusion of aesthetic and political radicalism – or, as Momberg put it in an early article featured in the Communist weekly *Arbejdet* (The Work): "If the Danish revolutionary movement wants to consolidate itself and create a new order, it must include the arts and the intelligentsia in the work" (Momberg 1920). The art that was to serve the proposed revolution was not the mimetic art of naturalism, social realism or proletcult, but the international avant-garde aesthetic of "non-representational" painting and poetry, as formulated by Momberg in a 1922 programmatic article for the Syndicalist magazine *Baalet* (1922: 17). This was not, in Communist and Syndicalist circles of the time, a commonly held point of view; and it was precisely this tension between political activism and avant-garde aesthetics that remained the key problem in the short and dramatic history of the DNSS group from 1922 to 1924.

The decisive factor behind the formation of the group is not to be found in aesthetics or art history, but in economics and public history – namely, the collapse of Scandinavia’s largest bank, The Farmer’s Bank, in the summer of 1922. The “Bank Crack” burst a financial bubble within the Danish economy following the booming “goulash capitalism” of the war period, and resulted in a national fiscal crisis that sent shock waves into all sectors of society. Furthermore, the Crack revealed that leading members of Danish economic and political life, including the Royal House, had been involved in dubious *hausse*-speculations and insider trading – thus creating a precarious financial predicament that society as a whole now had to redress. This state of affairs was, in other words, politically explosive, and the fact that both the liberal-conservative government and the bourgeois press downplayed the problem’s proportions roused the suspicions of young Communists, who saw the Bank Crack as final proof of the depraved and corrupt character of bourgeois society. The situation was further exacerbated in the light of the Easter Crisis of 1920, when King Christian X dismissed the social-liberal government of Prime Minister C. Th. Zahle due to discontent with its policy, felt most strongly in capitalist and nationalist circles. At the time of the Easter Crisis, the social-liberal daily newspaper *Politiken* had been almost bankrupted by an advertising boycott effected in response to its critical description of the King’s unconstitutional action as a “Coup d’état” (cf. Kaarsted 1981). This time, the old-liberal journal reacted much more cautiously in its coverage of the crisis, a reaction that only worsened the conspiratorial assumptions of DNSS activists wary of a shady alliance between big business, the political elite and the press or *Penge, Politik og Presse*, as the alliance was concisely designated by Brøcker in the first book published by the Society’s publishing house (Brøcker 1922). Consequently, the DNSS organisation began to report on the “Farmer’s Bank Swindle” in a series of widely distributed pamphlets. The publications were accompanied by a number of public demonstrations and events in which Communist agitation was combined with Dadaist tactics of provocation. DNSS’s activities in this formative phase also encompassed more traditionally didactic undertakings, including adult education (in foreign languages) and public debates on topical issues of the day such as Communism, workers’ issues, sexual matters, the legal system, internationalism, theosophy and Expressionism.

Literature and Politics

DNSS’s manifold activities included the publication of Momberg’s and Broby’s debut collections of Expressionist poetry, *Parole* and *BLOD*, both released in November 1922. Written under the

heavy influence of Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm*, these works demonstrate a range of Expressionist poetics spanning from Momberg's abstract or "non-representational" sound poetry to Broby's harsh poetical realism: a grotesque universe of war, capitalist exploitation and prostitution redolent of Georg Grosz's contemporaneous cartoons lampooning bourgeois decadence. The critical and political reception of the two books exposed the critical tension in DNSS's agenda between aesthetic and political radicalism.

Both books were unfavourably received by the public. Momberg's *Parole* was dismissed for its orthodox, German-style Expressionism, while Broby's *BLOD* was confiscated by the police and its author charged with immorality by the Copenhagen City Court. Faced with accusations of depravity and pornography, Broby gave a powerful speech in his own defence, which perfectly expressed the contradictions inherent to DNSS's Expressionist poetics. On the one hand he defended the work of art's autonomy with allusions to Kandinsky's concept of art as "inner necessity" (Broby 1923: 3), while on the other he described Expressionism as a revolutionary movement and subsumed his poems as a critical "gesture of despair" against the hypocritical "ethics" of bourgeois society (1923: 14). Broby seemed well aware that his revolutionary artistic praxis was innately paradoxical, as he acknowledged: "if the artistic endeavour should ever run across my ethical mission, I would tear the artistic out of my life" (1923: 7). As for the legal consequences, Broby was sentenced to 14 days in prison; a conviction he described, with not a little sarcasm, as "too light." The case was then brought to appeal in the High Court, whose officers, on the basis of number of statements from literary authorities, suspended the sentence (the confiscation and public ban on Broby's book, however, were maintained).

The entire process, of course, only vivified the oppositional spirit of the young revolutionaries. Recognising that Broby was a victim of censure, Herwarth Walden, as a gesture of moral support, published two of the condemned poems – in Danish – in the February issue of *Der Sturm* (Vol. 14, no. 1, p. 14). Later the same year, Momberg appeared in the pages of the international magazine with a number of newly written poems, pointing to an important change in the literary poetics of DNSS. Unlike the abstract sound poems of his debut collection, he was now writing explicitly political texts in a "factual," constructivist style using montage devices and "ready-made" fragments of everyday language. One of these poems, "La Victoire," which appeared in the October issue of *Der Sturm* (Vol. 14, no. 10, p. 154), can be seen as an attempt to integrate the aesthetic innovations of the international avant-garde into DNSS's political agenda, being a

multilingual montage text combining syntactical fragments in Danish and French (the “Danish” segments have here been translated into English):

10%

half innocent

see page 2

syphilis serieux

pharmacie the red moon

auto auto

traitement discret

Great stocks no demand

London

Zürich

Washington

La Haye la Haye

Alhambra

The human anatomy to open up and clap

ouvre ta vulve

125 rue de la Roquette

methode francais

my heart is a graveyard

The Exchange is rising

the prices of goods are rising

profiteering

the yoke is sinking

7 and 1

the rest thousand

10½

What should one tell the ladies?

l'inimitable lit national

resultat des courses

theatres-concerts-cinemas
noctambules
the best cure against impotence

C'est la vraie question!

Mixing capitalistic, stock market jargon with risqué allusions to depraved bourgeois night-life, prostitution and sexual diseases, Momberg's montage poem constitutes a subtle critique of post-war European capitalism as a worn-out political system riddled with decadence and "impotency." At the same time, the use of montage technique points toward a new critical turn in DNSS's poetics, in which spiritual aspirations and Expressionist doctrines of art's supposed autonomy were gradually replaced by Constructivist and utilitarian demands for the integration of art into political action and propaganda.

The pamphlet *Pressen*

Simultaneous with the appearance of Momberg's poems in *Der Sturm*, DNSS activists were engaged in creating what was to become the organisation's final and most important propaganda vehicle, the weekly pamphlet *Pressen*, published in 66 issues between September 1922 and November 1924. Once more, it was the Bank Crack and its legal repercussions that acted as a catalyst. In August 1923, almost all of the accused in the Farmers's Bank case were acquitted of criminal liability by the Danish High Court. Meanwhile, the Crack was still under scrutiny by an investigative board, whose findings were to be kept secret from the public owing to concerns regarding national safety and stability. Via mysterious channels, however, activists in DNSS's milieu managed to steal some parts of the board's "Secret Reports" (Thing 1993, p. 140), which were subsequently published in several pirated editions and distributed by activists on the streets of Copenhagen. This generated both widespread public attention and almost ritual confrontations with the police. In *Pressen*, the campaign was backed up with new scandalous "revelations" and accusations against leading members of Danish economic and political life. Despite the dubious and fragmentary quality of most of the articles, and the somewhat embellished character of its reportage, the pamphlet received enormous circulation, supposedly attaining at its peak, a print run as high as 20,000. In accordance with DNSS's communications strategy, the group made frequent "Agitation Tours" visiting all parts of the country in connection with their publications.

Pressen's revolutionary agenda was, however, not solely concerned with politics and economics; the artistic avant-garde(s) remained a key source of inspiration and topic for debate. The launching of the pamphlet coincided with two exhibitions organized by Herwarth Walden's "Der Sturm" Gallery, respectively in Berlin and in Copenhagen. In August, a visiting show of "*Die Junge Dänen*" took place in the Berlin Gallery, presenting works by artists of the *Klingen* circle such as Harald Giersing, Jais Nielsen and Olaf Rude, and DNSS artists Sala and Gunnar Hansen. Subsequently, in September, Walden held his fifth and final exhibition of "International Art" in Copenhagen. This exhibition mainly displayed highlights from the gallery's pre-war canon of Expressionist and Cubist artists: Robert Delaunay, Albert Gleizes, Paul Klee and Franz Marc, but also Dadaist and Constructivist novelties such as Kurt Schwitters' "Merz paintings," and abstract "constructions" by Moholy Nagy and Laszlo Peri were included in the show, both attracting lively interest among the young Communists. Furthermore, at a separate show organized by the DNSS to accompany Walden's exhibition, Sala, Hansen and Gunnar Hesselbo presented graphic works in the abstract geometric style of International Constructivism. Rudolf Blümner, *Der Sturm*'s house poet and "rezitator" of expressionistic sound poetry, was present at the opening of the exhibition; and was also willing to give lectures and recitations at DNSS events. *Pressen* contained comprehensive coverage of the events, and declared them a new departure for the Danish art scene, a rupture from the "Salon" aesthetics of *Klingen*, and a breakthrough for a new generation of "international" and "revolutionary" artists (Momberg 1923).

Political interpretation of the international avant-garde's aesthetics continued in a serialised essay by Broby (*Pressen*, no. 5-6 & 8), also published as a separate, richly illustrated booklet under the title *Art. An Introduction* (Broby 1923b) – a publication very similar to El Lissitzky's and Hans Arp's *Die Kunstismen*, from 1925. This at once polemic and prophetic essay, written under the sway of a recent piece by Walden in *Der Sturm* (Walden 1921), may be the closest thing in existence to a Danish avant-garde manifesto. Framed as a historical account of the development of avant-garde art from Italian Futurism to International Constructivism, Broby's essay offers a Marxist interpretation of the avant-garde's pull away from mimetic representation, seeing this as a critical reaction against "bourgeois mentality" and its dominant characteristics: the "non-productive" worship of "personality" and a striving for "illusion" (Broby 1923b: 3). When art no longer pretends to represent reality, argued Broby, it constitutes a political, anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist statement. The pictorial style of International Constructivism, consisting of non-

representational forms freed from personal feeling or illusion of perspective, was thus loaded with a revolutionary meaning.

A crucial element of *Pressen*'s subversive rhetoric lay in its innovative typographical layout, in which journalistic text, adverts, photos and drawings were combined into a striking totality of word and image (cf. Jelsbak 2006). The five-column text format was broken up by expressive variations in type and size: bold letters, pictograms and horizontal bars appeared across the columns, serving to enliven the overall feel and emphasise the scandalous revelations and accusations made therein. Denmark's leading capitalist, H.N. Andersen, was depicted as a rocking toy, while King Christian's photograph was mounted on a diminutive matchbox. Picture components from international avant-garde art were integrated into the layout; for example, Georg Grosz's satirical cartoons of decadent capitalists illustrated critical articles about the Danish "bank swindle". In the first issues, from September and October 1923, Grosz was even credited as a member of the general editorial board, and in 1924 a collection of his "Ecce Homo" prints were published as a separate booklet by DNSS's publishing house under the revealing title, "The Prophets of Prostitution" (Grosz 1924). In the pages of *Pressen*, Grosz's fierce satires of post-war capitalist society were supplemented and contrasted by the non-figurative constructivist work of Peri, Kassak, Theo van Doesburg and Gunnar Hansen, intended to act as positive icons of a Communist utopia, a new society based on order and solidarity.

The formal principles and ideas behind *Pressen*'s layout were prepared by Momberg in a serialised essay on "Active Advertisement," also published as a separate pamphlet (Momberg 1924). A parallel to Broby's "Art" essay of 1923, this essay turned out to be a veritable working manifesto for *Pressen* and DNSS, attesting to Momberg's close familiarity with the aesthetics and ideology of International Constructivism. To describe the peculiar fusion of word, image, journalism and typography in *Pressen*'s visual design, Momberg adopted the concept of the *topography* of the page, the key concept in El Lissitzky's manifesto for Constructivist typography, "Topographie der Typographie," published in *Merz* in July 1923. Meanwhile, Momberg's manifesto was much more than a design manual for activist agitation and publishing; the typographical revolution of *Pressen* was part of a vastly more comprehensive political program:

The upcoming generation, ready to shape and bring forward the next period, gathers together around THE NEW STUDENT SOCIETY.

These young are versed in the work of the international youth. They have pursued new ways for spiritual life, economy, art, agitation, and practice, based on international research within these areas [...]

Our age is characterized by disorder in all areas. The authentic youth of our time fights for order and regularity and solidarity in all things. Artistically and economically they are c o n s t r u c t i v i s t i c. They do not lose themselves in literary fantasies, but gets down to the urgent tasks. (Momborg 1924: 6-7)

Momborg's manifesto marked a critical point in DNSS's attempts to fuse aesthetic experimentalism with political activism: Expressionist doctrines on the autonomy of art were finally abandoned in favour of the utilitarian poetics of contemporary Soviet Constructivism, which prescribed a total integration of the individual arts into social design and political agitation. Somewhat symptomatically, Momborg's unequivocal commitment to this Constructivist programme also sealed his own transition from the field of imaginative literature to political journalism. The "authentic youth of our time" was no longer to lose itself in "literary fantasies."

The End of the Avant-Garde

A schism between aesthetics and political activism, however, remained apparent in DNSS's poetics. For the general election of April 1924, the Danish Communist Party sought to use *Pressen* as a mouthpiece for their election campaign. However, a sizeable faction of DNSS, including founding fathers Brøcker and Broby, were sceptical about the Party's participation in the election and asserted *Pressen's* independence of Party control. This resulted in the DNSS splitting into two rival factions that, in the weeks leading up to the election, in competition with one another, each published their own edition of *Pressen* (no. 31-33). This split also revealed a divergence in opinion concerning the group's artistic avant-gardism, as the Party-loyal faction now explicitly distanced itself from Dadaist elements and the "Constructivist fantasies" of DNSS's previous activities. As nominated candidate for the Communist Party in the constituency of Bornholm (the Danish Island in the Baltic Sea), Momborg, during the first run, ended up in the loyalist proportion; after the election, however, he was reunited with Broby and Brøcker's fraction as they (both now excluded from the Communist Party) continued the publication.

Without the support of the Communist Party, and without any new financial scandals to write about, *Pressen* lost its momentum. Despite the would-be visionary proclamations of Constructivism

– as being the universal conduit for future artistic practice – the organ did not become a seedbed for progress within Danish art or literature. Political issues continued to dominate proceedings to such a degree that the Yugoslavian avant-garde colleague Ljubomir Micić was in fact right as he, in a contemporary review, judged *Pressen* to be “intensively” Communist though “less artistic” (*Zenit* IV, 26-33, October 1924). Shortly after the break with the Communist Party, DNSS declared the formation of a new political party, The Communist Workers’ and Smallholders’ Movement; and as part of an editorial plan for transforming *Pressen* into a “Workers’ Weekly” (no. 57), artistic matters were further marginalised. Meanwhile, a separate monthly art magazine for Communism and Constructivism, “KOKO,” was projected; this project, however, never materialised. The failure of this endeavour may also be viewed as the failure of their avant-garde project to meld aesthetic and political radicalism or – to recall Bürger’s formula – to reintegrate art into the praxis of life. In November 1924, *Pressen* released its final number. Shortly afterwards, most of the key members of DNSS became affiliated with Henri Barbusse’s *Clarté* movement, continuing their political radicalism via activities and formats whose basic nature was far from avant-garde.

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