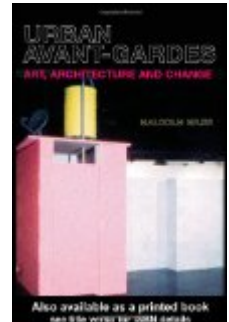


**Malcolm Miles.** *Urban Avant-Gardes: Art, Architecture and Change.* London: Routledge, 2004. xiv + 272 pp. \$41.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-415-26688-8.



**Reviewed by** Mysoon Rizk

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In *Urban Avant-Gardes: Art, Architecture and Change*, Malcolm Miles aims to untangle some of the convoluted relationships among aesthetic, political, and social arenas, from late-nineteenth-century modernism through twenty-first-century postmodernism. The reader will appreciate not only the temporal sweep of this study but also that the author gives shape to complex material culture. Many will also welcome the hyper-self-conscious care Miles demonstrates regarding our current "moment." Since September 11, 2001, we have inhabited a traumatized global age with increased "emphasis on security and denial of difference," according to Miles (p. xii). Anyone in search of neat narrative trajectories, however, where events are clearly delineated in series of causalities, and where heroes are easily distinguishable from villains, art from architecture, modernism from postmodernism, will find this book a serious challenge.

A quick summary of the contents of *Urban Avant-Gardes* may help reveal both the admirable ambitions of its author and the limitations of his approach. Consider the book's nine-chapter se-

quence, each title conjuring up a momentous year: 1871, 1912, 1938, 1967, and 1989, as well as 1993 and 2001, the latter pair getting two chapters apiece. To absorb this fragmented "history" demands tolerating startling shifts in subject matter-- from Gustave Courbet, August Strindberg, and Le Corbusier, to Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Marjetica Potrc, and PLATFORM--and geography (Paris, Stockholm, Algiers, New York, Berlin, Amman, London), with what Miles calls "an arbitrary division" of chronology (p. xii). Not so random, of course: the years signal periods of extreme, intensified, dispersed military activity, albeit localized by contextual specifics (e.g., fall of the Paris Commune, World War I, World War II, May 1968, "end" of the Cold War, first explosion at the World Trade Center, and the 2001 attacks on New York City's twin towers).

In each chapter and section, Miles concentrates on a startlingly disconnected series of cultural interventions. Representing "art, architecture, or something else altogether (like activism)," most of the events, once controversial, have been largely forgotten, or get rarely discussed, much

less in relation to each other (p. xi). Miles struggles to link these disparate subjects through a rich, refreshing, and often rewarding engagement with relevant theoretical and political texts, especially those that consider the notion of the "avant-garde." Miles parses the concept through such diverse manifestations as the "politicised avant-garde of Realism in the mid-nineteenth century [1871], the aesthetic avant-garde of early Modernism in art [1912], and the technocratic [read, fascistic] avant-garde of Modernist architecture and planning [1938]" (p. 70). This initial segment regarding elitist modernism contrasts greatly with the book's postmodern remainders. According to Miles, cultural acts and incidents, especially in recent times, proceed as if becoming avant-garde were no longer critical for social change and, maybe, had not been so since sometime "after 1871," the book's curious title notwithstanding (p. 7).

In chapter 4, "1967: Why Tomorrow Never Dawns," Miles explores the pivotal twentieth-century writings of Herbert Marcuse and Henri Lefebvre. Their commitment to any instant capable of catalyzing political change clearly melds with the spirit of the 1960s, for example, Situationism, yet also could easily link to events Miles details in earlier and later chapters. This chapter would have been a more effective springboard for later sections had Miles reinvented the ideas of Marcuse and Lefebvre in his discussions of artists or collectives from more recent times. Both European theorists discarded the vanguard dream of a "tomorrow," attending instead to a constantly revolutionary present (and praxis). Their focus, shared by Miles, on the unceasingly transformative powers of an everyday, including an art/architecture/activism that can stir community, with or without a vanguard, could have informed the work considered in the last four chapters. At times, the radical disconnect between the first half of the book and events unfolding since the 1960s becomes disruptive and distracting.

Because Miles largely quarantines theoretical from material discussion, readers must forge such connections on their own (what might seem a shortcoming could, however, become the basis for an invaluable classroom writing assignment). For example, the spontaneous, impulsive seconds leading up to the Parisian public's desecration of a prominent bronze statue in Paris ("1871: Spitting on [Napoleon] Bonaparte") were certainly marked by the radical potentialities of "immanence" that Miles discusses only in chapter 4, in relation to Lefebvre's 1960s moments "in which the new pervades and permeates the present like wonder or the morning dew" (p. 83). Why not think of the 1871 toppling of the Vendome column in Paris (for which Courbet was implicated and served time), however futile, together with Courbet's vanguardism as precisely due to a "wonder"-filled contemporaneity, say, rather than dreamy anticipation of some utopic, post-revolutionary "tomorrow"? Other links could have been made between the Vendome actions and the dismantling and dispersal of the Berlin Wall (pivotal to Fukuyama's so-called "end of history"), or the transformation by Mierle Laderman Ukeles of Fresh Kills Landfill on Staten Island (with World Trade Center remains). In chapter 5 ("1989: After the Wall"), Miles could have investigated the dynamism of "public monuments" in city life, noting how the Vendome column story resonates with those of the Berlin Wall, Richard Serra's "Tilted Arc," Maya Lin's Vietnam Memorial, and the comparatively lesser-known postindustrial monuments of Herman Pri-gann. Again, the author leaves the reader to infer these intersections.

The second half of *Urban Avant-Gardes*, concentrating on more recent decades while attending to society's increasingly repressive directions, contains some of the book's strongest passages. At the very least, Miles approaches his aim to elevate and sustain hope despite past immutable "failures" of the "avant-garde." Such attitudes may well prove contagious to present readers, howev-

er ordinary or extraordinary the activities and outcomes Miles describes.

Despite his understandable preference for collective, anonymous, and "viral" acts, like those of the artist-led group PLATFORM, Miles thankfully extends his analysis to the work of individuals including Ukeles, Potrc, and Mel Chin (though he sadly neglects influential figures like Joseph Beuys). This book endorses the viability of radical interventions, continuously erupting as ephemeral bubbles of participatory democracy. Nevertheless, questions persist, including how art/architecture/activism "infect" everyday life or, as the author wonders, early on, "Are the transgressions of the avant-garde aesthetic or social, and do aesthetic transgressions merely stand for aspirations for social change, or actively destabilise bourgeois society by exposing the contradictions of its values?" (p. 24). Ultimately, Miles posits, "alternative, more or less autonomous, and radically different structures of empowerment" are mainly and continually nourished "in the crevices," an infinite number of which surely infuse every urbanity (pp. 228-229).

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