

# Calling the dragon – the five avant-gardes today?

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## Abstract

Is the term avant-garde meaningful today beyond its historical use? Can it be used as an analytical tool in some way? In “The five avant-gardes or... or none?” Richard Schechner (1993) suggested that we distinguish a historical avant-garde, a constantly changing current avant-garde, a future oriented avant-garde, a tradition seeking avant-garde and an intercultural avant-garde. By looking at the project *Calling the Dragon* from 2012, as (if it was) avant-garde this paper explores these five ways of understanding the term in a contemporary context.

Is the term avant-garde meaningful today beyond its historical use? Can it be used as an analytical tool in some way? The question of the contemporary avant-garde was discussed this spring by the Finnish Avant-garde and Modernism Network (FAM 2017); although the main focus of the network is on historical investigations some relatively recent events in the 1980’s were debated as well (Hautamäki 2017). This prompted me to return to a paper “Calling the Dragon – avant-garde or not?” presented at Performance Studies International conference at Shanghai Theatre Academy, China 4-8.7. 2014 (PSi #20), with the all-encompassing theme Avant-Garde, Tradition, Community.

In “The five avant-gardes or... Or none?” theatre director and performance theorist Richard Schechner (1993) suggested that we distinguish a historical avant-garde, a constantly changing current avant-garde, a future oriented avant-garde, a tradition seeking avant-garde and an intercultural avant-garde. Are these distinctions valid beyond theatre and performing arts, the concerns of Schechner? Are they useful in understanding practices within contemporary art? In order to respond to those questions, I will use as an example the project *Calling the Dragon* from 2012, which was part of a series of works performing landscape for camera, in the border zone between performance

art, environmental art, and media art. By looking at this practice as (if it was) avant-garde this paper explores these five ways of understanding the term in a contemporary context. First, I will briefly explain the case used as an example, then I present the by now classic text by Schechner and try to look at the practice in light of the various types of avant-garde proposed in that text and finally make some comments on the avant-garde today.

## Calling the Dragon

During the year of the dragon 2012 I was calling the dragon (or a dragon) once a week from the roof of a bunker built after the Second World War for dismantling mines on Harakka Island in Helsinki, Finland. The roof would be a good landing platform for a small dragon, but too narrow for a creature the size of a helicopter. I was calling the dragon by ringing a small green ceramic bell bought outside a temple in Kyoto, Japan, recorded the performance on video and made notes in a blog in three languages every week. The beginning was planned for the Chinese New Year on January 23 2012, but the first performance was delayed due to thaw season with bad ice, which prevented me from getting to the island, so the first performance took place only on the 4 February.

*Calling the Dragon* was one part in a series of twelve one-year projects performed for camera on the same island. The series, *Animal Years*, which began in 2002 and finished in 2014, was based on the Chinese calendar and its cycle of twelve years, with each year named after a specific animal. (Arlander 2014) The project utilized the traditions of performance art, video art and environmental art, moving in the borderland between them. Every year I looked for a new perspective on the landscape, a new aspect of the environment and a new kind of relationship between the human body and the place. During the year of the dragon in 2012 the sound, the barely audible tinkle of the small bell, was important.

The dragon is the only mythical creature among the animals of the calendar, representing creative power, success and good fortune. In European fairy tales, legends and romances the dragon is a horrible monster, something the hero must face in combat in order to win his princess. A dragon can also mean the border between the known and the unknown, as in the expression: “Here be dragons”, which, although an anachronism, refers to the supposed dragons

on medieval maps denoting the end of the known world. That is why I felt a dragon was something I could only call.

Approximately once a week I repeated the following action: Wrapped in a green scarf I climbed up on the roof of the bunker, placed my video camera on a tripod in the centre, and called the dragon by ringing the small bell in four directions, beginning by facing north; I continued facing east, then south and finally west and the open sea. In each image, I rang the bell first from the left, then from the right and lastly from behind the camera. The same sequence of actions was repeated every time. And nothing even remotely resembling a dragon did respond to my calls, I have to add.

### The Five avant-gardes... or none?

In his text “The five avant-gardes or... Or none?”, originally an introduction to *The Future of Ritual*, in 1993, but since then republished in, for example, the *Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, where I first encountered it, Richard Schechner suggested that we could distinguish various forms of the avant-garde. Besides the idea of several understandings of the term existing in parallel, the fact that a lot of what was then termed avant-garde, especially in the theatre, was very much looking back, investigating past traditions, was interesting, even paradoxical, since the avant-garde is usually linked with a movement forward, towards the future.

My understanding of the term avant-garde comes mainly through the Russian futurists, after working, at the end of the eighties, on a reconstruction of the Krucheny-Malevitsh-Matjushin collaboration *Victory over the Sun*, (Arlander & Koskenniemi 1989) and with some Italian Futurist and Dadaist provocations. The distinction made by Michael Kirby in his text “Avant-garde Theatre” (Kirby 1987), between an ‘antagonistic’ avant-garde that tries to épater la bourgeoisie (or startle the middle class) and a ‘hermetic’ avant-garde that looks for something new behind closed doors, in a self-contained manner, was useful at the time. The most well-known theoretical analyses of the avant-garde probably come from Peter Bürger, who in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (originally published in 1974, in English 1984) claimed the main aim of the avant-garde to be the demolition of the difference between art and life, on one hand attacking the institution of art and on the other attempting the transformation of everyday life. He made a distinction between the aims of elitist modernism and the avant-garde as a critical and political

phenomenon. While working in the performance group Homo \$ in the eighties the main distinction we used in practical parlance, was between AG and UG, avant-garde or under-ground. Sometimes our collective performances or actions would turn out to be more under-ground and sometimes more avant-garde, we thought, and in that context avant-garde stood for high art.

Let us return to the five (theatrical) avant-gardes listed by Schechner and see how they sound or feel today: a historical avant-garde, a constantly changing current avant-garde, a future oriented avant-garde, a tradition seeking avant-garde and an intercultural avant-garde. And since he suggests that a single work can belong to several of these categories (Schechner, 1996, p. 342), we can look for aspects of *Calling the Dragon* to be linked to them.

## The historical avant-garde

The first great avant-garde movement, naturalism, at the end of the nineteenth century, soon spread around the world, Schechner tells us, and was followed by familiar movements like symbolism, futurism, dadaism and surrealism. The term avant-garde refers to the directionality of art with an advanced guard and a rear guard, and, according to Kirby quoted by Schechner, to some artists' "attempt to alter, expand or escape from the stylistic aesthetic rules passed on to them by culture", and to the "impulse to redefine, to contradict, to continue the sensed directionality of art". Schechner summarises this as a wish "to make something new ... in opposition to prevailing values" and traces the impulse back to the Romantics' idea of life lived in terms of one's art; and their affection for radical thought, rhetoric and action (Schechner, 1996, p. 344), which from a bourgeois perspective meant that artists were seen as neurotic, savage, or irresponsible. With the Russian revolution, the connection between art and revolutionary thought grew stronger. The task for art, as for philosophy, was not to describe the world but to change it, to create a new art for the new man, for the new masses. Schechner mentions Meyerhold but could equally well have listed Mayakovski, Hlebnikov, constructivism, personal performances on the streets and so on. The historical avant-garde is a crucial part of the history of art, perhaps less so of the theatre; art-historian RoseLee Goldberg (2011, first edition published in 1979) focused attention on the avant-garde movements as precursors of performance art.

Looking at *Calling the Dragon* in relationship to the historical avant-garde we can find some connections to this legacy by interpreting the action symboli-

cally: Calling the dragon could mean calling the ruling powers into combat, or calling the creative revolutionary forces to build alternatives for the future. Or even to summon the power of a folk myth like a dragon as a counterforce to current commercialized trends. Calling for something means taking action, calling a dragon is perhaps a poetic action. Calling for something that perhaps does not exist could be understood as calling for something that does not yet exist, like a people to come.

The traditional mark of the historical avant-garde, opposition to prevailing values, seems nevertheless far from this kind of private exercise. There is nothing that would “startle the middle class” in the act of ringing a bell on a rooftop once a week. But, as a contrast to contemporary culture, however, it is a) a private action instead of media event that b) involves duration instead of an efficient use of time, is based on c) repetition instead of novelty and d) focuses on the documentation of the everyday environment, rather than spectacular vistas and, for better or worse, e) engages with a fantasy creature instead of actual problems. What the “prevailing values” are depends on one’s perspective. The romantic legacy of the historical avant-garde is easy to recognise in the attempted fusion of art and life; by repeating the same action regularly, it turns into a life practice.

### The constantly changing current avant-garde

The current avant-garde is not the same as the one in 1993. Schechner describes the established theatrical avant-garde in New York, of which he himself was a part at the time, as engaged in a virtuosic, masterly use of former experimental techniques. He writes: “Like naturalism before it, ‘avant-garde’ has become a style, a way of working rather than a bellwether. ... not ‘mainstream’ ... but ‘a menu of options drained from their original impulses’” (Schechner, 1996, p. 345). Interestingly, he mentions performance art as an exception: “What innovation comes from the current avant-garde, is mostly emanating from performance art, where people are exploring such things as explicit sexual art and the combining of the extremely personal with the political.” (Schechner, 1996, p. 346)

Activist political theatre in the wake of 1960’s guerrilla and street theatre is included into this group as well. According Schechner activists use “sudden, often disruptive, and dramatic means” as a double strategy, “to get their message across graphically to the general public” and “to instil solidarity among

their members... [by] collectively taking action in an atmosphere of risk.” (Schechner, 1996, p. 346) For Schechner the current avant-garde (in 1993) is a compilation of simultaneous alternative styles and non-naturalistic forms, and inevitably also deteriorates into a pursuit of anything that seems ‘hot’ at the moment. (Schechner, 1996, p. 346-47)

What has changed in terms of the current (theatrical) avant-garde? Should we perhaps think of it in a broader perspective than New York. Personally, I remember the Norwegian performance group “Baktruppen”, literally the rear guard, from the eighties and nineties, who consciously played with recycling former experimental strategies. (Arntzen 2009) If we think of contemporary art today (festival art and biennale art in general) we would probably not speak of the avant-garde, but simply contemporary art. And if it were not ‘current’ or ‘contemporary’ enough, it would not be classified as contemporary art.

In what way could *Calling the Dragon* be related to the idea of a current avant-garde? We can recognise the use of techniques of the historical AG (or performance art in the 1960s and 70s), as an available aesthetic strategy, which is well known, rather than new, such as a) long duration, a year, (compare with original works of Linda Montano or Techieng Hsieh), b) static camera on tripod and long images (compare the early films by Andy Warhol), c) working outside (compare Robert Smithson’s site and non-site, or Denis Oppenheim’s experiments on the Canadian border, to mention just a few), d) the use of the artists’ body as performer (compare feminist art in the 1970’s) and lastly e) repetition, perhaps the most widely used device in all kinds of experimental work... Rather than using these historical strategies in a virtuosic or ironical way, the rough and documentary style of performing for camera recycles the raw aesthetic of early video art when the technology was emerging.

### The future oriented avant-garde

The division into a historical avant-garde and its contemporary remains, something like the current avant-garde, makes probably sense in many fields. Schechner’s main observation, however, consists in noting the paradoxical situation within experimental theatre: a division into a future oriented and a tradition seeking avant-garde. The importance of the tradition seeking avant-garde in the latter half of the twentieth century is probably specific for the theatre. Similar movements in poetry, visual art, or music would not have the same weight as the various roots –movements in performing arts.

Continuing in the tradition of the historical avant-garde, the future oriented avant-garde celebrates artistic innovation and originality, Schechner notes, and is looking for new techniques and technologies, virtual spaces, interactive telecommunication and the like. Perhaps symptomatically for the theatre he has fairly little to say about this category. Technology is nevertheless the area where the notion, if not the term, avant-garde is still used and useful. Technical experiments can be at the forefront of innovations, and they are avant-garde before they are accomplished and adopted. I remember listening to a presentation on experiments with so called intelligent textiles where the speaker exclaimed: “If it works it is no longer cutting edge”...

*Calling the Dragon* is hard to place in this group, in terms of technological innovation, since it uses low-tech tools, simple editing techniques without after effects, 100 % sound recordings and so on. The exhibition technology for the final video installations could of course be as high-tech as you wish. We could, however, understand low-tech explorations as part of an ecologically minded and thus future oriented avant-garde, preparing for a world without fossil fuels, although more advanced experiments in that line abound. Another future-oriented dimension would be to claim radically context-dependent, site- and situation oriented work as rehearsing developments for the future.

### The tradition seeking avant-garde

Schechner gives much space to various ‘roots’ movements in theatre with Grotowski as a leading example, followed by Eugenio Barba, and linked to phenomena like the “theatre of roots” in India and Butoh, or ancient dance, in Japan. The tradition seeking avant-garde “rejects fancy technology and cybernetics, preferring ‘the wisdom of the ages,’ most often found in non-western cultures,” he writes. (Schechner, 1996, p. 347) Even after “leaving the theatre” Grotowski continued his research in “the theatre of sources” looking for techniques of producing primary energy in ancient rituals. His work was both in the vanguard of experimental performance and profoundly traditional, Schechner notes.

*Calling the dragon* could, at least superficially, easily be linked to the tradition seeking avant-garde: leaving the stage for the roof of a bunker, the audience for birds and occasional blog readers, language for a simple physical action, representation for a ritual practice. In terms of aims, however, there is not much in common. In ringing a bell my aim was not to look for a ‘primordial’

action, and the act of calling the dragon was not a re-enactment of a traditional ritual. Some elements of the performance resemble elements in traditional rituals, though: a) Calling an animal with a sound, b) using a specific scarf, c) repeating the same action in the four directions, and d) for the duration of a seasonal cycle (a year) could occur in various rituals. There was nothing explicitly avant-garde in the use of these formal elements, however, nor any deeper exploration related to their efficacy.

## The intercultural avant-garde

The fifth form Schechner calls the intercultural avant-garde, which seems closest to his heart: “There is no area,” he writes, “which does not have artists actively trying to use, appropriate, reconcile, come to terms with, exploit, understand ... the relationships between local cultures ... and [their] increasingly complex and multiple contacts and interactions”... on a regional and global scale. “Fitfully, unevenly and with plenty of cruelty, a planetary human culture is emerging which is aware of, if not yet acting responsibly toward, the whole geobiocultural system.” (Schechner, 1996, p. 352) Artists are producing works “on or across various political, geographical, personal, generic, and conceptual borders” (Schechner 1996, p. 352), he notes. As an example, he mentions the Mexican-American Guillermo Gómez-Peña who states: “I physically live between two cultures and two epochs”, and notes the uneasiness that often follows from “subscribing to contradictory values, conflicting aesthetic canons.” (Schechner, 1996, p. 352-53)

Not all intercultural performances are avant-garde, Schechner observes. Only when not skirting over cultural and racial conflicts, “when the performance does not try to heal over rifts or fractures but further opens these for exploration”, is he willing to call it avant-garde. (Schechner, 1996, p. 353)

*Calling the dragon* utilises intercultural elements, like the dragon or the Chinese calendar, and appropriates them without exploring cultural differences in depth. To call for an unspecified and thus ‘universal’ dragon following the time of the Chinese calendar, with a Japanese temple bell manufactured for tourists, on a rooftop of a bunker in Helsinki could be seen as an example of the hybridized global culture today. The intercultural elements do not make the work avant-garde, though, nor is the work an intercultural performance in the customary sense of performers from different cultural traditions collaborating.

The intercultural elements were chosen because of their functionality, not their origin: a) The Chinese Calendar was used because of its cycle of twelve years (actually 64, as I later learnt) in order to have a loop beyond one year (a decade is not a cycle) and partly because of the names of animals, which hint at other than human experiences of time and space. This kind of appropriation could be criticized, and we could also say that it is rather foolhardy to call for something you do not really know.

### Or none?

Speaking of five different avant-gardes, despite the fact that they often overlap, “reminds of how complex, how multiple, the avant-garde has become”, Schechner (1996, p. 353) argues. The term does not serve a useful purpose any longer, it does not mean anything today, he writes, and should thus be used to refer to the historical avant-garde only. Events today are recorded, replayed, ritualized and recycled. In a way that speaks to current concerns, he notes: “The limitless horizons of expectations that marked the modern epoch and called into existence endless newness have been transformed into a global hothouse, a closed environment.” (Schechner, 1996, p. 354)

Schechner calls our time conservative, because of “the need to save, recycle, use resources parsimoniously”. (Schechner, 1996, p. 354) He links this to ritualizing and writes: “To recycle, reuse, archive and recall, to perform in order to be included in an archive”, as he suggests many performance artists are doing, “to seek roots, explore and maybe even plunder religious experiences, expressions, practices, and liturgies to make art”, as he suggests Grotowski among others was doing, “is to ritualize...”. (Schechner, 1996, p. 355) He notes that “only a small number of artworks relate creatively and critically to the worlds around them. These are what used to be called the avant-garde, but which today... barely owns its name.” (Schechner, 1996, p. 355) Clearly, for Schechner the term avant-garde consists of a relationship to the surroundings and involves a value statement of sorts, avant-garde is something good.

What about *Calling the Dragon*? Certainly, the project could be understood through recycling, reusing, and archiving. Yes, I am performing in order to be included in an archive, even creating an archive, of the changes in the landscape in that region in those years. And yes, I am inevitably ‘plundering’ some cultural features like ‘the dragon’. What about the relationship to the environment? There is a clear focus on “the world around it”, but how creative

or critical is the engagement? In contemporary art, we expect artworks to focus attention on specific problems in society and address very particular circumstances, and *Calling the Dragon* is not doing that explicitly. Its focus on changes in the environment is ambiguous...

### The five avant-gardes today?

As most contemporary artists would probably do, I agree with Schechner that the avant-garde is not a very useful term to designate current developments in art, being too tied to progress and an idea of linear development. It is nevertheless fascinating to think of various simultaneously existing approaches. The tendencies of 1) using the legacy of the historical avant-garde in terms of attitude, 2) searching for the 'hottest' new trend right now, the current fashion and 3) experimenting with new technologies that do not really work yet – these three forms of the avant-garde do still exist and flourish without necessarily being called with that name. But what about the two other forms, the tradition seeking one and the intercultural one? Are they still relevant for performances today? I guess few would consider tradition seeking or intercultural forms of performing arts avant-garde today? On the contrary, they seem to form the mainstream today. Most theatre and dance festivals show intercultural works. What other trends have emerged to replace them?

One important strategy within contemporary art, although not at all present in *Calling the Dragon*, consists of various forms of socially engaged art or social practice. They are not avant-garde in the sense of 'startling the middle class', unless the middle class is startled by not recognising the outputs of such projects as high-quality art. On the contrary, they try to engage and empower the working or workless class, or at least create some possibilities for participation. Another strategy, which *Calling the Dragon* is closer to, is the expansion of our consciousness and sensitivity to include the non-human, or more-than-human actors, which has concrete consequences for artistic practices. Neither of these strategies would probably be called avant-garde in ordinary parlance, and one could claim that they already constitute the mainstream in the world of contemporary art, but they do fit Schechner's definition of what used to be called the avant-garde – artworks that relate creatively and critically to the worlds around them.

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## Appendix

A tri-lingual blog documenting the project *Calling the Dragon*:

<http://aa-callingthedragon.blogspot.fi>

(Accessed 4.12.2017)

Video works related to the project  
distributed by the Finnish Centre for Media Art:

*Calling the Dragon (North, East, South and West)* 2013 four-channel  
video installation HD 16:9 (46 min 50 sec) [http://www.av-arkki.  
fi/en/works/calling-the-dragon-north-east-south-andamp-west/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/calling-the-dragon-north-east-south-andamp-west/)  
(Accessed 4.12.2017)

*Calling the Dragon 1-4 (Bell)* 2013 four-channel video installation HD 16:9  
(6 min. 28 sec.) or single channel video (4 x 6 min 28 sec) [http://  
www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/calling-the-dragon-1-4-bell/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/calling-the-dragon-1-4-bell/) (Accessed  
4.12.2017)

*Year of the dragon – Waving (A & B)* 2013 two-channel or single channel  
video installation HD 16:9 (20 or 50 min 12 sec) [http://www.  
av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-dragon-waving-a-andamp-b/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/year-of-the-dragon-waving-a-andamp-b/)  
(Accessed 4.12.2017)

*Day and Night of the Dragon 1-2* 2013 (19 min 30 sec) HD 16:9  
<http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/day-and-night-of-the-dragon-1-3/>  
(Accessed 4.12.2017)

*The Bunker* 2013 (22 min or 4 min 10 sec) HD 16:9 [http://www.av-arkki.fi/  
en/works/the-bunker/](http://www.av-arkki.fi/en/works/the-bunker/)  
(Accessed 4.12.2017)