Art, Science, and the Paradox of Knowledge: Decolonizing the European Avant-Garde

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The 2021 GSA Distinguished Lecture

In the Thick of German Studies: The GSA Distinguished Lecture Series

As part of the German Studies Association's cooperation with the Free University of Berlin's Program for Advanced German and European Studies, it was both an honor and a pleasure to launch our winter semester 2020/21 with the GSA Distinguished Lecture by Thomas O. Haakenson, Associate Professor in Critical and Visual Studies at the California College of the Arts on October 20, 2021. In his timely contribution, *Art, Science, and the Paradox of Knowledge: Decolonizing the European Avantgarde*, Professor Haakenson offered critical reflections on the European avant-garde's role in conceptualizing Western knowledge since the mid-nineteenth century. Haakenson's presentation was the ninth in our annual Distinguished Lecture Series. Initiated by GSA long-time Executive Director David Barclay, the series is designed to feature outstanding research by GSA members at Free University of Berlin and to strengthen ties between scholars working in these fields.

We have had the privilege of hosting distinguished speakers on a broad array of subjects and it was David Barclay who delivered the first lecture on "Old Glory und Berliner Bär. Die USA und West-Berlin 1948–1994" in 2013. Suzanne Marchand followed in 2014 exploring "Orientalism and the Classical Tradition in Germany." For 2015, Joy Calico spoke on "Arnold Schoenberg's *A Survivor from Warsaw* in Postwar Europe: Musical Remigration and Holocaust Commemoration." Irene Kacandes took up another timely subject in 2016 and examined possibilities for "Memory Work for/in the 21st Century." In her 2017 intervention "The Proletarian Prometheus," Sabine Hake applied the notion of cultural appropriation to examine the working class's use of bourgeois cultural tropes for political empowerment. Exploring the statue of a Hawaiian female deity in Berlin's ethnological collection, H. Glenn Penny engaged with the public controversies around ethnological museums in Europe in his 2018 contribution "*Kihawahine*: German Ethnology and its Histories of the World." Another compelling matter was taken up by Johannes von Moltke in 2019 who explored "The Meme is the Message: Alt-Right/Neue Rechte and the Political Affordances of Social Media." A strong case for considering Europe as a progressive alternative to Trump's America was made by historian Konrad H. Jarausch in his 2020 lecture "Embattled Europe: A Progressive Alternative."

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The GSA Distinguished Lecture Series has given us much food for thought in the last decade and has served the program's central mission, to deepen the understanding of Germany and Europe in an exemplary way.

Karin Goihl, Berlin Program Academic Coordinator, *Free University of Berlin*

Art, Science, and the Paradox of Knowledge: Decolonizing the European Avant-Garde

Thomas O. Haakenson

ABSTRACT

The Wonderful World of Words

My aunt Hiede Miyazaki was born in Kumamoto, Japan, on March 10, 1931. She was an excellent student, preparing at the end of World War II for college when her father passed away from cancer (Figure 1). At seventeen years old, she became the family's primary provider, often working several jobs and going hungry to support her mother, four siblings, and herself. Eventually, Hiede's English-language skills led to a position with the US Armed Forces at Camp Kumamoto and later on at both Itazuke Air Base in Fukuoka and Johnson Air Base in Tokyo. She continued her creative practice at the same time and became a skilled, much-sought-after Japanese Sumi-E artist, exhibiting widely and teaching classes in mainland Japan, the United States, Canada, and Germany. In the early 1960s, my Aunt Hiede met, and shortly thereafter married, my Uncle Gene. They were together for almost fifty-eight years.

My first encounter with Germany, with German culture and the German language, was made possible thanks to my Aunt Hiede. In 1987, when I was fifteen years old, I flew to Germany to visit her and my Uncle Gene, who at the time lived in a small town in southern Germany near a US military base. I traveled alone transatlantically, with no German language skills and, quite frankly, a rather limited grasp of the English language as well. It was only my second time aboard an airplane. Hiede met me outside the baggage claim at Frankfurt Airport.

Despite—and perhaps also because of—my first German trip's proximity to the US military, my fascination with "all things German" was a gift that I associate with my Aunt Hiede, who was doubly displaced—perhaps even more than doubly displaced—from the country of her birth, Japan, when she lived in Germany. And this gift simultaneously meant juxtaposition and erasure for me. A juxtaposition of what the

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Figure 1. Hiede Miyazaki Haakenson, circa 1960
Photograph
Provided by the author courtesy of Eugene Bruce Haakenson

past meant for the present, and a hope that erasure might also lead to a better future.

My 2021 GSA Distinguished Lecture was an unusual one for me—and will perhaps also be for you. In my presentation, I wanted to acknowledge how I came to be in a position to receive such a humbling invitation. And I also wanted to outline some thoughts from my past scholarship on the Berlin avant-garde and my current project on decolonizing the European avant-garde with respect to the critical potentials embedded in aesthetic experiences. To these ends, I found—and find—it important to acknowledge that I currently hold the position of Associate Professor at California College of the Arts, an institution whose campuses are located in Huichin and Yelamu, also known as Oakland and San Francisco, California, on the unceded territories of Chochenyo and Ramaytush Ohlone peoples. This land acknowledgment is itself an important part of my talk and this published version of my text. Land acknowledgments have become means of recognition and solidarity in a good deal of contemporary scholarly and institutional practice. Put bluntly, land acknowledgments are a way to honor past, present, and future contributions of indigenous peoples and indigenous cultures.

While I do not discuss the cultures of the Cochenyo and Ramaytush Oholone peoples in detail in this essay, nor did I in the lecture itself, I do engage with that of the Hopi, formerly called Moki or (Spanish) Moqui, the westernmost group of Pueblo Indians, situated in what is now the northeastern portion of the state of Arizona in the United States of America. I wish to outline the contours of an approach to art

history specifically—and perhaps even, more broadly, to history itself—that situates the concept of "decolonization" as not only a pedagogy but also a methodology. By pedagogy, I mean *how and what we teach and research*. By methodology, I mean *the approach we take* to how and what we teach and research.

One of the most challenging aspects for me of the important focus on decolonization that we see in a good deal of contemporary scholarly and institutional practice is the way in which it purposefully unsettles not only what we know about the past but also what we think is possible in the present—and may be possible in the future. In my lecture, I focused on what I think are two particularly efficacious avant-garde strategies for engagement in relation to the idea of decolonization. Those strategies are juxtaposition and obfuscation. My focus on these strategies is not always explicit or clear; this lack of explicitness and clarity may or may not be intentional.

My interest in these strategies comes not only from my current research project on decolonizing the European avant-garde, but also from the research for my book, *Grotesque Visions: The Science of Berlin Dada*.[1] In *Grotesque Visions*, I focus on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on a number of members of the artistic avant-garde in Berlin as they familiarized themselves with contemporary scientific developments. I also analyze some of the strategies scientists in Germany developed to convey their findings to the unfamiliar public—and the way in which avant-garde artists challenged some of this scientific research in hopes of creating not necessarily just a better-informed public but also a more critical one.

Dada served in *Grotesque Visions* as a key art movement because of its focus on avant-garde criticality as well as decolonizing opportunity. Dada's origin story is often told as something like this: The movement began in 1916 in a cafe in Zurich, Switzerland, and was the brainchild of émigré artists and alienated pacifists. Dada's success is associated with its provocations and its popularity, evidenced in the fact that the movement quickly spread to other cities: New York, Paris, Hannover, Cologne, and of course, Berlin. If scholars identify a so-called end to this version of Dada, it is often located in Paris and dated sometime in 1922 or 1923, the result of a conflict between Dada practitioners and other artists who would eventually give birth to a new avant-garde art movement: surrealism.

But I want to tell the story of the European avant-garde in general—and of Dada in particular—a bit differently. For Berlin Dada philosopher Salomo Friedländer, the artistic grotesque offered a powerful form of avant-garde criticality. Playing himself, albeit with the ruses and refractions of identity, Friedländer often wrote using the pseudonym Mynona, an inversion of the German word for anonymous, or "Anonym." Always himself, but also always not fully himself, at least in part: anonymous. Mynona argued that "the imagination calls into question knowledge claims based on the immediate sensorial experience of the empirical world or artistic aspirations to naturalism or [Aestheticism and] *l'art pour l'art*. The goal of using the imagination as part of

a critical artistic strategy (i.e., the grotesque) was to demonstrate the fundamental unity of humanity in spite of perceived differences."[2]

More than a reductive, privileged utopianism, however, Friedländer's ideas come from a place simultaneously of hope and of marginalization. A German Jewish writer active during the early twentieth century, Friedländer directly experienced the horrific effects of antisemitism as well as the extreme financial precarity characteristic of the so-called struggling artist. While Friedländer's views on difference and unity are not the most widely recognized manifestations of the early-twentieth-century Dada movement, they inform key aspects of that movement's worldview and of that movement's history, particularly with respect to that movement's Berlin iterations. I wish to point out as well that Friedländer's "grotesque vision" was utopic but in a very particular way. Friedländer was not simply fantasizing about a better world. Rather, he was invoking the original concept of the avant-garde, as that concept was articulated in 1825 in a text most often attributed to the French Utopian Socialist Henri de Saint-Simon.

Saint-Simon saw in the role of the artist an important figure for transforming the existing social order, even as he—and more specifically, associated members of the nineteenth-century utopian socialist movement—engaged in colonizing practices of their own—for example, in Algiers. I want to quote from the text attributed to Saint-Simon, however, before I make a point about this particular idea of the avant-garde's colonial, colonizing affiliations:

> It is we artists who will serve as your vanguard; the power of the arts is indeed most immediate and the quickest. We possess arms of all kinds: when we want to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them upon marble or upon a canvas; we popularize them through poetry and through song; we employ by turns the lyre and the flute, the ode and the song, the story and the novel; the dramatic stage is spread out before us, and it is there that we exert a galvanizing and triumphant influence. We address ourselves to man's imagination and to his sentiments. We therefore ought always to exert the most lively and decisive action. And while today our role seems nonexistent or at least quite secondary, that is because the arts are missing what is essential to their energy and to their success, a shared impulse and a general idea.[3]

The immediacy of the arts, its power as "the most immediate and the quickest" form of spreading, popularizing, and influencing is still crucial. It explains the continued allure of aesthetic experiences as well as the deleterious effects of social media forms, from Twitter to TikTok, with their powerful visuals, often full of detailed information but also very short on facts.

In recognizing, perhaps even celebrating, the continued power of avant-garde criticality, we cannot and should not ignore the ways in which certain utopian socialist ideas, and European Enlightenment ones as well, became so readily aligned with colonialist and racist ideologies. Yet there is something both critical and communal in Saint-Simon's concept of the avant-garde that I think has great use for us still, in thinking through what decolonizing the European avant-garde might mean.

The artist in Saint-Simon's formulation serves a key function in envisioning a better world and does so in collaboration with others from the existing social order—the industrialist and the scientist. But how the artist communicates this vision is of key importance for understanding avant-garde criticality and the tactics of juxtaposition and obfuscation. This is what Maria Stavrinaki describes, citing the work of Russian linguist and literary theorist Roman Osipovich Jakobson, as the "double paradox" at the heart of modern art and mastered by practitioners of the Dada movement:

> In his 1921 text on Dada . . . Jakobson noted a double paradox created by modern art's continuous transgression of the past: the "legalization of illegality" and the devaluation of successive artistic currents. . . . Dada conquered over all logical contradictions. . . . Things had no absolute value in time and space not only because they were ephemeral but also because their interdependence far exceeded their individual particularities.[4]

This idea of a "double paradox," as Stavrinaki describes it, seems to hold both exceptional promise and to be exceptionally problematic with respect to avant-garde criticality and its relationship to contemporary discussions of decolonization. On the one hand, avant-garde artists increasingly sought to incorporate the limits of aesthetic acceptability—in Jakobson's and Stavrinaki's formulations, to legalize "illegality." On the other hand, avant-garde artists witnessed increasing marginalization, the decline of the arts as tools of social and political transformation.

Dada artists did not reject this double paradox. Rather, as Stavrinaki suggests, they embraced it. Dadaists embraced the limits of what art could be by exploiting that which was not considered art. And Dada artists thrived in seeking to transform art's impact into an immediate quotidian focus on interdependent and communal value rather than individual and isolated (commodity) form. In both ways, the *audience* for the avant-garde work became integral to the work's significance.

Let me suggest one example of how Dada's engagement with this double paradox—aesthetic innovation and increasing marginalization—might be used as a strategy for decolonizing the avant-garde. Adam Pendleton's *Dada Dancers (large study)* (2017) (Figure 2) plays with innovation and marginalization by focusing on an intersectional, intersubjective interconnectedness evidenced in his source material.

To do so, Pendleton uses juxtaposition and obfuscation. There are at least four art historical references in this contemporary work by Pendleton—two of the references are specific to the Dada movement of the early twentieth century, one of the references is to the mid-twentieth-century Black Arts Movement, while the fourth and—for this essay's argument—final reference is to the Hopi culture and, more specifically, the Hopi people's spirit figures known as Katsinas or Kachinas.[5] I will show and explain these art historical references briefly.

Let me note now, however, that Pendleton's *Dada Dancers (large study)* is purposefully more—or less—than meets the eye. Pendleton, a cisgender, queer-identified Black American artist, exhibits in this work the strategies of juxtaposition and obfuscation. To these ends, *Dada Dancers (large study)* is a continuation of an interdisciplinary art project called *Black Dada*, which Pendleton began around 2007 and 2008. Much like in the other manifestations of his *Black Dada* project, Pendleton juxtaposes in this work *Dada Dancers (large study)* numerous art historical references. Graphic text overlays Pendleton's silkscreen, rendering intersubjective the otherwise distinct, figurative forms. It is tough to distinguish one dancer from another, the bodies from the text, that overlay—or perhaps integrate—them. Importantly in *Dada Dancers (large study)*, Pendleton also addresses some of his source material's own iconicity. Pendleton obscures in his *Dada Dances (large study)* the now-iconic image barely visible in the center and background of the work—a photograph from the 1920s of the Dada artist Sophie Taeuber—also known as Sophie Taeuber-Arp—and another figure in costume.[6] Taeuber, inspired by Hopi Katsinas, had made these costumes for a Dada play.

But let's turn back again to *Dada Dancers (large study)*. In allowing the viewer to identify the iconic photograph while also seeking to erase or obscure that photograph, Pendleton calls the viewer's attention back to the actual source material—that is, Pendleton brings the viewer's attention back to the indigenous North American Hopi people and the cultural and spiritual significance of the Katsina. In attempting a form of cultural and aesthetic decolonization, Pendleton can only return to the Hopi Katsina source material, however, by juxtaposing and obscuring the iconicity of the Taeuber photograph.

Clearly, I think there is something profoundly important in our current discussions about decolonization. My concern with decolonization comes from my own subject position, and this subject position is one primarily of privilege but also, intermittently and unpredictably, one of marginalization as well. To these ends, I use the work of Griselda Pollock as a point of departure and of critical engagement, as a methodology, and as a way of articulating my own subject position. In particular, my position is informed by Pollock's 1992 text *Avant Garde Gambits, 1888–1893: Gender and the Colour of Art History*.[7] A cis-gendered, white, queer man, I benefit from settler

Figure 2. Adam Pendleton
Dada Dancers (large study), 2017
Silkscreen ink on Mylar
54 5/16 × 42 5/16 in (137.95 × 107.47 x 4.45 cm)
Installation view of *shot him in the face*, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, UK (2017)

colonialism. My race, my whiteness, embedded in a patriarchal system, benefits me even as I navigate the asymmetrical terrain of public and political recognition of my same-sex relationships—asymmetrical insofar as, for me, my queerness is not always a point of marginalization. In fact, it can also be a form of access. But it can also be cause for prejudice, for limit, for restriction. While these aspects of my argument may seem to some simply personal, they are through and through political and, from the scholarly point of view of my project, vitally necessary to articulate. They inform my approach, my privilege, my perspective, and my practice.

In her forthcoming article on the concept of decolonization, a version of which she presented at the Berlin Program's Summer Workshop in 2021, Maureen Gallagher suggests that the various ways in which we have come to understand the concept are key to realizing that term's potential.[8] Gallagher examines competing ideas of what it means to "decolonize" and cites a wealth of literature on decolonization to these ends. More specifically, Gallagher suggests that decolonization is "not about destroying but about acknowledging institutions or ways of life that are unsustainable or no longer supportable."[9] At least two competing approaches to decolonization inform Gallagher's thought.

The first approach is one associated with a key 2012 text by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang titled "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." A particular excerpt from Tuck and Yang's text, an excerpt Gallagher cites as well, is helpful in understanding what I would describe as a particularly narrow view of "decolonization":

> When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future. Decolonize (a verb) and decolonization (a noun) cannot easily be grafted onto pre-existing discourses/frameworks, even if they are critical, even if they are anti-racist, even if they are justice frameworks. The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation. When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn't have a synonym.[10]

One of the concerns with Tuck and Yang's approach, and others like it, is the way in which such a position seems to foreclose the possibility of activating anew the lost, seemingly forgotten pasts that critical historical and art historical scholarship might recover. Decolonization, to be sure, should not be a "metaphor" that implicitly or explicitly allows for continued "settler appropriation." In contrast, however, I would point out that a focus on decolonization should not prevent us from seeking contem-

porary recognition for historical marginalization or erasure, for aesthetic appropriation as a form of intersectional solidarity.

Elizabeth Mackinlay and Katelyn Barney's writing exemplifies to these ends a second approach to the concept of decolonization, one that encourages broader historical and narratological imperatives even as it also emphasizes repatriation:

> Decolonisation is a concept that takes on different meanings across different contexts—it simultaneously evokes [a] historical narrative of the end of empire, a particular version of postcolonial political theory, a way of knowing that resists the Eurocentrism of the West, a moral imperative for righting the wrongs of colonial domination, and an ethical stance in relation to self-determination, social justice, and human rights for Indigenous peoples enslaved and disempowered by imperialism.[11]

Mackinlay and Barney emphasize decolonization as a "historical narrative" and a "way of knowing" in contrast to Tuck and Yang's much narrower concern with decolonization as a metaphor. Let me clarify this distinction with two examples.

Tuck and Yang's definition of "decolonization" quite literally means repatriation—a return of that which was stolen from colonized peoples. Repatriation has become an important topic in Germany and elsewhere, of course. A focus on repatriation might include a broad discussion of such institutions as the Humboldt Forum or a more particular focus on specific examples such as the *Stone Cross* displayed until recently in the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin. I will bracket a discussion of the Humboldt Forum but let me explain the *Stone Cross* in relation to Tuck and Yang's concerns with repatriation.

The *Stone Cross* speaks to German colonialism specifically and European colonialism more broadly on at least two levels. First, the artifact itself is an historical example of European colonial exploitation on the African continent. In this historical sense, the artifact predates European colonialism in Africa perhaps only formally. The 3.5-meter-high navigation landmark, erected by Portuguese explorer Diogo Cão, was first placed on Namibia's coast in 1498.[12] It was only centuries later that a formal European colonial segmentation of Africa occurred. In 1884 and 1885, European colonial powers—Germany included—met to divide Africa at the now infamous Berlin Conference. The *Stone Cross* was brought to Germany shortly thereafter, in 1893, after present-day Namibia and portions of South Africa became a German imperial protectorate: that is to say, a German colony.

The second way the *Stone Cross* speaks to Europe's engagements in Africa is even more directly connected to Germany's own colonial history. In May of 2019, the German Foreign Ministry announced that the artifact, which had been on display at the

Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin, would be returned to Namibia, as part of an ongoing effort to evaluate Germany's often dismissed colonial activities in Africa and elsewhere during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dismissed, as the traditional narrative goes, because Germany's colonies supposedly were relatively few and Germany's activities as a so-called colonial power relatively minor in comparison to those of other European countries. This is the type of decolonization to which Tuck and Yang refer, the recognition of false ownership and stolen artifacts, and the concomitant need to return these artifacts to the indigenous peoples from which they were taken, and the colonized peoples from which they were stolen, often under the auspices of protection, safe-keeping, or blatant and celebrated conquest.

There is another kind of colonization, however, which analyses such as Tuck and Yang's are less effective in addressing. This kind of colonization bears the traces of material objects and geographical territories to be sure, but might more correctly be considered aesthetic, even cultural in a broader sense. In other words, this type of colonization is better addressed via the form of decolonization advocated by Mackinlay and Barney as a recognition of the appropriation of a people's culture and an examination of the historical narrative to better inform our contemporary ways of knowing. Sophie Taeuber und Erika Schlegel appear in the now-iconic photograph *Maskenballkostüme (Hopi-Indianer)* in Zurich, Switzerland, a photograph taken around 1926 (Figure 3).[13] The photograph of Taeuber's Hopi-inspired costumes allow for the kind of decolonization advocated by Mackinlay and Barney, and this photograph's iconicity represents both the problems of European avant-garde colonialism and the lost histories of colonial exploitation as well as an opportunity for recovering this history and advocating for contemporary, intersectional coalition building.

An example of Sophie Taeuber's *Maskenballkostüme (Hopi-Indianer)* was included in the recent *Dada Afrika* exhibition which toured in cities such as Berlin, Zurich, and Paris. The exhibition showcased the many ways in which Dada artists turned toward non-European cultures for inspiration and source materials for their avant-garde projects. The problematic inclusion of a work, inspired not by African cultures but by those of the North American Hopi, rightly received critical attention in the press. The presence of Taeuber's Hopi-inspired costume led to a productive dissonance for me, one that I was not fully able to understand until a series of productive exchanges with the archive director at the Berlinische Galerie, Dr. Ralf Burmeister, and my colleagues at the Technische Universität München, Dr. Sarah Hegenbart, and Dr. Cole Collins. Taeuber created in 1926 the image known as *Kostümentwurf (Hopi-Indianer)* (Figure 4). The costumes the artist made were based on the Katsina spiritual figures used in ceremonial and sometimes nonceremonial functions among the Hopi people who now mostly reside in a reservation in the state of Arizona in the USA.[14] Katsina are spiritual figures in the Hopi tradition, embodied by live performers in costume as part of cultural ceremonies. Yet Katsina are sometimes sold as dolls that

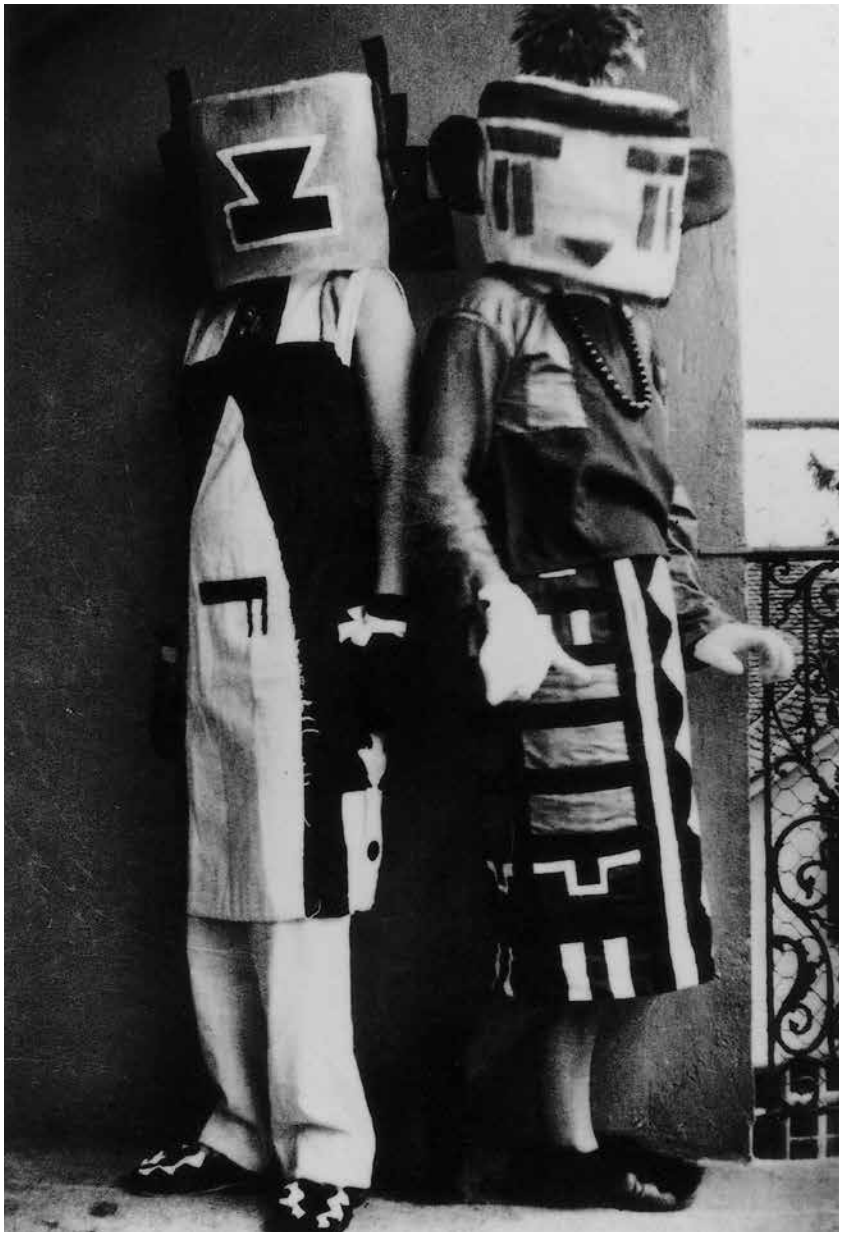

Figure 3. Sophie Taeuber-Arp und Erika Schlegel in *Maskenballkostümen (Hopi-Indianer)*, photograph, Zürich, c. 1926, Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth
Sophie Taeuber-Arp und Erika Schlegel in *Maskenballkostümen (Hopi-Indianer)*, circa 1926, photograph. © 2022 Stiftung Arp e.V., Berlin/Rolandswerth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

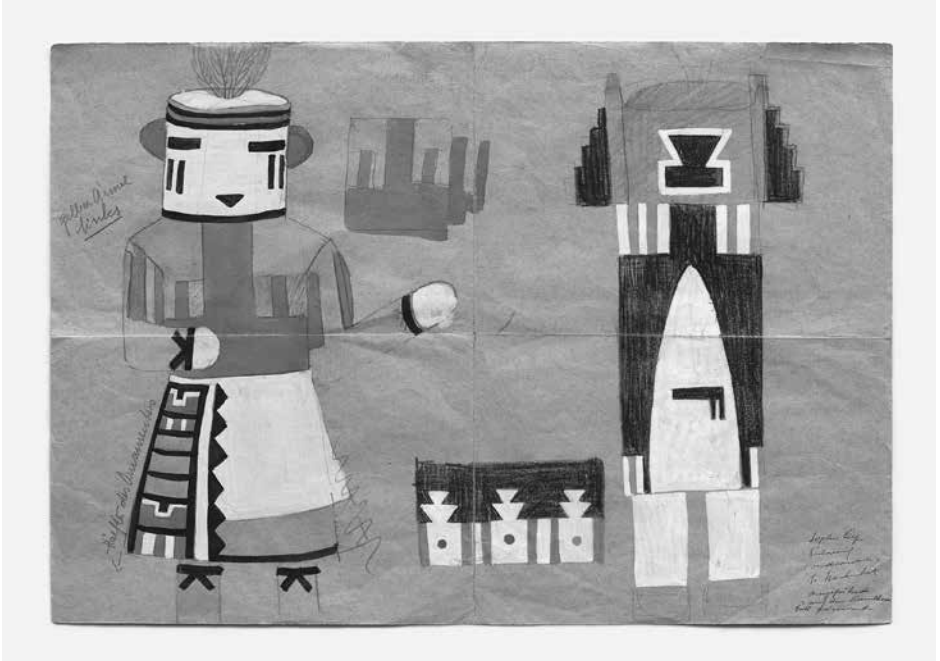

Figure 4. Sophie Taeuber-Arp, *Costume Design* (*Hopi Indians*), circa 1926, colored illustration. © Arp Museum Bahnhof Rolandseck _ Artist Rights Society ARS, New York.tif

represent various forms of the Katsina spirits. However, according to some indigenous spokespersons and scholars, that Katsina are sold as tourist objects or even preserved in museum collections goes against the original purpose of the Katsina as ephemeral embodiments of immaterial entities.[15]

Resituating Taeuber's *Maskenballkostüme (Hopi-Indianer)* in the context of Hopi Katsina culture helps create a more informed "historical narrative" and a "way of knowing" with respect to Taeuber's appropriation of Hopi culture. We can begin to more fully decolonize works like Taeuber's Hopi-inspired costumes and the related, iconic photograph by turning to key definitions of the avant-garde—and, in particular, the avant-garde's concern with ephemerality, iconicity, and time.

As Peter Bürger outlined in response to his much-referenced 1974 text *Theorie der Avant-Garde*, the avant-garde's potential lies in its immanent critique. Immanent critique renders in the context of the avant-garde—a fundamentally "utopian" project—concepts such as origin and authenticity nearly nonsensical. Avant-garde origin stories only, paradoxically, exist as historical chronologies or in comparative analyses—paradoxical because the avant-garde work references its own time, and not the historical or comparative time such analyses would assign it. Bürger notes in his 2010 essay the role that "utopia" plays to these ends:

> In so far as the historical avant-garde movements respond to the developmental stage of autonomous art epitomized by aestheticism, they are part of modernism; in so far as they call the institution of art into question, they constitute a break with modernism. The history of the avant-gardes, each with its own special historical conditions, arises out of this contradiction. . . . The unification of art and life intended by the avant-garde can only be achieved if it succeeds in liberating aesthetic potential from the institutional constraints which block its social effectiveness. In other words: the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the possible realization of a utopia in which art and life are united.[16]

Put another way, the chronological questions of origin and authenticity are less important, almost nonsensical, when trying to address what Maria Stavrinaki describes as the avant-garde object's "interdependence." In emphasizing the ways in which the artwork is more about an interdependence rather than an individual particularity, we can grasp the work's avant-garde criticality without positioning the work as a discrete "object"—what Stavrinaki describes as an object with "an absolute value in time and space." What I am arguing here along the lines that Bürger and Stavrinaki suggest is that a focus on the avant-garde work's interdependence better explains the artwork's critical intent. The avant-garde work loses its criticality when we focus for its meaning solely on historical or comparative analyses. The avant-garde artwork, in other words, is always of its own time, always of its own present moment.

This approach to decolonizing the avant-garde is one that focuses on the work's interdependence, and on strategies such as those of obfuscation and juxtaposition to recover that interdependence in service of creating intersectional possibilities. This approach takes inspiration from Griselda Pollock's text *Avant-Garde Gambits: Gender and the Colour of Art History*. In that text, originally given in 1992 as the Walter Neurath Memorial Lecture at Birkbeck College in London, Pollock focuses on avant-garde strategies and the way in which they might deny or silence the agency of women, colonized people, people of color, and discussions of sexuality. The primary target of her analysis is the artist Paul Gauguin and his depictions of Tahitian women. Gaugin's travels to Tahiti in the 1880s and 1890s resulted in a radical avant-garde break from previously vanguard painterly approaches. Pollock remarks to these ends the way in which Gaugin depicts in 1892 his 13-year-old Tahitian bride—a painting titled *Manao tupapau* (The spirit of the dead keep watch). Gaugin's painting was according to Pollock an update on what had previously been the exemplar of avant-garde depictions of the female body: Édouard Manet's *Olympia* from 1863.

Pollock does two things in *Avant-Garde Gambits*. First, she gives substantive attention to her privileged position as a white woman and a colonial subject of the colonial era. Born in South Africa during Apartheid, growing up in the former British colony of Canada, and living in England, Pollock suggests her methodology must be

self-reflective. That self-reflexivity then leads to her methodological disidentification with systems of power from which she benefits, a reidentification with marginalized cultures and peoples about whom she writes, and a theoretical revision that informs a new historical narrative about artworks that reference colonized peoples—seeking, in effect, to give the colonized a voice in contemporary discussions of these historical works even when these colonized peoples and marginalized voices are themselves not present.

While Bürger and Stavrinaki help us understand the unique role of immanent critique in avant-garde criticality, Pollock's approach to the avant-garde directly addresses the ways in which avant-garde practice, historically, has depended upon colonial exploitation as well as sometimes very overt forms of racism, misogyny, and sexual oppression. Contemporary artist Adam Pendleton extends these lines of thought, focusing in his *Dada Dancers (large study)* on the potentials of avant-garde criticality in service of recovering the contributions of marginalized figures and colonized peoples as well as building a narrative of intersectional possibility. The title of Pendleton's *Dada Dancers (large study)* comes in part from a photomontage created by the Berlin-based Dada artists Hannah Höch over the course of two years, 1919 and 1920, and titled *DADA-Tanz*, translated as "Dada Dance" or "Dada Ball."

As the work of a variety of scholars from Hanna Bergius to Ralf Burmeister, from Maria Makela to Peter Boswell have shown, Höch was continuously marginalized as the only woman among the otherwise all-male Berlin Dada movement. That marginalization took the form of pejorative dismissals of her work as "too decorative" or "too feminine," as well as in the treatment she and her lesbian partner, the Dutch writer Til Brugman, received among members of the supposedly progressive European avant-garde.

While Höch's figures show movement and corporeal fluidity, they are nevertheless separate and individuated at their "Dada Ball." Pendleton reference's both the formal fluidity of Höch's work as well as her personal dismissals among fellow avant-garde artists by invoking *Dada-TANZ*. In Pendleton's *Dada Dancers (large study)*, the bodily movements bleed into the constant artistic imperative for performative reproduction, suggesting the always possible future that presents itself in each new iterative act. The bodies may appear to be used at any moment as textual messages or as corporeal forms. We are unable to determine—or to "predetermine," really—what forms these dancers, their textual messages, even their bodily shapes might take in the future. And here not only the possibilities of the future are important, but also how to communicate these possibilities in a way that does not foreclose chance, change, new opportunity.[17]

It is not simply Taeuber's *Maskenballkostüme (Hopi-Indianer)* that forms the second reference but rather the iconicity of the photograph of Taeuber and Erika Schlegel from about 1926 that is the intended focus. Using strategies such as blurred

reproduction techniques, graphite overlays, silkscreens, and repeated reproductions of the photograph itself, Pendleton simultaneously obscures yet also juxtaposes the source photograph and his own work. In making the source photograph nearly illegible, *Dada Dancer (large study)* actively seeks to use and to erase that photograph—to problematize, in other words, that photograph's privilege position as the primary object of art historical reference. The photograph is primary in the sense that it is both the iconic reference for Taeuber's *Maskenballkostüme* as well as an oblique cultural reference to the Hopi people and their Katsina spirit figures that served as Taeuber's inspiration. Pendleton actively seeks to shatter if not to destroy the photograph's iconicity and redirect the viewer's attention to the Hopi culture that the photograph and Taeuber's *Maskenballkostüme* had displaced.

The final reference for us in Pendleton's effort to decolonize the avant-garde with *Dada Dancers (large study)* is a less explicit one: Amiri Baraka's 1964 poem "Black Dada Nihilismus."[18] The poem informs Pendleton's ongoing *Black Dada* project and comes from Baraka's involvement with the Black Power and the Black Arts movements in the US during the 1960s and 1970s. In many ways, Black Power activities prefigure contemporary social justice campaigns such as the Black Lives Matter movement. It should come as no surprise then that Pendleton's own *Black Dada* project parallels the Black Lives Matter movement in much the same way as the Black Arts Movement companioned Black Power campaigns. As Daniel Won-Gu Kim suggests, Baraka's language—not only in his poem, "Black Dada Nihilismus," but in others of his works as well—is far from radical when situated in the tradition of European Dada. The wonderful world of words: They provoke, they shock, they challenge—yet they also only show the illusion of meaning. Nevertheless, Baraka was jailed for poems like "Black Dada Nihilismus," poems that were deemed to be incendiary. This imprisonment, for us today perhaps, was ironic and symbolic, an imperative for silence in spite of the history of slavery and racial injustice to which Baraka was responding and to which he was trying to bring broader public attention. Baraka was successful in his provocations in other ways as well; Won-Gu Kim suggests that Baraka found in Dada key tools for "destroying the degraded language logic of bourgeois Western rationality."

Pendleton takes up Baraka's avant-garde imperative, of juxtaposition and obfuscation, in the *Black Dada* project in general and in works such as *Dada Dancers (large study)* in particular. This imperative is a call for racial justice in the 1960s and 1970s. It is paralleled today not only in the social and political efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement, but also in the important initiatives in German Studies broadly.[19]

Adam Pendleton suggests in his contemporary *Black Dada* project the important connections among these past efforts at social and political justice and contemporary, intersubjective, intersectional concerns. According to Pendleton's 2008 manifesto,

> Black Dada is a way to talk about the future while talking about the past. It is our present moment. The Black Dada must use irrational language. The Black Dada must exploit the logic of identity. Black Dada is neither madness, nor wisdom, nor irony, nor naiveté. Black Dada: we are successive. Black Dada: we are not exclusive. Black Dada: we abhor simpletons and are perfectly capable of an intelligent discussion. The Black Dada's manifesto is both form and life. Black Dada your history of art.[20]

Pendleton emphasizes both juxtaposition and obfuscation in many works from his *Black Dada* project, including *Black Dada Flag (Black Lives Matter)* from 2018 (Figure 5). In this location-specific piece, Pendleton brings attention to past and contemporary forms of racism and racial injustice in the United States, locating his *Black Dada Flag* at the site of a portion of Randall's Island, a site with a particularly troubling, racist history. Pendleton's flag thus is meant both to identify with a specific time and place, and also to reject the historical and geographical erasures that such ontological referentiality demand. *Black Dada Flag (Black Lives Matter)* invokes and challenges the past, the problematic geography, and returns us to that problematic history, a history that is sadly still with us. Curator Adrienne Edwards notes that she hopes works like Pendleton's "will serve as a platform to help us imagine what is possible today through the poetics of protest by breaking down boundaries between galleries and the street, the artist and their audience and making new propositions that open up conversations about the role of art in today's society."[21]

Pendleton further explores juxtaposition and obfuscation as forms of avant-garde criticality in his recent exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). In that exhibition, titled *Who is Queen?*, Pendleton examines the myriad forms and points of contact made possible by his own identity as a cis-gendered, queer, Black man. In so doing, Pendleton also insinuates the museum viewer in an effective erasure of the museum's institutional boundaries. Figuratively "unbuilding" the institution of art from the inside out, Pendleton's massive installation includes scaffolding, large-scale sculptures and paintings, and interactive videos and projections. Forcing the viewer to become part of a museum that he has effectively created inside MoMA's structure, *Who is Queen?* provides for a recognition of interdependence, of juxtaposition and obfuscation, in telling another history of an iconic institution.

Much like *Dada Dancers (large study)*, Pendleton's main point with respect to the exhibition *Who is Queen?* and much of his *Black Dada* project is the extent to which this other history—the history of racial oppression, of misogyny, of colonialism, homophobia, transphobia—are always there to be revealed. The avant-garde artist uses their work to reveal these suppressed histories through immanent avant-garde critique.

Let me return one last time to Pendleton's *Dada Dancers (large study)* to emphasize just how complex and insightful this work is. I outlined the ways in which decolonizing the avant-garde might mean revealing the interdependence of the artwork's

Figure 5. Adam Pendleton
Black Dada Flag (Black Lives Matter), 2015–18
Digital print on polyester
72 × 108 in (182.88 × 274.32 cm)
Installation view at Frieze New York (2018)

references, offering a contrast to approaches that seek to focus on historical origin stories or concepts such as authenticity to make their claims. I identified the ways in which the work of Peter Bürger, Griselda Pollock, and Marina Stavrinaki inform my approach. And I spent a good deal of time examining the references for Adam Pendleton's *Dada Dancers (large study)*.

I want to conclude my GSA Distinguished Lecture 2021 by returning to the beginning. To the wonderful world of words—of Germany and German words, in particular—to which my Aunt Hiede introduced me. The gesture was a gift, one of privilege and promise and access, to be sure, which is why I wish to remind us all about what gifts like these—the wonderful world of words, of engaging other cultures, of sharing a bit of ourselves—can mean. My Aunt Hiede's gift was amplified. I gave it to others. The gesture lives on. My trip to Germany in 1987 was my first international flight. My Aunt Hiede and my Uncle Gene introduced me to Germany and their German friends, art exhibits and cultural exchange, Glühwein and Weinprobe.

It may seem unusual to spend so much time on the personal side of my relationship to Germany, and German culture, in this essay. But my Aunt Hiede represents to me, and she and my Uncle Gene gave to me, a profound appreciation for cultural difference, for the power of art, for the wonderful world of words. This gift lives on. It opened up the wonderful world of words—and of things—for me in ways that are marked by privilege and access. I was a grantee, a fellow, of the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies at the Free University Berlin during the 2003–2004 academic year. My parents, Travis and Lila, visited. I showed them what had become, already by then, my "zweite Heimat." We wandered Berlin. Visited Dresden. Travis and Lila and I went to the Staatsoper. Ate Apfelstrudel. They tried my new-found love, sushi, at the Surf und Sushi Restaurant near Hackescher Markt. They did not like sushi. They thought Hackescher Markt was beautiful.

The wonderful world of words . . . Clearly, words alone cannot describe how a trip to Germany can change a worldview. Words present us only with an illusion of meaning. But we can hope—and perhaps it is always only hope—that if we all look hard enough and share our worldviews often enough, we might find in the wonderful world of words, other worldviews as well.

Notes

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1. Thomas O. Haakenson, *Grotesque Visions: The Science of Berlin Dada* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).
2. Haakenson, *Grotesque Visions,* 33.
3. Henri de Saint-Simon, "L'Artiste, le savant et l'industriel" ("The Artist, the Scientist, and the Industrialist") (1825), *Oeuvres complètes de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin* (The Complete Works of de Saint-Simon and d'Enfantin) 10 (1867): 210.
4. Maria Stavrinaki, *Dada Presentism: An Essay on Art and History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 35–36.
5. The terms "Katsina" and "Kachina" both appear in reference to the Hopi spirit figures. I will use the spelling "Katsina" in the text.
6. I refer to the artist throughout the essay as Sophie Taeuber, rather than Sophie Taeuber-Arp, in order to define her independently of her marriage to artist Hans (Jean) Arp.
7. Griselda Pollock, *Avant Garde Gambits, 1888–1893: Gender and the Colour of Art History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993).
8. Maureen O. Gallagher, "COVID-19, Decolonization, and Teaching German in the Settler Colonial University, cited with permission via email to the author October 11, 2021.
9. Gallagher, "COVID-19," 16.
10. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 3.
11. Elizabeth Mackinlay, and Katelyn Barney, "Unknown and Unknowing Possibilities: Transformative Learning, Social Justice, and Decolonising Pedagogy in Indigenous Australian Studies," *Journal of Transformative Education* 12, no. 1 (2014): 55.
12. Bukola Adebayo, "Germany to Return 500-Year-Old Monument to Namibia," *CNN World*, https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/17/africa/germany-to-return-namibia-art-scli-intl/index.html.
13. Note that the Museum Rostock gives the grammatically incorrect title: *Maskenballkostümen (Hopi-Indianer)*. See https://arpmuseum.org/en/exhibitions/temporary-exhibitions/retrospective/the-arp-collection-2021.html
14. During the GSA Distinguished Lecture, I showed examples of two Katsina dolls: *Nuvakchin Mana* ("Snow Maiden") and the *Turquoise Lady*, by Hopi carvers Stewart Nicholas and Neil David, respectively.
15. Ryon Polequaptewa, who advised the Heard Museum in Arizona mentions a particularly revered figure, Chief Wilson Tawaquaptewa, who produced nontraditional katsinas for nonceremonial purposes. Kathy Zarur, exchange with the author via the moderated Facebook group Art History Teaching Facebook, October 2021.
16. Peter Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*," *New Literary History*, 41 (2010): 696.
17. For more on Hannah Höch's *Dada Tanz*, see the website of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem: https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/220491
18. Baraka's "Black Dada Nihilismus," is ideally played from the 1964 recording the poet made with the New York Art Quartet, an all-Black jazz group, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=98oK6zZXmQw
19. This important activity includes not only the work of groups such as the Black German Heritage and Research Association and the Diversity, Decolonization, and the German Curriculum movement but also excellent published scholarship such as Tiffany N. Florvil's *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2020), as well Mike Sell's *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008)
20. See Adam Pendleton, "Black Dada," *The Black Dada Reader* (London: Koenig Books, 2017): 333–345. In true Dada tradition, the manifesto appears to be rearranged repeatedly and published elsewhere. Pendleton also performed the "Black Dada Manifesto" at least once, at Berlin's KW

Institute for Contemporary Art as part of the exhibition *shot him in the face*: https://www.kw-berlin.de/en/adam-pendleton-shot-him-in-the-face/.

21. Adrienne Edwards is quoted in "From 'Suffragette City' to Black Lives Matter in 'ASSEMBLY,'" *Frieze New York*, February 15, 2018, https://www.frieze.com/article/suffragette-city-black-lives-matter-assembly. See also Adrienne Edwards, "The Struggle for Happiness, or What is American about Black Dada," *The Black Dada Reader* (London: Koenig, 2017), 29–34