

# TODAY'S AVANT-GARDE

---

By Ben Beaumont-Thomas, WGSN, 16 November 2010

The avant-garde in music, theatre and visual arts today is interested in breaking down the distance between art and audience to create personal, emotive work that truly reflects our daily lives. WGSN reports.

## Music: noise turns into pop

As soon as someone plugged in the first electric guitar, musicians have been pushing sonic possibilities with the logical conclusion in walls of punishing sound that almost completely evaporate the notion of melody, harmonics and rhythm.

Now this exploration is not being limited to just guitars, drums and other traditional instruments.

Electronic musician Daniel Lopatin, aka Oneohtrix Point Never, uses ancient synthesisers to create his unique brand of music, and sounds once associated with FM rock in the 1980s are suddenly valid once again.

### WGSN FACT FILE

Avant-garde means "advance guard" or "**vanguard**". The adjective form is used in English, to refer to people or works that are **experimental** or innovative, particularly with respect to **art, culture, and politics**. *Wikipedia*



*New music: youth trend analysis*

9 September 2010

WGSN speaks to taste-defining music industry experts and breaking artists to uncover the best new music in late 2010.



*JPEG Gen*

13 July 2010

The JPEG Generation inhabits a random landscape of absurd wit, irony and the unexpected. An aesthetic of speed over process and crude computer craft combines jarring scale and motifs into unusual textures. A pastiche of incongruous materials, pattern and form become LOL (laugh-out-loud) compositions.

"In a way he's reinvented the orchestra every time he's made a new track," explains Adam Harper, blogger and author of the book *Infinite Music*.

"The noise has dissipated and out of it has coalesced pop; in the same way some Abstract Expressionist painters in the 50s and 60s became more and more representational.

"Abstract expressionism was about pure, meaningless, abstract beauty of form. Emotional, personal images full of meaning. That sort of thing has happened to people who were very much noise-orientated."

Harper meanwhile champions post-dubstep dance artists such as Zomby, Ikonika and Bok Bok as pointing the way for the avant-garde.

"What dance allows is a new form of avant garde, because if you repeat something and you can dance to it, you've naturalised it for someone.

"The old expectation of modernism was that you would produce something really weird, like Boulez or Schoenberg did. But instead of creating alien music out of nowhere, it has to be based on something we've already heard, and on repetition, to make sense for you. That's what allows a proper avant-garde scene to develop, not this constant alienation. And if real avant-gardeism is going to happen, it needs a collective effort, and a community," says Harper.

## Theatre: personal space

Personality and accessibility are what drives a lot of current avant-garde theatre - placing intimacy, humanity and "realness" against our often digitally mediated lives.

Companies such as Punchdrunk, Ontroerend Goed, Coney and Blast Theory have all been staging interactive "plays" in which the audience is free to move around and interact with the performance.

Battersea Arts Centre recently staged the One-on-One Festival, where all the performances were for a single audience member.

In one piece, you sat on a stairlift above the performer Barnaby Stone as he delivered a history lesson about a piece of oak, before bringing you down and handing you a sliver of the ancient timber inscribed with your initials. In another, a nurse "healed" you with wine and philosophy. Elsewhere, a candlelit girl sang Billie Holiday as you both stared into a giant suspended mirror.

Christer Lundahl and Martina Seidl's piece, *Rotating in a Room of Images*, was a highlight. A voice spoke to the spectator through darkness via noise-cancelling headphones, as hands reached out to dance, and sinister figures emerge in bursts of light.

"We think of our bodies as a very two-dimensional surface," explains Seidl. "We're never really encouraged to really feel our bodies like they are, as three dimensional.

"How often do we feel the presence of our backs, other than when we're walking home from the pub and we feel threatened? That's why we like to work with the dark. I think to be able to go into the future. We need to understand the body and its natural capacities."

"We've been using shamanic rituals, trying hypnosis. If the unconscious is allowed to operate in the creative process, you will find unexpected pathways," agrees Lundahl.

They excitedly discuss the interface of science and art, researching how the brain reacts to its surroundings, and using the work of Rudolf Laban, who documented human movements, particularly how to harmoniously and meaningfully move and interact using the body.

For their next piece, where they record visitors, artists, academics and staff at a Gothenberg museum, they plan to "look at the museum as a conscious entity itself, and ask the question if the museum learns from the shows and the artist that it hosts."

## Art: the freedom of hybrid

The often obscure world of contemporary visual art is also becoming increasingly democratic and accessible.

Jennifer Higgie, co-editor of contemporary-art magazine *Frieze*, describes it thus: "A lot of artists in the 80s and 90s had theory rammed down their throats; everything had to be justified within a theoretical framework, and had to have a certain political bent.

"It crippled a lot of artists, because it was this overriding ideology. And that has absolutely been blown apart. I'll go into art

schools now and see students doing highly different things.

“Biennales 20 years ago tended to show a lot of the usual suspects, such as artists with big, international careers, whereas now you’ll see a much greater emphasis on what’s being created locally.”

Where once schools of hardcore ideologies would exist separately from one another, now there are individual voices, perhaps linked together with similar artists by a curator or gallery.

“People have an innate sense of freedom,” continues Higgie. “The art world is really accommodating now - you don’t get much border control, and that’s a healthy thing.”

It’s a similar process in the musical avant-garde. “In the 90s you had genre, but now that’s split into two. You now have your personal artist, who often has a recognisable sound, within a much broader idea of style,” explains Harper.



Frieze art fair



Frieze art fair

Higgie’s co-editor, Jörg Heiser, describes this new art-world dynamic as “super-hybridity”: “a life between anger and equanimity, sociability and loneliness, city lights and desert, advanced tech-iness and the deliberately antediluvian.”

As in global fashion, the internet has allowed for a cherry-picking hybrid culture, where inspirations, shorn of irony, are placed alongside one another in a near-infinite palette.

The danger of hybrid culture, of course, is “the uncritical acceptance of form, genre and content as one gloopy morass”, as philosopher Nina Power puts it.

But kept in check, the avant garde, now unencumbered by dogma and with a human heart, is as relevant and varied as it has ever been.

## Gaming: avant play

Companies such as Coney are broadening their practice outside the theatre with projects like Papa Sangre - an online “3D audio” game in which you solve the mystery via listening through headphones.

Tassos Stevens, co-director of Coney, describes it as experiencing a world through sound and music, and a game where you are able to be yourself.

According to games creator Jane McGonigal, the new direction of gaming will force people to be themselves, collaborate, and escape real-world suffering.

McGonigal also believes that games are essential to the future survival of the human species, and with avant-gaming now making it possible for people to create something unique through game play, this could hold true.

Stevens said: “There is no inherent superiority to any medium, genre or convention,” so we can expect gaming to really push the limit and challenge the creative process.

With games just beginning to do big, extraordinary creative things, good game design, however, is of core importance coupled with this element of “art coming into game”, says Stevens.

Entering the Palace of Bones from Papa Sangre on Vimeo.