

The Avant-Garde, Affectively (Leuven, 2-4 Feb 26)

Leuven, Belgium, Feb 2-04, 2026

Deadline: Sep 1, 2025

Zanë Hadri

CFP: THE AVANT-GARDE, AFFECTIVELY

Symposium hosted by the MDRN Lab of the University of Leuven, Belgium

Convened by Zanë Hadri (University of Leuven) & Susan Best (Griffith University), with Sascha Bru (University of Leuven).

Confirmed keynote speaker: Prof. Thierry de Duve.

This interdisciplinary symposium aims to explore how the avant-garde (be it historical, neo or contemporary) intersects with affect. Adopting a methodologically inclusive approach to affect, feeling and emotion, we seek (i) to investigate if and how the artistic experimentation of the avant-garde throughout the 20th and 21st centuries has given aesthetic shape to (new) affects, and (ii) to foster an open debate on which theories lend themselves best to examining the affective, feeling and emotional range of avant-garde practices across arts and media.

While the avant-garde has often been said to spearhead cultural development, scholars of the avant-garde have been relatively slow in engaging with the recently emerged field of affect theory and the broader scholarly study of emotions and feelings. Scholars in cultural history and critical theory, psychology and psychoanalysis, and postcolonial, feminist and queer theory have long established the key role of the arts in maintaining and widening the affective registers of cultures. Yet the role of the avant-garde in this process is at present oblique at best.

This is not to say that discussion of affects and emotions is entirely absent from the study of the avant-garde. The avant-garde has been widely associated with feelings of shock, anger, disgust, indifference and shame, the latter also being a touchstone for many affect theorists today. It has long been established as well that certain avant-garde formations, like those of the feminist avant-gardes or of Expressionism and Surrealism (in their many guises and iterations), worked with and on affect, feeling and emotion. If we understand affect broadly as a dimension of cultural communication situated between thought and action, connecting the subject and the collective, then perhaps the passionate efforts of the avant-garde to critique the status quo may be said to have rendered experiential new forms of being. These affective-intellectual complexes may be thought of as preconceptual, emergent, unformed, but reaching toward language or a settled image.

We welcome 300-word proposals for individual papers accompanied by 150-word biographies. Questions addressed can include, but are not restricted to:

- What (new or other) types of affect or feeling were given shape by the avant-garde? If scholarship so far has tended to isolate mainly “negative” affective states and complexes as mentioned above, did the avant-garde not also expand the expressive repertoire for emotions like, for instance, joy and community, enthusiasm or love? And what (if any) other aesthetic categories grounded in these alternative types of affect were yielded by the avant-garde?

- Does the affective range or signatures of the avant-garde (historical, neo, contemporary) change over time, and how, more generally, can the avant-garde be related dialectically to the dominant cultural structures of feeling? What, for example, are contemporary avant-garde practices doing in terms of expanding our affective register, perhaps as an answer to ecological and political crises currently unfolding?

- What methodologies best make this production visible across (but also within) different ‘isms’, formations, media and artforms (be they visual, performative, time-based, literary, musical, ...)? Affect theory being a house with many rooms, which rooms are best visited to approach the avant-garde affectively?

The deadline for proposals, to be sent to zane.hadri@kuleuven.be, is 1 September 2025. Upon acceptance in early October, you will receive more practical information about the symposium, which will also entail a modest registration fee and the option of a collective dinner. The symposium will have no parallel sessions so as to foster communal debate. A selection of papers presented also will be published afterwards.

Reference:

CFP: The Avant-Garde, Affectively (Leuven, 2-4 Feb 26). In: ArtHist.net, May 7, 2025 (accessed Apr 8, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/49189>>.