

# What is the avant-garde? The questionnaire as historiography

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In 1928 the Cuban magazine *Revista de Avance* issued a questionnaire asking, 'What should American art be? What should the attitude of American artists towards European art be?'<sup>1</sup> In the context of the question, '¿Qué debe ser el arte americano?' the designation 'American' signifies 'Latin American' and served to gather a collective in opposition to North America and Europe. The same year, 1928, the expatriate magazine *transition* based in Paris, polled its North American contributors asking: 'Why do Americans Live in Europe?' and surveyed its European writers to ask: 'How are the influences of the United States manifesting themselves upon Europe?'<sup>2</sup> These questionnaires, posed across the Atlantic in the same year, demonstrate how avant-garde publications grappled with the concept of 'America', particularly in relationship to Europe, and also how the questionnaire became a site for negotiating these aesthetic and national identities.

By enabling a dispersed group of readers and writers to collaborate across national borders, magazines also generated anxiety about the collective purpose uniting their diverse communities. Questionnaires address this anxiety by providing a forum for individuals to insert themselves into a broader community formation in print. The genre structures the artistic and political stakes of modernist print communities generally, and here illuminates the different relationship these magazines establish between aesthetics and the Americas in 1928. Through the questionnaire, individual self-reflections come to form a composite history of a print community, allowing key players in the avant-garde to historicize and contextualize their own activities within broader aesthetic debates. While individually these questionnaire responses declare subjective artistic positions, taken together, they form a patchwork historiography of the avant-garde.<sup>3</sup>

## Towards a genealogy of the questionnaire

Magazine editors have long issued questionnaires to their magazine's contributors, asking them to reflect on a series of questions linked to the group's sense of

<sup>1</sup> 'Directrices: Una encuesta', *Revista de Avance* Vol. 2, No. 26 (1928) 235.

<sup>2</sup> *transition* no. 13 and 14; Summer and Fall 1928.

<sup>3</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the symposium 'Reconsidering the Historiography of the Historical Avant-Garde' held at the CUNY Graduate Center on 8 April 2011, organized by Michelle Jubin and Sam Sadow.

community or purpose.<sup>4</sup> The responses to these questionnaires are published in subsequent issues of the magazine, marking a self-reflexive circuit that linked editor, contributor, and reader to questions that formed the basis of the magazine's mission. If editorial statements and manifestos inaugurate these magazines, such questionnaires retroactively reflect on the shared aesthetic or political purposes that formed (and sometimes divided) these communities. In this way, the manifesto and the questionnaire can be read as bookends, marking the temporality of avant-garde projects. This temporal lag is what enables the questionnaire to serve as a self-generated historiography. Artists and writers take stock of themselves and their peers through their responses to questionnaires, at once declaring their singularity and self-consciously positioning themselves in an international field. Unlike a manifesto whose signatories align with a single polemical text, the questionnaire produces a patchwork of responses, offering a composite portrait of a community comprised of multiple voices.

By asking artists and writers to identify their own investments in a shared project and to recast their aesthetic contributions according to this larger vision, the questionnaire unites disparate voices and performs a community-building function. As the critic Faith Binckes writes about the modern period, 'composite textual forms can construct, or even impose, collective identity...[They reveal the] need to naturalize, even backdate, such allegiance'.<sup>5</sup> In addition to naturalizing a collective formation, the questionnaire also has a canon-building function, much like the small magazine itself. Mark Morrison explains that the magazine is where writers and artists '*themselves* create the canon by their interaction with each other's work and that of their predecessors', as opposed to simply responding to norms being dictated by outside institutions.<sup>6</sup>

The genre of the questionnaire can be traced back to the Italian Renaissance wherein *paragoni*, or 'comparisons of the arts', were issued on the relative merits of painting and sculpture. Notably, in 1546 Benedetto Varchi sent a *paragone* to sculptors like Michelangelo and painters such as Vasari, who replied with letters, which Varchi compiled and published in 1549.<sup>7</sup> Other precursors to the modern questionnaire include the parlour game popularized by Proust in the 1880s and, with the rise of print culture, the *enquêtes* published by the *Mercure de France*, such as one issued on the relative merits of French and German literature in 1895.<sup>8</sup> Some of these *Mercure de France* questionnaires foregrounded visual culture as their primary

<sup>4</sup> In fact, these responses were often over-determined as magazines only polled their contributors, rather than the general public.

<sup>5</sup> Faith Binckes, *Modernism, Magazines, and the British Avant-Garde: Reading Rhythm, 1910-1914*, New York: Oxford UP, 2010, 176. I thank Carey Snyder for this reference.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Morrison, 'Nationalism and the Modern American Canon', *The Cambridge Companion to American Modernism*, ed. Walter Kalaidjian, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2005, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Leatrice Mendelsohn-Martone, ed. *Paragoni: Benedetto Varchi's Due lezioni and cinquecento art theory*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> 'Une Enquête Franco-Allemande', *Mercure de France*, 14 April 1895. Popularly affiliated with Marcel Proust, the parlour game originated with the daughter of the 19th-century French president Felix Faure and was known as 'Antoinette Faure's Album', which Proust filled out in 1886 and 1892, subsequently publishing his answers as 'Salon Confidences written by Marcel', in an 1892 article in *La Revue Illustrée* XV.

concern, such as the 1905 *enquête* issued by Charles Morice asking questions such as 'Is Impressionism finished? Can it renew itself?' and 'What opinion do you have of Cézanne?'<sup>9</sup> The questionnaire form was soon adopted by print publications internationally, many of which based themselves on these early French models.

Often these questionnaires were political in nature, such as the 1926 'Negro in Art' questionnaire issued in *The Crisis*, the NAACP magazine founded by WEB Du Bois in 1910. In this questionnaire, the editors asked prominent African-American modernist thinkers to articulate their relationship to the portrayal of race and class and its implications for aesthetic, social, and political progress.<sup>10</sup> Others were more playful in nature, such as *The Little Review's* open-ended questionnaire of 1929 that culminated with 'Why do you go on living?'<sup>11</sup> Still other questionnaires sought to historicize the avant-garde itself. In 1930 the Madrid-based *La Gaceta Literaria* asked, 'What is the Avant-Garde?' and a respondent to the questionnaire cited the 1907 *El Nuevo Mercurio* poll 'What is modernism?' thus suggesting that magazines and writers alike were positioning themselves in an avant-garde genealogy through their participation in the questionnaire form.<sup>12</sup> Whether political

<sup>9</sup> Charles Morice, 'Enquête sur les tendances actuelles des arts plastiques', *Mercure de France*, 1 Aug 1905, 346-49. Morice asked five questions: 1. Do you feel that art today is tending to take new directions? 2. Is Impressionism finished? Can it renew itself? 3. Whistler, Gauguin, Fantin-Latour... what is the significance to us of these dead artists? What have they left us? 4. What opinion do you have of Cézanne? 5. Do you think that the artist should expect everything to come from nature or should the artist only ask of nature the plastic means to realize the thought that is within him? Among the 57 respondents were Paul Signac, Georges Rouault, Charles Camoin, among others.

<sup>10</sup> 'We have asked the artists of the world these questions: 1. When the artist, black or white, portrays Negro characters is he under any obligations or limitations as to the sort of character he will portray? 2. Can any author be criticized for painting the worst or the best characters of a group? 3. Can publishers be criticized for refusing to handle novels that portray Negroes of education and accomplishment, on the ground that these characters are no different from white folk and therefore not interesting? 4. What are Negroes to do when they are continually painted at their worst and judged by the public as they are painted? 5. Does the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as 'Porgy' received? 6. Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid, and preventing white artists from knowing any other types and preventing black artists from daring to paint them?' ('Negro in Art', *Crisis*, 1926).

<sup>11</sup> While Joseph Stella, William Carlos Williams, Ben Hect and others responded to the questionnaire, it is also interesting to note who chose *not* to respond, a group that included Djuna Barnes, James Joyce, and Wyndham Lewis. The questions were as follows: 1. What should you most like to do, to know, to be? (In case you are not satisfied.) 2. Why wouldn't you change places with any other human being? 3. What do you look forward to? 4. What do you fear most from the future? 5. What has been the happiest moment of your life? The unhappiest? (If you care to tell.) 6. What do you consider your weakest characteristic? Your strongest? What do you like most about yourself? Dislike most? 7. What things do you really like? Dislike? (Nature, people, ideas, objects, etc. Answer in a phrase or a page, as you will.) 8. What is your attitude toward art today? 9. What is your worldview? (Are you a reasonable being in a reasonable scheme?) 10. Why do you go on living? (*The Little Review*, 1929)

<sup>12</sup> *El Nuevo Mercurio*, inspired by the French *Mercure*, issued the questionnaire 'What is modernism?' *El Nuevo Mercurio*, 2 (Feb 1907) 123-4. 'A Sensational Poll: What is the Avant-Garde?' published on 1 June 1930 in *La Gaceta Literaria* culminated in a series of questions: 'Does the avant-garde exist? Has it ever existed? How do you understand it? In your opinion, what literary tenets characterize/d it? How can/could it be judged from your political viewpoint?' (¿Existe o ha existido la vanguardia? ¿Cómo la ha entendido usted? A su juicio, ¿qué postulados literarios presenta o presentó en su día? ¿Cómo la juzgó y la juzga ahora desde su punto de vista político?)

or whimsical in nature, these questionnaires reinforced the publications' editorial policies and brought to the fore their readerships' shared beliefs.<sup>13</sup>

Although the questionnaire became a prominent means of collective self-assessment around the same time as the social science survey, the genre is ultimately a literary device rather than an analytical tool. While the impulse to question and tabulate responses may betray a desire for statistical quantification or artistic validation, the avant-garde questionnaire ultimately works against the form's mathematical logic to parody empiricism. As Matthew Josephson, a writer involved with *transition* and other magazines of the era, notes, 'Although they may have been somewhat diverting, [questionnaires] could scarcely lay claim to having made any scientific approach to the subjects they treated'.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the responses to these questionnaires present highly selective, anecdotal histories that usually substantiate a magazine's editorial claims, thus demonstrating a closer affinity with the manifesto than with the social science survey.<sup>15</sup>

For instance, the Surrealists playfully subverted the questionnaire genre even as they took it seriously as a means of self-assessment. Often, these seemingly parodic gestures worked to solidify the bonds of their collective. In the magazine *Minotaure*, for example, Breton and Éluard issued a survey asking, 'What was the most important encounter of your life? To what extent does or did this encounter give you the impression of chance? Of necessity?'<sup>16</sup> While this questionnaire does not explicitly reference the formation of Surrealism as a mobile, dispersed group committed to a 'revolution of the mind', it does underscore the Surrealists' emphasis on chance encounters and the role of the subconscious in aesthetics, thus re-inscribing these ideas as central to the group's identity even as it toyed with the questionnaire genre.

Questionnaires persisted as a means of self-definition in print throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. They were used by the French neo-avant-garde in projects such as the '*Enquête: Pensez-vous avoir un don d'écrivain?*' published in *Tel Quel* in 1960. The Situationists' '*Le Questionnaire*' appeared in *Internationale Situationniste* in 1964.<sup>17</sup> In 1975 *Artforum* issued a survey on the obsolescence of painting, while *October* sent out the 'Visual Culture Questionnaire' in 1996 and the "Questionnaire on the Contemporary" as recently as 2009. The questionnaire models an avant-garde feedback loop initiated in the early part of the century that remains viable today. By looking at two questionnaires in depth, I hope to demonstrate how the genre works as a form of collective self-assessment, a means of gathering a dispersed community under the banner of a shared project; in this case locating and defining what constitutes 'American' art in 1928.

<sup>13</sup> Not only were the surveys' questions highly suggestive, but also the editors had the authority to select who they wanted to participate, what responses they published, and how they edited and framed such responses.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew Josephson, *Life Among the Surrealists*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962, 335.

<sup>15</sup> For example, *The Mercure de France* published a survey as early as 1895, the same year as landmark sociological surveys such as Jane Addams' *Hull House Papers* (1895) were published.

<sup>16</sup> *Minotaure*, Issue 3-4. (Paris: 1933).

<sup>17</sup> *Tel Quel* 1 (Spring, 1960); *Internationale Situationniste* No. 9 (Paris: August 1964).

### ***¿Qué debe ser el arte americano?: Revista de Avance's pan-American project***

'What should Latin American Art be?' asks the Cuban magazine *Revista de Avance* in 1928. The question underlies the magazine's political and aesthetic goals: to define an autochthonous avant-garde that, as a local offering, resists the corruption of the Cuban government, US imperialist advances, and European cultural dominance. *Revista de Avance* functioned as a nexus of cultural institutions by organizing the first exhibition of avant-garde art in Havana and serving as a publishing house. In the magazine itself, editors showcased work by international artists and writers such as Ezra Pound, Eugene O'Neill, Federico García Lorca, Salvador Dalí, André Gide, and Alice Neel alongside Ecuadorian Pablo Palacio and Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga, and Cuban artists and writers, including Félix Lizaso, Eduardo Abela, and Víctor Manuel. By publishing both local and international artists and writers, the magazine contextualized and introduced their work to Cuban audiences. According to the critic Carlos Ripoll, *Revista de Avance* served as 'the means by which Cuba communicated with the best of the revolutionary art world that had already emerged in Europe and America'.<sup>18</sup>

Because of its location in Cuba, *Revista de Avance* was well-positioned to define what constituted pan-American artistic production. Antonio Benítez-Rojo describes the Antilles' geographic location between North and South America as a 'discontinuous conjunction' characterized by 'sociological fluidity'.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, *Revista de Avance* was connected to a network of magazines across the world, including *Amauta* in Peru, *Repertorio Americano* in Costa Rica, *Martín Fierro* in Buenos Aires, *The Dial* in New York, *Índice* in Puerto Rico, *Floha Academia* in Brazil and *Revista de Catalunya* in Barcelona. As a result of its geographic and cultural positioning, Cuban artists and writers were receptive to outside influences, but were also distrustful of such forces. Wary of being co-opted by another country's agenda, Cuban intellectuals were intent on integrating these exterior ideas into their own independent platform. As Francine Masiello argues, *Revista de Avance* created 'a minority discourse that found its strength through local and international alliances among intellectuals and subalterns in national and other international contexts'.<sup>20</sup>

Although Cuban artists and writers were deeply engaged in expanding the role of art in Latin American cultural and political life, their work emerged out of a singular political and artistic milieu. The conditions that led to the rise of aestheticism and the subsequent movements that Peter Bürger addresses in his landmark 1974 study, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, were unique to a European cultural and economic climate. Bürger reads the rise of the historical avant-garde as a response to aestheticism's separation of art from praxis, but unlike in Europe, in

<sup>18</sup> 'El medio por el cual Cuba se comunicaba con lo mejor del revolucionario mundo artístico que ya había surgido en Europa y América'. Carlos Ripoll, 'La *Revista de Avance* (1927-1930) Vocero de Vanguardismo y Pórtico de Revolución' *Revista Iberoamericana*, Vol. 30, No. 58 (July-Dec 1964) 261.

<sup>19</sup> Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Trans. James Maraniss, Raleigh, NC: Duke UP, 1992, 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> Francine Masiello, 'Rethinking Neocolonial Aesthetics: Literature, Politics, and Intellectual Community in Cuba's *Revista de Avance*', *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (1993) 27.

early twentieth century Latin America, art was not yet established as an institution independent from the state. As a result, the Cuban artistic community was not concerned with attacking art as an institution, and instead worked to construct literary canons rather than to refute or undermine them. As Julio Ramos explains in *Divergent Modernities*, it was only in what is considered modernity that Latin American literature shifted from a state-sponsored endeavour to an independent practice, thus changing the value of literary discourse in society.<sup>21</sup> Unsure of their new social status, Latin American writers had to work to legitimize their profession and to expand it so as to establish a market for their work. As Ramos argues, Latin America was ‘never governed by an institutional homogeneity, but rather, by a critical impulse against truth and disciplinary formation’.<sup>22</sup> In addition to inheriting institutional problems common across Latin America, Cubans grappled with a specific confluence of political, aesthetic, and social struggles out of which their yearning for independent art institutions emerged.

Founded by Juan Marinello, Jorge Mañach, Martí Casanovas, Francisco Ichaso and Alejo Carpentier in 1927, *Revista de Avance* was intended to be the mouthpiece of ‘minorism’, a group formed in 1923 in support of social and political change in Cuba.<sup>23</sup> In 1927 the group published a ‘Declaration’ advocating for their own brand of intellectual work, social reform, and aesthetic innovation.<sup>24</sup> In their declaration they advocate for ‘new art in its diverse manifestations’ as well as for the ‘economic independence of Cuba’. They rail against ‘Yankee imperialism’ and instead favour ‘Latin American unity’. As the first Cuban ‘vanguardia’, the group involved in the magazine had literary, artistic, political, cultural and social aspirations, publishing fifty issues bimonthly between March 16, 1927 and September 30, 1930, with a circulation of approximately 3,000 copies. The title of the magazine changed yearly, calling itself ‘1927’, or ‘1928’ and *revista de avance*, all lower case, the date and name intended to jointly showcase the magazine’s impulse towards change.<sup>25</sup> As the editors announced in the first issue, ‘We want movement, change, advancement, even in the magazine’s name! And we want absolute independence—even from time!’<sup>26</sup> This inclination towards the future, to looking ahead while advocating for change, is reflected in the titles and projects of avant-

<sup>21</sup> See Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada*, Hanover, NH: Ediciones del norte, 2002 for an extensive history of literary culture in 19<sup>th</sup> century Latin America.

<sup>22</sup> Julio Ramos, *Divergent Modernities: Culture and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Latin America*, Trans. John D. Blanco, Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001, 78.

<sup>23</sup> They formed in opposition to the rule of Alfredo Zayas (1921-1925) and then to the reign of Gerardo Machado (1925-1933).

<sup>24</sup> ‘Declaración del grupo minorista’, *Carteles*. Havana, no. 21, 22 May 1927, 16 and 25.

<[http://www.cubaliteraria.cu/monografia/grupo\\_minorista/declaracion.html](http://www.cubaliteraria.cu/monografia/grupo_minorista/declaracion.html)> Note: Alejo Carpentier left after the first issue and was replaced by José Z. Tallet while Martí Casanovas was expelled from Cuba in 1927 for being a communist and was replaced by Félix Lizaso. Marlene Vázquez Péré, ‘The *Revista de Avance* in Cuban culture’, *Cuba Now*. Online. 2 April 2010.

<<http://www.cubanow.net/pages/loader.php?sec=7&t=2&item=3349>>

<sup>25</sup> The magazine was known at the time as 1927, 1928, 1929, or 1930 and ‘revista de avance’ was explicitly lower case. However, scholars have since referred to the publication as *Revista de Avance*, and thus I adopt this convention in my essay.

<sup>26</sup> Los Cinco, ‘Al llevar la ancla’, *Revista de Avance* Vol 1 No. 1 (1927).

garde magazines throughout Latin America.<sup>27</sup> From its inception, *Revista de Avance* was invested in establishing a Cuban foothold in a broader field of Latin American and transatlantic avant-garde publications.

Central to the project of *Revista de Avance* was defining what constitutes and unites Latin American art and literature. Masiello writes that *Revista de Avance* worked towards 'securing a place for the modern intellectual as an arbiter of art and social life' both in Cuba and abroad.<sup>28</sup> Reflecting these goals, in September 1928 the journal issued the following questionnaire:

What should American art be? Do you think that the work of an American artist should reveal American concerns? Do you think 'Americanness' is a matter of perspective, content, or vehicle? Do you think there might be characteristics common to the art of all the countries in our America? What should the attitude of American artists towards European art be?<sup>29</sup>

The questionnaire responses gather together the reflections of important practitioners of the day, and also confront an ambivalence that underlies modernist production in Latin America. Respondents struggled with what artists' responsibilities are to site and race.<sup>30</sup> The Venezuelan historian and poet Rufino Blanco Fombona submits: 'I believe that the American artist (we are not talking about the Yankees) should reveal an American concern; better yet, an American inspiration'.<sup>31</sup> The Cuban painter Eduardo Abela argues that American artists ought 'to express visions of their environment and their spirit'.<sup>32</sup> Mexican writer Jaime Torres Bodet says that the idea that art should reveal something uniquely Latin American, 'seems to me a necessity so obvious that I admire having it almost fully formed as a question in the intelligent survey of '1928''.<sup>33</sup> Bodet goes on to say that such writers will involuntarily reveal something uniquely American: 'A shout, a tear, a smile, can and do have regional significance that the most refined command

<sup>27</sup> See Gilberto Mendonça Teles and Klaus Müller-Bergh, "Introducción," *Vanguardia latinoamericana: Historia, crítica y documentos*. Vol II: Caribe, Antillas Mayores y Menores, Madrid: Iberoamerica, 2002, 15 for a discussion of magazine names such as *Proa*, *Vértice*, *Hélice*.

<sup>28</sup> Masiello, 27.

<sup>29</sup> 'Qué debe ser el arte americano? Cree usted que la obra del artista Americano debe revelar una preocupación Americana? Cree usted que la americanidad es cuestión de óptica, de contenido o de vehículo? Cree usted en la posibilidad de caracteres comunes al arte de todos los países de nuestra América? Cual debe ser la actitud del artista Americano ante al europeo?' 'Directrices: Una encuesta', *Revista de Avance* 2, No. 26 (1928) 235.

<sup>30</sup> Responses came from: Jaime Torres Bodet, Rufino Blanco Fombona, Eduardo Abela, Alfonso Hernández Cateá, Regino Boti, Eduardo Áviles Ramírez, Carlos Montenegro, Carlos Préndez Saldía, Luis Felipe Rodríguez, Carlos Enriquez, José Antonio Ramos, Raul Maestri, Ildefonso Pereda Valdés, Víctor Andrés Belaunde, Raul Roa and others. The magazine was published until 1930. 'Directrices: Una encuesta', *Revista de Avance* 2, No. 26 (1928) 235. The problematics of pan-Americanism can be traced to Rubén Darío and the inception of *modernismo*.

<sup>31</sup> 'Creo que el artista americano (de los yanquis no hablemos) debe revelar una preocupación americana; más una inspiración americana'. *Revista de Avance*. No. 29 (Dec 1928) 361.

<sup>32</sup> 'De expresar visiones de su ambiente y de su espíritu', *Revista de Avance*. No. 29 (Dec 1928) 361.

<sup>33</sup> 'Me parece necesidad tan obvia que me admira casi hallarla formulada, como pregunta, en el inteligente cuestionario de "1928"', *Revista de Avance*. No. 28 (Apr 1928) 313.

will have difficulty avoiding'.<sup>34</sup> The Uruguayan writer Ildefonso Pereda Valdés, a proponent of nativism, goes even further, suggesting that this American preoccupation 'begins to germinate in certain countries, which because of their unique racial and aboriginal traditions, have a greater capacity for this desired Americanization'.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, most of the questionnaire's responses reinforce a relationship between art and its cultural or geographical location, suggesting that the artist needs to reconcile the indigenous elements of his country with Western influences. This position allowed Latin Americans to see themselves as cosmopolitan without serving as what critic Ivonne Pini calls 'a repository for a particular exoticism' in relation to Europe, and instead seek 'integration with the international' on their own terms.<sup>36</sup> Like the magazine itself, *Revista de Avance's* questionnaire works to situate the Cuban intellectual community at the crossroads of local and international vanguard production. Many of the writers who respond to the survey argue that American art has a responsibility to reveal something specifically (Latin) American, thus spurring the need to define what constitutes 'American' art. The *Revista de Avance* questionnaire works to interpellate all of these varied allegiances at a time when there were few other channels available for such a synthesis of disparate political and artistic activities. As a result, the questionnaire constitutes a historicizing gesture, allowing artists and writers across Latin America to insert themselves into a larger community formation while collectively conjuring a new historical category, 'Latin American art', into being.

### **Why do Americans live in Europe? *transition's* expatriate print community**

Whereas *Revista de Avance* sought to define an aesthetic in opposition to Europe, *transition* magazine wanted to collapse the distance between American and European experimental writing. In 1927 Eugene Jolas founded *transition* with Elliot Paul in Paris, to showcase experimental writing in English alongside its European counterparts.<sup>37</sup> Calling the magazine 'an international quarterly for creative experiment', Jolas and Paul offer 'American writers an opportunity to express themselves freely' and 'to the writers of all other countries' they 'extend an

<sup>34</sup> 'Sin que el escritor mismo o el poeta quieran transparentar esa preocupación, algo involuntario los traiciona en el momento en que, acaso, creen haberla ocultado mejor. Un grito, una lágrima, una sonrisa, pueden tener y tienen un significado regional que el más depurado control evitaría difícilmente', *Revista de Avance*. No. 28 (Apr. 1928) 313

<sup>35</sup> 'Esta preocupación empieza a germinar en algunos países, que por su originalidad racial y por su tradición aborigen, están más capacitados para esa deseada americanización', *Revista de Avance*. No. 35 (June 1929) 213.

<sup>36</sup> 'Esa proyección fue lo que permitió no ver a nuestro continente como depositario de un particular exotismo, con pocas posibilidades de incidir en otras culturas, incluso la europea. La definición de lo nacional no desdeñaba, por el contrario buscaba, una integración con lo internacional', Ivonne Pini, 'Aproximación a la idea de 'Lo propio' en el arte latinoamericano a fines del siglo XIX y comienzos del siglo XX', *Historica crítica*, No. 13 (Dec 1997) 5-15.

<sup>37</sup> Paul eventually shifted from associate to contributing editor in 1928; Robert Sage took over as associate editor until late 1929, when Stuart Gilbert filled the position. Maria Jolas assisted with every stage of the publication, although she was not on the masthead.



invitation to appear, side by side, in a language Americans can read and understand'.<sup>38</sup> The magazine was best known for publishing and defending James Joyce's 'Work in Progress', which became *Finnegans Wake*. *transition* also published Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, sections of Breton's *Nadja*, as well as work by Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, William Carlos Williams, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp and Kurt Schwitters. Jolas, his wife Maria, and a 'team of translators', translated much of the foreign language material for the magazine, from French, Russian, Serbian, Czech, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Swedish, and Yiddish into English.<sup>39</sup> Published until 1938, *transition* often exceeded 200 pages and had a circulation of approximately 4,000 copies, available in the United States, France and Great Britain.<sup>40</sup> Because it was an English-language publication based in Paris, *transition* was anxious to establish itself in relation to America, as evidenced by these 1928 questionnaires and subsequent pronouncements. In fact, in the magazine's second issue the editors announced: 'During the current year *transition* will conduct *enquêtes* among the artists and writers of several countries concerning the effect of one national culture upon another'.<sup>41</sup>

In issue thirteen of the magazine, which came out in the summer of 1928, *transition* issued an 'Inquiry Among European Writers into the Spirit of America'. In the preface to the questionnaire, Jolas positioned the United States as 'the most important problem among the nations of the world' next to Russia.<sup>42</sup> Questions included: 'How, in your opinion, are the influences of the United States manifesting themselves upon Europe and in Europe? Are you for or against those influences?' The survey provoked incendiary responses by European artists and writers such as Tristan Tzara, Philippe Soupault, and Theo Van Doesburg, about America's burgeoning influence. Jolas remarked, 'the violence of the answers received makes any commentary on my part, for the moment, superfluous'.<sup>43</sup> In his vitriolic response, Benjamin Péret, the editor of *La révolution surréaliste*, wrote that the United States' influence is manifesting itself upon Europe 'through the most emphatic garbage, the ignoble sense of money, the indigence of ideas, the savage hypocrisy in morals, and altogether through a loathsome swinishness pushed to the point of paroxysm'.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, the Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara announces: 'I consider America responsible for that shame of our age: *the glorification of work*' and in

<sup>38</sup> Jolas and Paul, *transition* no. 1 (Apr 1927) 136-37.

<sup>39</sup> 'We had our own team of translators, for I regarded this as an essential feature of the mediatory action of my early conception'. Eugene Jolas, *Man From Babel*, Ed. Andreas Karmer and Rainer Rumold, New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1998, 98.

<sup>40</sup> The magazine appeared in 1927 as a monthly review. In 1928 it became quarterly, but only three issues appeared in 1928 and 1929. From 1929-1938 eight more issues appeared. For more on *transition* see Céline Mansanti, 'Chapter 31: Between Modernisms: *transition* (1927-38)' *Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines Volume 2: North America, 1880-1960*, Oxford University Press, forthcoming. I thank Peter Brooker for allowing me to read this article in advance of its publication. See also: Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen and Carolyn F. Ulrich. *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1946, 175.

<sup>41</sup> Advertisement, *transition*, No. 2 (May 1927).

<sup>42</sup> Eugene Jolas, *transition*, no. 14 (Summer 1928) 248.

<sup>43</sup> Eugene Jolas, *transition*, no. 14 (Summer 1928) 248.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin Péret, *transition*, no. 14 (Summer 1928) 250.

contrast hails 'idleness' as 'the most creative of actions'.<sup>45</sup> Other respondents critique the genre of the questionnaire itself, even as they participate in it. Historian Bernard Faÿ writes, 'I never respond to literary inquiries for they seem to me to be one of the vainest intellectual fads of modern times'.<sup>46</sup> The irony of responding to a questionnaire by announcing that he would *never* respond to a questionnaire is underscored by the fact that these Europeans are angrily writing about their disdain for America in an American publication located in Europe. The questionnaire results suggest that the Europeans polled are as unhappy as the Latin Americans writing in *Revista de Avance* about encroaching American geopolitical dominance.

To complement their poll of Europeans, in the subsequent issue of the magazine, *transition* asked 'a number of Americans living in Europe to write brief stories of themselves- autobiographies of the mind, self-examinations, confessions, conceived from the standpoint of deracination'. The questionnaire asked:

Why do you prefer to live outside America? How do you envisage the spiritual future of America in the face of dying Europe and in the face of a Russia that is adopting the American economic vision? What is your feeling about the revolutionary spirit of your age, as expressed, for instance, in such movements as communism, surrealism, anarchism? What particular vision do you have of yourself in relation to twentieth century reality?<sup>47</sup>

The survey's responses work both to instantiate the magazine's community and to underscore the importance of the magazine's location, and by extension, its artistic purpose. In their responses, the contributors do not reject their American heritage, although they all agree that Paris is a more affordable and liberating artistic climate in which to work than America- many in fact cite prohibition and the strong dollar as reasons for moving abroad. However, as Sylvia Beach writes in her memoir, 'prohibitions and suppressions were not entirely to blame for the flight of these wild birds from America. The presence in Paris of Joyce and Pound and Picasso and Stravinsky...had a great deal to do with it'.<sup>48</sup>

Among the responses is Gertrude Stein's assertion that America is 'a well-nourished home but not a place to work' and is thus 'a country the right age to have been born in and the wrong age to live in'.<sup>49</sup> The composer George Antheil claims that he did not even realize that he was part of an expatriate community, until receiving this questionnaire, writing, 'I was astonished to think that I was probably an exile, but it is undoubtedly true'.<sup>50</sup> The photographer Berenice Abbott suggests that it is this distance from their native country that allows the group to better understand their origins, noting, 'The very complex nature of America is, if

<sup>45</sup> Tristan Tzara, *transition*, no. 14 (Summer 1928) 252-3.

<sup>46</sup> Bernard Faÿ, *transition*, no. 14 (Summer 1928) 260.

<sup>47</sup> 'Why do Americans Live in Europe?' (*transition*, Fall 1928). Reproduced in *In transition: A Paris Anthology. Writing and Art from transition Magazine 1927-30*, Ed. Noel Riley Fitch, New York: Doubleday, 1990. 217.

<sup>48</sup> Sylvia Beach, *Shakespeare and Company* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1959) 23-4.

<sup>49</sup> Gertrude Stein, *transition*, no. 14 (Fall 1928) 218.

<sup>50</sup> George Antheil, *transition*, no. 14 (Fall 1928) 220.

possible, better understood from a distance than at close range'.<sup>51</sup> The artist Hilaire Hiler is more explicit in his critique of American cultural values, and by extension, the questionnaire, noting that artists in America, unlike those in Europe, waste time 'in self-justification both verbally and introspectively'.<sup>52</sup> Robert McAlmon also comments on the questionnaire form itself, writing:

By the time Menckens, Pounds [sic], Enemies, and Surrealists give their messages on what is wrong and what should be done, *transition* comes along with a questionnaire. In any case, answers are contradictory, chaotic, and ineffectual with the wall of lost souls seeking a platform or expressing personal bias and frustration.<sup>53</sup>

McAlmon's response helps position *transition* in relation to other avant-garde endeavours, even as he insists that the questionnaire cannot elicit a unified platform of any kind.

Through his questionnaires, Jolas did not aspire to foment a movement, so much as to explore the growing influence and presence of America in Europe. In the same issue as the second questionnaire, Jolas justifies the questions he puts forth. Responding to 'American critics', he maintains that *transition* has 'never believed in a rigid application of a priori ideas, but [we] have always conceived our effort as primarily a research into the modern spirit'.<sup>54</sup> This kind of 'research into the modern spirit' echoes the goals of the Surrealist Research Bureau, which Antonin Artaud — an author also published in *transition* — described in 1925 as not so much 'establishing canons' as 'finding a means of Surrealist investigation' through the 'spontaneous reclassification of things' and 'an absolute and perpetual confusion of languages'.<sup>55</sup> Through *transition*, Jolas tried to forge a community while maintaining a place for the freedom of individual expression, catering in particular to a kind of work that is not readily supported in the United States or by European collectives.

The questionnaire can then be read as justifying both Jolas and the magazine's choice to live and work abroad. Born in New Jersey to a French father and a German mother and returning to Lorraine at age two, Jolas lived between two continents and three languages his entire life, self-identifying as an 'intercontinental amalgam'.<sup>56</sup> In his memoir, Jolas centralizes his struggle for transnational linguistic space writing, 'I dreamed a new language, a super-tongue for intercontinental expression, but it did not solve my problem. I felt that the great Atlantic community to which I belonged demanded an Atlantic language'.<sup>57</sup> Jolas' personal and artistic struggle is centred around language. In 1929, a year after issuing these

<sup>51</sup> Berenice Abbott, *transition*, no. 14 (Fall 1928) 223.

<sup>52</sup> Hilaire Hiler, *transition*, no. 14 (Fall 1928) 218.

<sup>53</sup> Robert McAlmon, *transition*, no. 14 (Fall 1928) 220.

<sup>54</sup> Jolas, 'Notes' (1928) from *transition* 14 (Fall 1928) cited in Lawrence Rainey, ed. *Modernism: An Anthology*, London: Blackwell, 2005, 1007.

<sup>55</sup> Antonin Artaud, 'The Activity of the Surrealist Research Bureau', (1925) *The Selected Writings of Antonin Artaud*, Ed. Susan Sontag, Berkeley, CA: U Cal Berkeley P, 1988, 105-6.

<sup>56</sup> Jolas, *Man From Babel*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Jolas, *Man from Babel*, 2.

questionnaires, *transition* published its 'Revolution of the Word' proclamation, announcing, 'The revolution of the English language is an accomplished fact', thus experimenting with English's potential to be an 'Atlantic language'.<sup>58</sup> However, in 1933, the magazine stopped translating its submissions into English, and instead simply published all work in its original language. Perhaps the magazine's policy—to translate all foreign language works into English—began to conflict with *transition's* aspiration to expand language beyond its typical use. Regardless, this gesture seemed to indicate the irreducibility of languages, asserting their untranslatability.<sup>59</sup>

Ultimately, these questionnaires don't present any neat answers to their questions, but rather signal through the act of asking, a problem circulating through their communities. In fact, by asking these authors to position themselves in relation to such questions, editors instantiate a community, calling a provisional collective into being. What they do signal on a concrete level, is that 'America', specifically 'North America', is an unwelcome proposition, something that is perceived as threatening to Latin Americans and Europeans alike, who in turn are eager to proclaim and preserve the confines of their artistic identities. The vociferousness with which these complaints were raised indicates the burgeoning influence of North America on these group's practices. Their questionnaires suggest defensive community formations. Meanwhile, American writers are emulating their European counterparts, interested in diminishing their own identity in favour of an unrealizable 'Atlantic language'.

These questionnaires also underscore the centrality of travel, exile, and other modes of circulation to the debates that they address, privileging what Roman Jakobson calls 'the fluidity of becoming' over the fixity of national affiliation.<sup>60</sup> These avant-garde groupings became centred around magazines—inherently ephemeral, widely dispersed, multimedia objects—rather than rallying around only national or artistic identifications. Both projects display what Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel term 'geocultural consciousness—a sense of speaking from outside or inside or both at once, of orienting toward and away from the metropole, of existing somewhere between belonging and dispersion.'<sup>61</sup> Both *Revista de Avance* and *transition* centralize the influence of geographic dislocation on their literary sensibilities, demonstrating a desire to replace national identity with a collective aesthetic project. Through the questionnaire, these artists and writers from Europe and the Americas assess their internal avant-gardes while self-consciously situating themselves in an international trajectory.

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<sup>58</sup> *Transition*, no. 16-17 (June 1929).

<sup>59</sup> Craig Monk explores the possible reasons behind this editorial decision in 'Eugene Jolas and the Translation Policies of Transition', *Mosaic* (Winnipeg), Vol. 32, 1999, 17-34.

<sup>60</sup> Roman Jakobson quoted in T.J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007, 77.

<sup>61</sup> Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, "Introduction: The Global Horizons of Modernism," in Doyle and Winkiel (eds.), *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, Bloomington IL: Indiana UP, 2005, 4.

Lori Cole     What is the avant-garde? The questionnaire as historiography

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