



The Creation of an Avant-Garde Brand: Heiner Müller's Self-Presentation in the German Public Sphere

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literary theory, Fuchs has to take his readers through some muddy waters to afford them a clear view of his main object of analysis. Others will look back and grapple with whatever questions remain. Ultimately, *Civic Storytelling* is a brilliant book that makes a vital contribution to our understanding of storytelling in modernity.

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Jens Pohlmann, *The Creation of an Avant-Garde Brand: Heiner Müller's Self-Presentation in the German Public Sphere*. Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2023. 192 pp. \$67.95. ISBN 978-1-80079-892-2.

All major authors try to elude the efforts of journalists, critics, and scholars to categorize and define them. It's a matter of pride, and respect for their own unique complexities. The case of Heiner Müller, however, is uniquely extreme in this regard. By the time he died in 1995, this East German Marxist turned Western-style avant-gardist had cultivated a kind of obstinate, intellectually rigorous slipperiness as the essence of his public profile. Internationally renowned, widely translated and produced, he had more or less stopped writing plays when the Berlin Wall fell, pouring much of his formidable talent instead into provocative public appearances and interviews—hundreds of them, gathered partly in three volumes titled *Collected Errors*, that contain astute political and cultural analysis but also persistent and maddening contradictions. Interviews are “performances,” he once said, “the next day you can say the opposite.”¹ His elastic Marxism aside, the pervasive slipperiness regarding what his true beliefs were amounted to an impenetrable trickster mask that concealed his real face, and that camouflage-skin has made Müller a difficult subject for younger readers and scholars who tend to look skeptically on the valorized obscurantism and evasiveness of 1980s/90s postmodernism.

Jens Pohlmann's *The Creation of an Avant-Garde Brand: Heiner Müller's Self-Presentation in the German Public Sphere* is only the second English-language monograph about Müller to appear in the last 25 years. Refreshingly cogent and crisply written, it is a particularly useful study because, unlike much Müller scholarship that has read him against various ideologies, it directly addresses the matter of that trickster mask. Pohlmann has a theory about it rooted in the historical avant-garde, which has merit as far as it goes. Its limitation is that its lens on both literature and theory is too narrow to fully account for the artistic strategies and worldview of such an erudite and savvy author. To his considerable credit, though, Pohlmann is asking the right question, namely: how is Müller's proteanism to be understood as a part of his artistic project?

Pohlmann's theory leans heavily on Peter Bürger's definition of avant-gardism in his well-known book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. For Bürger, the radical essence of the avant-garde was in Dada and Surrealism, which aimed not merely to interrogate and reform bourgeois society in the spirit of Marxist “self-critique” but rather to destroy art as an institution.

¹Heiner Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren, 1986), 155.

These movements posed a fundamental challenge to the status of art in bourgeois, capitalist society, Bürger asserted. Their nonrational, provocative, and shocking gestures aimed to undermine the commodity dimension of art and emancipate the bourgeois public (degraded by capitalist functionality) by merging art with “the praxis of life.” The avant-garde in this view was essentially utopian and redemptive, like Marxism. And its chief challenge after World War II was to remain “revolutionary” in the face of commodity cooptation: “the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardist intentions.”²

That Pohlmann adopts Bürger’s polemical definition uncritically as a cornerstone is the chief weakness of his book; the theory’s boundaries become Pohlmann’s blind spots. Neither author considers any forms of avant-gardism that tried to reform and liberalize institutions, for instance, such as Expressionism and the Bauhaus. Nor, more importantly, does either consider Futurism, which predated Dada and was in some ways more radical and relevant to Müller. Pohlmann assumes rather than demonstrates the irrelevance of these alternative avant-garde models, taking for granted that only Bürger’s definition pertains to Müller.

Pohlmann supplements Bürger with several more recent books on the rise of brand culture: Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2007), Sarah Banet-Weiser’s *AuthenticTM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* (2012), and Douglas Holt’s *Cultural Strategy: Using Innovative Ideologies to Build Breakthrough Brands* (2010). These writings help him position Müller as a shrewd analyst of the triumphant capitalism that prevailed in the 1980s and 90s West, when corporations and art institutions had become adept at neutralizing avant-gardist subversions by building brands around innocuous imitations of them. For Pohlmann, Müller’s self-contradiction constituted an original avant-gardist performance, an exercise in self-branding intended to subvert commodity culture using its own tools. To retain integrity as an “adversarial author” in a “reunified Germany that he considered to be hostile to his own ideas and political convictions,” Müller had to assume “performative armor” (1, 5). This armor allowed him to “discuss certain controversial and provocative issues in the public sphere without being held directly responsible for his opinions: he created space for himself to engage in public artistic ‘play’ or ‘experimentation’” (5).

Pohlmann’s theory is viable, though he sometimes overstates his case. He refers, for instance, to Müller’s public behavior as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* half a dozen times without explaining it, but his basic idea of Müller as a playful performative “experimenter” is sound. He describes Müller as a sort of super-jester whose license consisted of using self-contradiction to undermine his “self” and thus insulate it from direct attack. Noting that he became a national celebrity—used on TV, for instance, as a “meme” for high-culture intellectualism—Pohlmann compares Müller with artists like Banksy and Shepard Fairey who retained artistic edge in triumphant capitalism by (in Banet-Weiser’s words), “illuminat[ing] the ways that brands work in contemporary culture, where critique and ambivalence are elements of self-brand management” (143).

Pohlmann devotes much space to establishing Müller’s avant-garde *bona fides*. A chapter-length analysis of the 1984 work *Bildbeschreibung*, for instance, eloquently illuminates that difficult work in order to argue that its complex narrative and metaphorical density exemplify the distinctly avant-gardist quality *Sinnentzug* (“withdrawal of meaning”) that Bürger particularly prized. Another chapter-length analysis of the text “Die Wunde Woyzeck,” written as an acceptance speech for the prestigious Büchner Prize in 1985, argues that its dense web of arcane references and inflammatory political suggestions came from Müller’s anxiety

²Peter Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 58.

about avant-garde “credibility”; he had to protect himself from seeming like a “sellout” to Germany’s cultural establishment (67).

These chapters, as well as Pohlmann’s discussions of Müller’s high-profile appearances and mainstream publications in the 1990s, are valuable scholarly contributions. The stories told are accurate, fair, and have not been so clearly or fully related elsewhere in English. Less impressive is Pohlmann’s chapter-length metadata analysis of Müller’s publication record, whose meager fruit amounts to statistical proof that he published in more mainstream venues as he became more famous.

The major blemish in Pohlmann’s fluid and intelligent book is his failure to recognize that the quasi-sincerity he sees operating beneath Müller’s mask of slipperiness was as likely as not also performative, and was to some extent a late-life anomaly. Müller may have taken some admirably principled public stands in his final years when he had maximal cultural clout (as head of the Akademie der Künste (Ost), standing up for lowly employees facing firing, for instance), but his friends saw that behavior at the time as an uncharacteristic softening prompted by age, serious illness, late remarriage and new fatherhood. Müller’s history of provocation, prevarication, and contradiction dates back decades, and the signature cold and calculating tone in his work never varied. This “armor,” to use Pohlmann’s word, was not just a costume or shell protecting a deeper nature that believed sincerely in the redemptive power of art. Müller was a resolutely hardheaded and canny author, marked by deep wounds suffered under two dictatorships, and his wounds left him cynical in ways his socialist apologists have always found inconvenient.

Müller in fact flirted with the pleasures of destructiveness, even with nihilism, much more than Pohlmann and others acknowledge. There is a strong Nietzschean strain in him that drew him to cynical artists like Andy Warhol, murderers like Charles Manson, and other flagrantly unwholesome figures like Carl Schmitt, and that cannot be waved away with a few benevolent remarks and gestures from the 1990s. There is in fact an avant-garde paradigm for this amoralist strain, but it isn’t in Dada. It’s rather in Futurism, whose cynical glorification of war and technology, farsighted invention of branding, and shameless supersalesmanship led naturally to an affiliation with fascism. Any thorough understanding of Müller must also take this darker dimension into account.

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