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Little Magazine Commu from Dada to Digital

Stephanie Anderson reviews Provisional Avant-Gardes

Sophie Seita. *Provisional Avant-Gardes: Little Magazine Communities from Dada to Digital*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019. 272 pp.

Review by [Stephanie Anderson](#)

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How can we write about avant-garde groups without falling into flattening and reductive generalizations? How can we depict them in their complexity—as “diachronic and dynamic” (p. 196)—and still keep their characteristics in view? How might we read little magazines as both exemplary and as deeply contextual? What is the work of describing sociality without making it all about dinner parties and gossip?

Sophie Seita’s first monograph, *Provisional Avant-Gardes*, is a much-needed study of US-based little magazines between the 1910s and 2010s. It pulls together modes of analysis from book history, periodical studies, poetics, avant-garde studies, and literary history: Seita calls her inquiry “material, group-oriented, and textual” (p. 7). By focusing on a small yet disparate sample of magazines, she avoids the risk of reifying groupings and idealizing certain forms of sociality. *Provisional Avant-Gardes* works toward an alternative model of what might be possible when these modes converge.

As evidenced by the title, the book begins by arguing that avant-gardes are provisional in practice and in discourse. As a “discursive and malleable construct,” she writes, “the avant-garde is what is called avant-garde” (p. 16). An argument about provisionality is a little like squinting through mist—it becomes hard to see the edges. Seita’s answer to this problem is multifaceted: she advocates for multiple definitions, promotes description and context, and clusters together genres of characteristics. She uses the term “proto-form,” from Mina Loy, as an umbrella category for all things provisional that might be affiliated with the avant-garde (“media, genres, and groups” [p. 3]). As if anticipating the criticism that the argument is at times elusive or tautological, the prose is refreshingly direct. I find the writing about the avant-garde to be the most compelling aspect of the book; it’s a term that so often evokes ambivalence or distaste in contemporary poets, and is often seen as a critic’s term. In Seita’s commonsensical historicization and theorization, I found my own receptivity toward it rekindled.

Provisionality haunts the book’s other major concepts, to varied ends. I sometimes wished for a more robust or upfront discussion of the concepts—laboratory, map, theoretical implement, and hospitality (and, underlying it all, community)—that provide edges for each avant-garde group. Additionally, approaching cases as both paradigmatic and particular is a balancing act. The *Raddle Moon* roundtable case study in Chapter 4, which uses correspondence not (yet) institutionally archived, is especially illuminating with regards to the participants, the scene, and the text. However, *Provisional Avant-Gardes* also urges us to

consider the idea that just as avant-gardes are provisional, so too should be our modes of criticism. The study resists reading manifestos because they are given excessive weight in the critical literature and are often more tonally complex than they appear. Yet I thought of their present-future-orientation at the end of the book, which questions critical instrumentality and advocates for hospitality. It's an aspirational appeal for a practice of generous and capacious criticism, offering up the book as a model, and I am swayed to work in its orbit.



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