

Mad Responses to the Avant-Garde (Roundtable)

Organizer: Andrew McEwan (Brock University)

This panel invites participants to consider contemporary and historical avant-garde theory, art, literature, and performance in relation to theoretical perspectives based in the lived experience of stigmatized mental difference. This might include critical disability theory, mad studies, trauma studies, or other critical frameworks that aid in addressing the construction of madness in avant-gardism.

Surrealist André Breton once described the experience of observing psychiatric hospital patients as “the beginning at the heart of surrealism.” The historical avant-garde drew upon observations of experiences of madness, psychological photographic documents, and the art and writings produced by those experiencing psychiatric incarceration. As much avant-garde work, both in historical and contemporary iterations, seeks an aesthetic outside of contemporary logics and structures for the purpose of revolution, experiences of psychiatrized madness and mental disability have been seen to provide an escape from social norms.

This panel invites responses that consider avant-gardism in conversation with theorizations that centre lived experience and critiques of social constructions of sanity and mental ability. Along with critical perspectives, this panel asks participants to consider those aspects of avant-gardism that highlight emancipatory possibilities for mad, psychiatrized, neurodivergent, or mentally ill artists and writers.