The avant-garde in dry dock

The avant-garde, as the nominal artistic prod of Western culture, was seen the other Saturday from Pier 16 as just one more pitching, rolling, yawing thing. As with the parent vessel, which has, they say, sprung a leak amidships, the avant-garde—at any rate—seemed to want to gambol gleefully in the spray—was seen to pause in virtual state of dry dock. The image ends.

The point was the 1972 edition of the annual New York Avant-Garde Festival vis-a-vis these backward-looking times. Though I managed only a couple quick walk-throughs of the shows and displays set aboard the ship—Alexander Hamilton down alongside the Seaport Museum at South Street, one thing clear to me was the deja-vu, even melancholy quality of the vibes on board.

Avant-garde doings, of course, like political revolutionary activities, always wear a certain sadness (if the world were both comfortable and just, the only world to know, people might all find fulfillment within the culture's mainstreams). And it is also possible for the avant-garde to look back and still not lose its futural thrust (a machine age must often be reminded of the soil in which it is planted and needs fresh ways to see its history). But the festival of '72 seemed more off-to-the-side than those natural ironies could ever render it. I suspect that it is the artist-to-audience relationship which has changed. And since avant-garde's very meaning depends on how it affects the audience (how it startles by comparison with art-and-life-as-usual), this is a relationship change with backward-looking times. Though set a board the good ship were John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Alexander Hamilton down along with Feldman, Moorman, Park, Oldenberg, Yoko Ono, Merce Cunningham and company (far out but Beats even), the New York avant-garde was at the forefront as the French military term could imply. The oldest avant-gardes had been scandalizing people for some time before Moorman, with encouragement from Cage and Voss, organized the 1964 first avant-garde show. At Judson Church in fields and by streams around town, the free shows of these madmen and madwomen were plentiful, however, and the annual festival was hardly noticed, and in fact the very notion of organizing and festivalizing these wild creations seemed right only in that it itself was so weird a thing to do. The Beatles came and went. Theirs, Janis, and Otis too. Nixon's notion set in, that the Stones and the Dead are worthy leftovers now from the days of the rock-freaks-committed-to-change. At present the public doesn't seem to want to hear about anything that's new and the art world doesn't seem to be into offering anything new. Freky, yes—new. Anybody, with feeling or—cannot dress like Mick Jagger or like Holly Woodlawn or beyond. One mascara-ed eye does not a movie make. I left the avant-garde boat that Saturday of October 28 and stopped to a crowded benefit party at the Mercer Arts Center. What an avant-garde show that was, the most startling parts of which were staged by the public in the halls. What bullish costumery, such egotistic vanity, how melancholy. I began to see. The avant-garde has preached and taught audience participation to a generation of people. But it never could quite sell the notion of doing one's own thing. What I saw at the Mercer party was Andy Warhol's version of the avant-garde with everybody a hollow superstar, perhaps waiting for the screen-play, unaware that Warhol is not apt to use one. I may be wrong myself—nostalgic for an un-nostalgic time. Mercer is, by way, an intriguing place with a variety of rooms and spaces which may well contribute to a rebirth of New York arts, avant-garde or otherwise. The costumery may only signal the need for the coming of a new climate for artistic expression.

Thrills on the Alexander Hamilton there were, though, not least of them being the ship itself, multi-decked under a cloudy sky, looking downtown at the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges, and featuring the light show of the Lower Manhattan skyscrapers. I liked Woody Vasulka's beautiful tv and electronic music work, assembled by you look down a hatch in the deck to see four tv sets with pure patterns changing in sync to a tape of sounds vaguely suggesting a phantom engine room and a lapping tide. I also liked Shirley Moorman's annual far-out celio piece, this one by Jim McWilliams featuring a recital in a diving suit, under East River water in a glass tank. She deserves credit no matter what happens to the direction freak arts may take. Nothing stops here—not the police, not ill health, not the regular avant-garde's averse to festivals and straight-world publicity. She every year gets a marvelous location for the festival, and in lean years her hustling of the straight world for some concessions to the arts may amount to the freshest (and most hopeful, perhaps) aspect of the avant-garde idea. At any rate, as of now the old avant-garde remains aloof, if somewhat at sea, short of cargo, and with no friendly port on the horizon.

Palmieri at Piano

Charlie Palmieri, director of the City College Latin Band, will perform a program of popular Latin piano music on Thursday, November 16 at 12:30 p.m. in CCNY's Shephard Hall, room 200, 130th Street and Convent Avenue. Admission is free.