
BOOK REVIEW

Allan Antliff, *Anarchy and Art: from the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall*. Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007, 213 pp., \$23.95 paper.

Reviewed by **Kevin Walby**, Carleton University

Recently I had an opportunity to travel and explore some histories of art under pre-1989 Communist regimes across Central and Eastern Europe. The history is not a pretty one, consisting mostly of censorship and repression. Similarly, art has long been marginalized as a topic of study in much of the social sciences. It is thought that art is too much based in the realm of blithe aesthetics, and lacks meaningful politics. When it has been a topic of study, art has been analyzed as a cultural adjunct to capitalism, or, when critical, configured within the Marxist paradigm of class struggle.

In *Anarchy and Art*, Canada Research Chair in Modern Art, Allan Antliff, shatters the idealist approach to art by grounding the production and consumption of art in actual material struggles and the biographies of artists. The aesthetics versus politics binary is false, and Antliff demonstrates this through analysis of key debates and art expressions in the anarchist tradition. Antliff provides a captivating social history of some key subversive artistic practices from the mid-19th century onwards. *Anarchy and Art* is a social history since it concerns the biographies of individuals in relation to political events as mediated by artistic creations. An artist's life experiences impact their work. In turn, art communicates sentiments and interpretations regarding experiences of the world.

Antliff's book foregrounds "art production as it relates to historical, philosophical, social, and political issues from an anarchist perspective" (11). The anarchist approach is positioned as contra the Marxist perspective. While Marxists and anarchists both oppose private property and the capitalist division of labour, anarchists go further to oppose state organized production, state based forms of political administration, and any form of unjust rule. Anarchists differ from Marxists because they believe political association should be based on voluntary and non-hierarchical relations and that delegation of power should be rotational. Diversity, in art, in expression, is tolerated (even fostered) by

anarchists, whereas under many modern political regimes certain forms of diversity have not been tolerated at all.

Antliff argues that a key moment of emergence in anarchy and art stems from the exchange between Joseph Proudhon and Emile Zola over paintings of a future *communar*—Gustave Courbet. Courbet's work was negatively evaluated by the art establishment and Parisian upper classes for its crude brush work and blasphemous depictions of everyday life. Proudhon argued Courbet's work was a critique of political authoritarianism and philosophical metaphysics. Though not wishing to break from Proudhon's identification as an anarchist, Zola instead argued the importance of Courbet's work as it espoused freedom through style. The Paris Commune's Federation of Artists, formed by Courbet's instigation, issued a manifesto against government interference in art, declaring freedom of expression and equality of membership. For Antliff, both art as critique and freedom through style are important tenets of anarchist creativity to be found in Courbet and the Commune's Federation of Artists.

Antliff goes on in his book to examine several other anarchic movements within art. For instance, the representations and techniques of many neo-impressionist painters were suffused with anarchist politics. *Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte* (1888), painted by Camille Pissarro, captured the cadence of a life relatively untouched by capitalist production. Neo-impressionists achieved a harmonious effect through application of thousands of small dots to the canvas, and painters thought of this technique as the painterly analogue to potential for a free anarcho-communist social order. Evidence of his anarchic individualism, in 1913 the post-Cubist abstractionist Francis Picabia was involved in campaigns to protect the memory of Oscar Wilde and against censorship in France and the United States at the same time he fought against traditional values mirrored in Cubism.

A later chapter chronicles the dissident politics of anarchist painters, journalists and poets murdered by the All-Russian Committee Against Counter-Revolution (or Cheka) in the early stages of Russian Communism following the 1917 October Revolution. Antliff traces production of the *White on White* and *Black on Black* series by Kazimir Malevich and Aleksandr Rodchenko, respectively, to a creative egoism that eventually folded into the renouncement of anarchism by the Russian constructivists who adopted tenets of scientific communism. This constructivism was an anti-art project that jettisoned art and aesthetics for intellectual production based on the needs of the Communist dictatorship.

Antliff also comments on the “gay anarchy” of Robert Duncan and Jess Collins during McCarthyism, the struggles against narrow ideas of “modernism” promoted in art schools during the civil and women's rights movements of 1960s America, and Richard

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Mock's ecological and anti-war linocut prints in the 1990s. Mock's works "strive to be revelatory ...critiquing oppression while showing the anarchic potentialities" in all of us (195).

Antliff convincingly argues that art is political and that many artists carry a radical politics with them in their hearts. *Anarchy and Art* is attractively illustrated with colour plates of many of the paintings as well as photographs of the artists discussed throughout. Demonstrating the clear link between aesthetics and politics, this book should appeal to more than just art historians. Sociologists, political scientists, activists, and really anyone interested in art, politics or anarchism should read *Anarchy and Art*.