

# **Anarchy and Art**

From the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall

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## INTRODUCTION

As its title indicates, this book was written in part to call attention to and encourage the development of an emerging field in art history: the study of anarchism in art. Though there are many monographs on artists who have identified as anarchists, to date broader surveys of the relationship between anarchism and art are few and far between. In part, this is because anarchist art has been perceived generally as one facet in a larger project—“leftist” art—with the result that differences between it and other traditions have often been glossed over or ignored altogether. This book, therefore, is a step toward the foregrounding of art production as it relates to historical, philosophical, social, and political issues from an anarchist perspective.

From European anarchism’s beginnings in the nineteenth century, the arts have been an integral part of the movement, as evidenced by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s willingness in the 1860s to write an entire book in defense of the anarchist artist Gustave Courbet. In similar fashion, Peter Kropotkin’s pamphlet “Appeal to the Young” (1880) counted artists as key players in the social revolution, and addressed them with this stirring call:

... if your heart really beats in unison with that of humanity, if like a true poet you have an ear for Life, then, gazing out upon this sea of sorrow whose tide sweeps up around you, face to face with these people dying of hunger, in the presence of these many corpses piled up in these mines, and these mutilated bodies lying in heaps on the barricades, in full view of the desperate battle which is being fought, amid the cries of pain from the

conquered and the orgies of the victors, of heroism in conflict with cowardice, of noble determination face to face with contemptible cunning—you cannot remain neutral. You will come and take the side of the oppressed because you know that the beautiful, the sublime, the spirit of life itself are on the side of those who fight for light, for humanity, for justice!<sup>1</sup>

These positive views regarding the importance of art carry forward into the early twentieth century, when American anarchist Emma Goldman asserted: “Any mode of creative work which with true perception portrays social wrongs earnestly and boldly is a greater menace ... and a more powerful inspiration than the wildest harangue of the soapbox orator.”<sup>2</sup> And we find this attitude echoed by anarchist theorists and activists up to the present day.

Why, then, has the anarchist movement attributed such importance to art? To answer this question, we need to examine the role of the individual in anarchist theory. In 1900, Goldman closed her essay, “Anarchism: What It Really Stands For,” with the following reflections:

Anarchism, then, really stands for the liberation of the human mind from the domination of religion; the liberation of the human body from the domination of property; liberation from the shackles and restraint of government. Anarchism stands for a social order based on the free grouping of individuals for the purpose of producing real social wealth, an order that will guarantee to every human being free access to the earth and full enjoyment of the necessities of life, according to individual desires, tastes, and inclinations.<sup>3</sup>

Goldman’s statement points to how anarchism widens the field of political action far beyond the economic and class-based focus of Marxism and the socialist currents influenced by it.<sup>4</sup> She critiques religion for oppressing us psychologically, capitalist economics for en-

dangering our corporal well-being, and forms of government that shut down our freedoms. She also asserts that the purpose of anarchism is to liberate humanity from these tyrannies. And most importantly for our purposes, she predicts that in an anarchist social order, individuals will differentiate endlessly, according to their “desires, tastes and inclinations.”

Goldman counted Kropotkin amongst her most important influences, so it is appropriate we turn to him for further insight. For Kropotkin, anarchism is synonymous with “variety, conflict.”<sup>5</sup> In an anarchist society, “anti-social” behavior would inevitably arise, as it does at present; the difference being this behavior, if judged as reprehensible, would be dealt with according to anarchist principles.<sup>6</sup> More positively, the refusal to “model individuals according to an abstract idea” or “mutilate them by religion, law or government” allowed for a specifically anarchist type of ethics to flourish.<sup>7</sup> This entailed the unceasing interrogation of existing social norms in recognition that morals are social constructs, and that there are no absolutes guiding ethical behavior. Kropotkin characterized anarchist ethics as “a superabundance of life, which demands to be exercised, to give itself ... the consciousness of power.”<sup>8</sup> He continued: “Be strong. Overflow with emotional and intellectual energy, and you will spread your intelligence, your love, your energy of action broadcast among others!”<sup>9</sup> In sum, the anarchist subject’s power, situated socially, is not reactive; it is generative. Kropotkin wants power to “overflow”; it has to if a free social order is to be realized. We find the same perspective articulated in the early 1870s by Michael Bakunin—who most famously declared “the destructive urge is also a creative urge”—in his reflections on freedom and equality:

I am free only when all human beings surrounding me—men and women alike—are equally free. The freedom of others, far from limiting or negating my liberty, is on the contrary its necessary condition and confirmation. I become free in the true sense only by virtue of the liberty of others, so much so that the greater the number of free people surrounding me the deeper

and greater and more extensive their liberty, the deeper and larger becomes my liberty.<sup>10</sup>

Anarchist social theory develops out of this perspective. Bakunin goes on to theorize the necessity of socializing property in the name of individual liberty. Rejecting both state-adjudicated socialism and capitalism, he declares, “we are convinced that freedom without socialism is privilege and injustice, and that socialism without freedom is slavery and brutality.”<sup>11</sup> Kropotkin similarly argued for the necessity of socializing property, while Proudhon supported the institution of private ownership on a small scale on the condition that it never become an instrument of domination.<sup>12</sup>

Configuring art within this tradition, it follows that, aesthetically speaking, diversity is inevitable: after all, the artist’s creative freedom goes hand in hand with a politics that refuses power over others or hierarchical relations that would dictate what is and is not acceptable. The artist is also radically reflexive, because anarchists create art in tandem with the transformation of society anarchically, and they interrogate it with this aspiration in mind, giving rise to creative activity that enriches the field of art production and the libertarian social project.

This, then, is the terrain we will be exploring. Adopting an episodic approach, I discuss European and American art from the era of the Paris Commune through World Wars I and II to the fall of the Berlin wall. Each chapter examines the engagement of anarchist artists with a range of issues, including aesthetics, war and violence, sexual liberation, ecological crisis, militarism, state authoritarianism, and feminism. Throughout, the interface of art production and anarchism as a catalyst for social liberation has been my main preoccupation. In the spirit that gave rise to the art under examination, I have tried to ensure my reflections are accessible to the general reader as well as specialists.

## NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

- 1 Peter Kropotkin, "Appeal to the Young," in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*, Roger N. Baldwin, ed. (New York: Dover Press, 1970): 273.
- 2 Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (New York: Applause Theater Book Publishers, 1987): 1–2.
- 3 Emma Goldman, "Anarchism: What it Really Stands For," in *Anarchism and Other Essays*, with a new introduction by Richard Drinnon (New York: Dover Press, 1969): 62.
- 4 This aspect of anarchism has been noted by a number of contemporary theorists. See, for example, Richard Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 2005): 15–16 and Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994): 50.
- 5 Peter Kropotkin, "Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal" (1896), in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*, 143.
- 6 Peter Kropotkin, "Anarchist Morality" (1891), in *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets*, 106.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 108.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 109.
- 10 Michael Bakunin, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin*, G.P. Maximoff, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1953): 267.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 269.
- 12 On Kropotkin and Proudhon, see Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics and the First American Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 3–5.