

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## ANARCHIST AESTHETICS

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It.: *Estetica anarchica*; Fr.: *Esthétique anarchiste*; Germ.: *Anarchistische Ästhetik*; Span: *Estética anarquista*. This term denotes theories and practices of art emerging from and associated with anarchist movements and traditions. Anarchism, as codified by a branch of the workers' movements emerging in the 19th century, took many forms, but was unique in its opposition to domination in any form (including that exercised by organized religion, the State, and the patriarchal family as well as capitalism); as such, it produced critical discourses both about and through art, literature, and culture, and competed for the allegiance of artists, writers, and intellectuals with the rival forces of Communism, fascism, and liberalism, particularly in the early 20th century. Aesthetic practices and discourses about them have thus held a place of high importance in the anarchist tradition, an importance marked by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's dedication of the last of his works, *Du Principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale* (1865), to their consideration. However, anarchist concepts and theorists have been almost completely absent from academic discourses on aesthetics until relatively recently.

### ANARCHIST AVANT-GARDES

A long and intense engagement has linked anarchist movements to nearly every European avant-garde movement in the arts and not a few avant-gardes in Latin America (Suriano 2010) and Asia (Weisenfeld 2002). Symbolism (Sonn 1989), Neo-Impressionism (Roslak 2007), Expressionism (Mitzman 1977), Dada and Surrealism (Grindon 2011), Futurism (Berghaus 1996), Imagism (von Hallberg 1995), Cubism (Leighten 1989), Constructivism (Gurianova 2012), and Abstract Expressionism (Wünsche & Gronemeyer 2016) were all strongly marked by this engagement with anarchism, forming an "anarchist modernism" (Antliff 2001).

Points of convergence between anarchist politics and avant-garde aesthetics include:

1. *A search for autonomy.* Just as anarchists seek political autonomy (Newman 2017), the avant-gardes seek aesthetic autonomy, the creation of art objects and texts free from reference by a creator who is free from the demands of public and patronage (Grindon 2011).
2. *A critique of representation.* Just as anarchists deny the right of political representatives to speak for their supposed constituents, a substitution that always entails a theft of power (Colson 2019), the avant-gardes call into question the premise of symbolic representation, the capacity of the artistic text to stand for a world (Kadlec 2000).
3. *A refusal of constituted and constituent power in favor of destituent power.* Just as anarchists attempt to escape the cycle of failed revolutions (constituent power) that degenerate into new oppression (constituted power) (Newman 2017), the avant-gardes encounter the already constituted tradition of art as a “dead weight,” an obstacle to new creation (Goodman 1972), aiming at an unmaking or “destitution” of the institutions of art.
4. *A struggle against alienation.* Just as anarchists fight for a society of “non-alienated production” without bosses or commissars (Graeber 2007), the avant-gardes imagine an end to the separation of art (as a realm of free creation) from life (as the realm of utility), an “integration” of the two (Moore 1998).

## SOCIAL ART

The embrace of anarchism by modernists was never entirely reciprocated, and the aesthetics promoted by anarchist militants, publications, and organizations was quite distinct from that of their avant-garde counterparts:

1. Where modernists prioritized experimentation with form, anarchists prioritized radical content (Litvak 1988).
2. Where modernists attacked traditional genres and conventions, anarchists freely appropriated them (e.g., anarchist writer Louise Michel’s repurposing of the melodrama), mixing them with vernacular forms (e.g., Jules Jouy’s subversive parodies of popular songs), as means of reaching a broad working-class audience (Granier 2008).
3. Where modernists favored difficulty and resistance to interpretation, anarchists favored simplicity, even didacticism (Corral Rodriguez 2014).
4. Where modernists resisted symbolism and allegory, anarchists made a hyperbolic use of symbolism and allegory (Granier 2008).
5. At the same time, where modernists attacked the conventions of verisimilitude, anarchists embraced the realism of Tolstoy, Ibsen, and Zola (Suriano 2010).

Ultimately, anarchists champion a “situated art” (Proudhon 1865), a “social art” that aims not merely to reflect reality (as in Zola’s Naturalism) or escape from reality (as in Mallarmé’s Symbolism) but to reveal its potential for change and to participate in its transformation (Lazare 1896).

Nonetheless, these two historic tendencies in anarchist aesthetics often converge (Antliff 2001). The commitment of some avant-gardists, from Lucien Pissarro to Juan Gris, was sufficiently serious to blur the lines between bohemian formalism and proletarian social art (Leighten 1995). Both the avant-gardes and the anarchist movement aim at the de-commodification and destitution of art (Jeppesen 2003, Litvak 1988, Corral Rodriguez 2014). The desire of avant-gardists to overcome the division between art and life is to some extent realized in the creation of an entire working-class anarchist culture, furnished with its own customs, rituals, educational institutions, etc. (Suriano 2010). Even the recourse of social art to conventions of genre, realism, and allegory is not bereft of inventiveness and iconoclasm; this, too, is a matter of subversive re-appropriation (Granier 2008).

#### CONTEMPORARY ANARCHIST AESTHETICS

By the middle of the twentieth century, the destruction and dispersal of anarchist movements left the place occupied by social art largely vacant, setting the stage for a “postmodern” return of the avant-garde anarchist aesthetic (Call 2001): in the hands of young anarchists (e.g., poets John Cage and Jackson Mac Low), postmodern aesthetics turned modernist devices (such as the operation of chance) into a critique of “high modernist” projects of liberalism and utopian managerialism (Cornell 2016; Scott 2000; Cabri 1997). Modernism having become a “dead weight” in its own right, anarchist aesthetics was reimagined as a postmodern destitution of the privileged status of the creator, in favor of the creativity of active readers and spectators: a “postanarchist” aesthetic. Where modern art resists the “tyranny of the audience”, postanarchist art resists the “tyranny of the author” (Cohn 2006). While some argue that postanarchist art, by “sharing its authority with readers”, suggests “interdependence” (Spahr 2001; Spinoza 2018), it is sometimes hard to distinguish from modern art, “hermetic” and “inaccessible” (Corral Rodriguez 2014).

The rise of media-driven “semio-capitalism” (Berardi 2009), meanwhile, made salient a new form of the games of creative appropriation played by both the modern avant-gardes (e.g., collage, montage, Duchamp’s “ready-mades”) and the social artists (e.g., the creative thefts of Michel or Jouy): “détournement”, the signature technique of the Situationist International, who combined anti-authoritarian Marxist and anarchist traditions. *Détournement* – stealing the sign-products of semio-capitalism and placing them in new contexts, inserting subversive messages that turn them against themselves – became one of the preeminent devices of anarchist aesthetics (Schleuning 2013). However, the turn of semio-capitalism toward regimes of precarity, producing a “dominant affect of anxiety”, has called into question the effectiveness of an aesthetics designed to combat postwar consumerist disengagement (Institute for Precarious Consciousness 2014). An important new form of anarchist protest aesthetics, the “tactical frivolity” of participatory carnival (Reclaim The Streets), camp performance (Radical Cheerleaders), and giant puppets (Bread & Puppet Theater), attempts to divert public space from its commercial and utilitarian uses into a place for the collective reimagining of life (Vila, Expósito 2007).

As such, their goal is not so much to disrupt the semio-capitalist "spectacle" as to produce a seductive and participatory "ethical spectacle" (Duncombe 2007).

"In closing against anarchism" – T. J. Clark remarks – "socialism deprived itself... of an imagination adequate to the horror confronting it, and the worse to come" (qtd. in Wark 2013). It remains to be seen what kinds of anarchist aesthetic can rekindle the spirit of mutual aid to resist the horror inspired by the present "spectacle of disintegration" in a world of rising fascism and rising sea levels (Wark 2013).

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