

Anarchism and Art

Mark Mattern

2019

Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	3
Art as a Way of Life	4
Art to Change the World	7
Prefigurative Art	10
Challenges	12

Abstract

The arts have been integral to anarchism since its inception in the nineteenth century. Foundational thinkers including Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Peter Kropotkin, and Emma Goldman wrote persuasively and eloquently about the power of art as a potential tool of social criticism, revolutionary vision, and an essential component of a life free of domination. Some contemporary anarchists pick up on these themes while opening new ones: especially, the relation between art and anarchists' quest for a life free of alienation, and the role played by some popular forms of art in opening cracks in dominant structures of everyday life where anarchist values and practices can take root. They emphasise the prefigurative capacity of art: its capacity for pointing toward a better world of greater freedom and less domination, and the ways some art forms already model that world. This chapter will, first of all, summarise the arguments of foundational and contemporary anarchists while further developing some of them. Second, for purposes of illustration, it will interpret several popular art forms in terms of anarchist values of autonomy, equality, power, and direct action. Third, the chapter will argue that these art forms prefigure deeper forms of democracy than currently practised in neoliberal democracies.

Introduction

As recently as 2007, Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland noted that there is 'hardly any discussion about art within anarchist and anti-authoritarian circles', and that there has been 'oddly little writing readily available in English on the subject of visual art and anarchism'.¹ With some qualification, they are not wrong. I wrote in 2016 that most of the discussion among contemporary anarchists of strategies for progressive change focus on civil society and the economy while largely ignoring the arts and popular culture.² The exceptions have generally focused on so-called high art and on specific earlier periods of avant-garde art in Russia, Europe, and the United States.³

Nevertheless, some anarchists past and present have viewed art as both a constituent element of a good life and as an instrumental means of attaining that good life. In this chapter I will refer to these as the constitutive and instrumental dimensions of art. In practice, the two often merge. Both entail a rejection of 'art for art's sake', which purges art of its social significance.⁴

¹ Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland, "Introduction: Towards Anarchist Art Theories," in Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland (Eds), *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority* (Oakland, CA, 2007), 3–5, 3, 4.

² Mark Mattern, *Anarchism and Art: Democracy in the Cracks and on the Margins* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2016), 7.

³ See, for example, Patricia Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Allan Antliff, *Anarchy and Art: From the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007); Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012); John G. Hutton, *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siecle France* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1994); and Mark Antliff, "Cubism, Futurism, Anarchism: The 'Aestheticism' of the *Action d'art* Group," 1906–1920," *Oxford Art Journal* 21.2 (1998), 22–120.

⁴ On the distinction between art for art's sake and art in the service of social revolution, see for example Emma Goldman, *The Social Significance of Modern Drama* (New York: Applause Theater Book Publishers, 1987 [1914]), 3; and David Graeber, "Anarchism, academia, and the avant-garde," in Randall Amster, Abraham DeLeon, Luis A. Fernandez, Anthony J. Nocella, II, and Deric Shannon (Eds), *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An introductory anthology of anarchism in the academy* (London: Routledge, 2009), 103–112, 109.

What is art? What is specifically anarchist art? For art to be anarchist, must it be created by an avowed anarchist who intentionally creates art that expresses specifically anarchist values and commitments? Or can it be any art created by any artist that expresses—either in content or in form—anarchist values and commitments? And who counts as an artist? Someone with specialised expertise and skills? Or anyone who splashes paint on a canvas or wall, dances with enthusiasm and abandon, or sings a favourite song? Each of these questions deserves an extended answer, but space constraints preclude it. I have addressed some of these issues and debates elsewhere.⁵ Here, I will only make several claims that hopefully clarify my position. First, art can and should be broadly defined—elsewhere I define it broadly as ‘any attempt to express ideas and emotions through a medium that includes aesthetic and affective dimensions, as well as potentially analytical and intellectual dimensions. Artists employ imagination and skill to create objects, experiences, or environments that typically include an aesthetic dimension’.⁶ By implication, an artist is anyone who does this. Additionally, any attempt to separate so-called ‘high’ and ‘low’ art says more about power and interest than it does about actual substantive differences among art forms. Here, I will use the term ‘art’ to include both so-called high art forms such as opera and paintings that hang on museum walls and so-called low art forms such as graffiti and punk music.⁷ I will include in this discussion those art works that express anarchist values and commitments either in content or in form, or both. And, finally, I include artistic expressions whose anarchist values and commitments are there intentionally, that is, the artist intended to create a specifically anarchist work of art—or unintentionally—that is, the artist did not intend to create a specifically anarchist work of art but whose artistic work nevertheless expresses anarchist values and commitments.⁸

If anarchist art expresses anarchist values and commitments, what are those values and commitments? Given the diversity of anarchists past and present, a full accounting is impossible here. For the purposes of this chapter, they include ending domination in any form; autonomy; equality; horizontal, decentralised power; voluntarist, non-hierarchical forms of social organisation; and direct action. Other contributors to this volume address these and others at length.

Art as a Way of Life

For some anarchists, a good life is an artful life. This means that art is integrated into the ideal life, and any life worth living will include art. More profoundly, for some anarchists a fully realised anarchism is itself the lived reality of art, understood to mean a life of creativity, free and full expression, unalienated labour, and the joy and spontaneity associated with many forms of art. In other words, art is a model of a fully realised anarchist way of life.

⁵ Mark Mattern, “John Dewey, art and public life,” *Journal of Politics* 61:1 (February 1999), 54–75; and Mattern, *Anarchism and Art*. See also Nancy Love and Mark Mattern, “Introduction: Art, Culture, Democracy,” in Love and Mattern (Eds), *Doing Democracy: Activist Art and Cultural Politics* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2013).

⁶ Mattern, *Anarchism and Art*, 8.

⁷ I tend to agree with the pragmatist and participatory democrat, John Dewey, who called distinctions between high and low art as ‘out of place and stupid’. Dewey, *Art As Experience*, in *John Dewey: The Later Works, 1925–1953*, volume 10: 1934, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989 [1934]), 231.

⁸ As a very partial defence of this position, I only note that it is doubtful that the musicians creating the dance music that Emma Goldman defended (see below, in text) were anarchists, and doubtful that most of her fellow dancers identified as anarchists. For Goldman, that was beside the point. The point was the expressiveness and joy captured in dancing, and how that affective experience enlivened and enriched her life.

This perspective can be found perhaps most famously in the response by Emma Goldman (1869–1940) to criticisms from a fellow anarchist that her dancing was frivolous, unbefitting a serious revolutionary. She responded that precisely in the spirit of dance could be found the rationale and motivation for anarchism:

I did not believe that a Cause which stood for a beautiful ideal, for anarchism, for release and freedom from convention and prejudice, should demand the denial of life and joy. I insisted that our Cause could not expect me to become a nun and that the movement would not be turned into a cloister. If it meant that, I did not want it. I want freedom, the right to self-expression, everybody's right to beautiful, radiant things. Anarchism meant that to me, and I would live it in spite of the whole world—prisons, persecution, everything.⁹

Here we see a clear, powerful statement of art as an essential constitutive element of any life—which Goldman associated with anarchism—worth living. She also found these experiences of beauty and joy in other forms of art such as poetry and drama. According to Timothy Robbins, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* showed her that beauty and joy were as important as freedom and justice to anarchism'.¹⁰

Jill Dolan's concept of utopian performatives vividly captures anarchists' ideal of an artful life. Utopian performatives are artful performances that transport us out of our current lives to imaginative emotional, psychological, and physical spaces that promise richer, more beautiful lives. They describe 'small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense' as that created by the performances. They 'make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better'.¹¹ To illustrate, Dolan references musicians' experience of 'finding a groove' or 'getting tight': 'There are these rare moments when musicians together touch something sweeter than they've ever found before in rehearsals or performance, beyond the merely collaborative or technically proficient, when their expression becomes as easy and graceful as friendship or love. This is when they give us a glimpse of what we might be, of our best selves, and of an impossible world in which you give everything you have to others, but lose nothing of yourself'.¹²

One of the most persistent articulations of anarchists' commitment to artful living can be found in their rejection of work in a capitalist political economy. Contemporary anarchist David Graeber asked 'Why is it that artists have so often been drawn to revolutionary politics?' and argued that it 'must have something to do with alienation'.¹³ As most workers can testify, capitalist work tends to be unsatisfying, dreary, boring, dehumanising, and often dangerous. Anarchists

⁹ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, volume I (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1931) and volume II (Hempstead, NY: Garden City Publishing Company, 1934); volume I, 56. Her defence of dancing has subsequently been rendered succinctly, if somewhat inaccurately, as 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution'.

¹⁰ Timothy Robbins, "Emma Goldman Reading Walt Whitman: Aesthetics, Agitation, and the Anarchist Ideal," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 57:1 (Spring 2015), 80–105, 83.

¹¹ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 5–6.

¹² Ian McEwan, quoted in Dolan, *Ibid.*, title pages.

¹³ Graeber, 'Anarchism, academia', 110–111.

seek a different world in which work sheds its alienating character and engages workers' whole selves from conception to creation. The link to art is an obvious and natural one. Artists imagine, they create, they do work that engages them in engrossing, satisfying, immersive activity in which their full humanity is acknowledged and expressed. Anarchists past and present have made this connection between unalienated work and art. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), sometimes interpreted as a proto-anarchist thinker in his defence of a minarchist state, wrote that in a condition of freedom, 'all peasants and craftsmen might be elevated into artists; that is, men who love their own labor for its own sake, improve it by their own plastic genius and inventive skill, and thereby cultivate their intellect, ennoble their character, and exalt and refine their pleasures'.¹⁴

In her utopian anarchist science fiction novel *The Dispossessed*, Ursula Le Guin makes this connection between unalienated work and artful life conceptually as embedded in language. Set on the planet Anarres, its people speak a Pravic language that pointedly does not employ separate words for work and play; they are the same, suggesting the merging of work and play in practice.

Laurence Davis focuses on the connection between the idea of every person as an artist and 'pleasurable labour', by addressing the work of three anarchist writers: William Morris, Oscar Wilde, and Ursula Le Guin. According to Davis, their work functions as 'a counter-cultural challenge to the currently dominant, capitalist form of anarchist ideology and practice' in contrast to 'an anarchist or libertarian socialist utopian alternative distinguished by the qualities of self-direction, free expression, and creativity associated with artistic, non zero-sum, and nature-friendly labour'.¹⁵ In a similar interpretation of William Morris, John Clark argues that Morris 'envisioned a social order in which the creative capacities of all would be allowed free expression. Human productive activity would be valued as a good in itself, rather than as a means toward accumulation of property and power. The goal of labour would be the collective creation of a community in which beauty, joy, and freedom would be realized'.¹⁶

While some leading anarchist thinkers have been advocates of art, many artists have identified as anarchists or expressed an affinity with anarchism. This is especially true of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century avant-garde artists, many of whom in one way or another sought to undermine the separation between art and life.¹⁷ Many of these artists explored new, less alienated ways of life. Some of their efforts congealed into avant-garde movements of Dadaists, Futurists, Surrealists, and Situationists, seeking to break boundaries between art and life.¹⁸

Many contemporary artists similarly express a commitment to an artful life. Musician Patty Griffin's 'Go Wherever You Wanna Go' works beautifully and powerfully as a critique of life in a neoliberal capitalist world, including the ubiquity of alienated, exploited labour. It achingly

¹⁴ Humboldt, quoted in Noam Chomsky, "Introduction," in Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), vii–xx, xi.

¹⁵ Laurence Davis, "Morris, Wilde, and Le Guin on Art, Work, and Utopia," *Utopian Studies* 20.2 (2009), 213–248, 213.

¹⁶ John P. Clark, "Anarchy and the dialectic of utopia," in Laurence Davis and Ruth Kinna (Eds), *Anarchism and utopianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 9–29, 18.

¹⁷ A short list would include, for example, Leo Tolstoy, Oscar Wilde, most neoimpressionists, most early twentieth-century artists who became Communists, Kazimir Malevich, Pablo Picasso, Camille Pissarro, Georges Seurat, Man Ray, Robert Henri, Wassily Kandinsky, Rockwell Kent, Frans Masereel, and Mark Rothko.

¹⁸ See Graeber, 'Anarchism, academia', 109–110 on this point. See also Julian Eagles, "Marxism, Anarchism, and the Situationists' Theory of Revolution," *Critical Sociology* 43:1 (2017), 13–36 for artists' attempts within these movements to merge art and life.

expresses a utopian future age when ‘You can go wherever you want to go’, when war has been abolished, when people can get up in the morning and ‘run a hundred miles just for fun’, where ‘heartaches and yesterdays don’t weigh a ton’, and where there are no more bills to pay or ‘worried floors’ to walk. In a line that likely resonates with most working people, Griffin sings that ‘working like a dog ain’t what you’re for now’.¹⁹ Similarly, street artist Dan Witz creates art that one encounters randomly in public spaces in New York City. During two separate periods, he painted a series of strikingly beautiful, life-size hummingbirds on buildings, light poles, and other public structures. They functioned as an intervention in the everyday life of New York City, perhaps the epitome of a work-obsessed, fast-paced, alienated world. Each offered passers-by a temporal and spatial break in the social fabric of the city, a passing experience of a different, more beautiful, sane, delightful world. Each gave passers-by a brief experience comparable to Emma Goldman’s dancing, or Jill Dolan’s utopian performative.²⁰

By implication, if art is a way of life, then everyone is potentially an artist. Anarchist Herbert Read argued that art as a separate profession is simply a consequence of culture that exists in separation from the daily lives of common people. In the artful life he envisioned, the category of professional artist would simply be eliminated: ‘there will be no precious or privileged being called artists: there will be only workers ... The artist is not a special kind of man, but every man is special kind of artist’.²¹ According to Read, an evolving, egalitarian, art-based society ‘does not fit human beings for the mindless and mechanical actions of modern industry’.²² Artists would offer ‘a powerful antidote to social alienation’, by creating new, more artful ways of life in the process of creating new art forms.²³ Leo Tolstoy similarly defined the artist broadly to encompass art created by non-professionals. He argued that ‘art is that human activity which consists in one man’s consciously conveying to others, by certain external signs, the feelings he has experienced, and in others being infected by those feelings and also experiencing them’.²⁴ This broad definition of art encompasses many forms of artistic expression dismissed or belittled by arts professionals, and opens new, accessible routes to artistic expression for common people. Tolstoy prioritised ‘the expression of feeling and response to it over taste or form ... Making art or becoming art ... is for Tolstoy also much more important than the material, technical side of it that deals with norms, rules, genres, or certain styles that regulate the creation of aesthetic objects, or works of art’.²⁵ Anyone can create art and therefore anyone can live an artful life.

Art to Change the World

How do anarchists propose to achieve an artful life? I turn now to the use of art for instrumental purposes. Anarchists have long viewed art as a tool for political advocacy and political

¹⁹ To listen to Griffin’s song, go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPeIrp-aIOY>.

²⁰ Witz’s website URL is http://danwitz.com/index.php?article_id=11. His two hummingbird projects are at http://danwitz.com/index.php?article_id=56 and http://danwitz.com/index.php?article_id=88.

²¹ Herbert Read, ‘To Hell With Culture’, in *To Hell With Culture* (London: Routledge, 2002 [1941]), 23.

²² Herbert Read, *Art and Alienation: the Role of the Artist in Society* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 26.

²³ Catherine M. Nutting, ‘Art and Organicism: Sensuous Awareness and Subjective Imagination in Herbert Read’s Anarchist Aesthetics,’ *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 45.2 (Fall 2012), 81–94, 91.

²⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *What Is Art?* Trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonosky (London: Penguin Books), 1995, 40.

²⁵ Gurianova, *Aesthetics of Anarchy*, 45.

action, of at least three different kinds: social critique, expanding vision, and direct action. These may overlap considerably in practice.

First, to even conceive of a better world than the one we currently occupy requires breaking through layers of dominant ideologies, myths, and lies that legitimise the status quo. Criticism of the current social order is a necessary step.

William Godwin (1756–1836), one of the earliest proponents of anarchism, had little to say directly about the role of art. However, he wrote eight novels, in addition to a wealth of nonfiction, which suggests more than a passing interest in the value of fiction and literature. His first, *Things As They Are; or The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, was both a mystery thriller and a critique of aristocratic privilege.²⁶ Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865) advocated a ‘social role’ for art and assigned to artists the lofty role of ‘the physical and moral perfection of our species’. Art, he argued, is a ‘representation of nature and of ourselves’ whose task is ‘to warn us, to praise us, to teach us, to make us blush by confronting us with a mirror of our own conscience’.²⁷ In other words, like Godwin, Proudhon viewed art as a means of social criticism but also of self-reflection and self-criticism. Art could help perfect the self and society through recognition and criticism of its shortcomings.

Similarly, the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin in a pamphlet entitled *Appeal to the Young* included artists (along with doctors, scientists, engineers, teachers, and lawyers) as important figures in advancing a social revolution. He called the youth ‘true poets’ who ‘will come and take the side of the oppressed because [they] 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!’²⁸ He emphasised their instrumental role in advancing social revolution by exposing conditions of oppression.

In addition to her view of art as a way of life, Emma Goldman enthusiastically advocated art as a powerful means of revolutionary change, a vehicle for revolutionary ideas that would advance the cause of anarchism. In her analysis of popular drama, she argued that ‘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’.²⁹ Goldman referred to modern dramatic art as ‘dynamite’ that ‘undermines superstition, shakes the social pillars, and prepares men and women for the reconstruction’ of society.³⁰

Many of the paintings and other artistic expressions included in Patricia Leighton’s work on French modernist and anarchist avant-garde artists presented ‘realist scenes of hard labor and harder poverty’ that circulated as a form of social critique.³¹ For example, Jules Adler’s painting ‘Les las’ (‘The weary’, 1897) portrays a mixed crowd of stooped working people, their haunted faces etched with weariness and hardship. Adler’s *Les hâleurs* (‘The haulers’, 1904) depicts six workers straining at ropes, apparently pulling something along a dock, their figures bent at a forty-five-degree angle suggesting the extreme physical exertion needed to complete their work. Other examples are more metaphorical, their political critique found in the title. Édouard-Bernard

²⁶ For a discussion of Godwin’s fiction, see Jared McGeough, “Unlimited Questioning: The Literary Anarchism of William Godwin,” in *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 45.2 (Fall 2012), 1–25.

²⁷ Pierre Proudhon, *Du principe de l’art et de sa destination social* (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1865), 43, 84.

²⁸ Peter Kropotkin, “Appeal to the Young,” in *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*, Roger N. Baldwin, (Ed), (New York: Dover Press, 1970 [1880]), 273.

²⁹ Goldman, *Social Significance of Modern Drama*, 1–2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹ Patricia Leighton, *The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 20.

Debat-Ponsan's *Humanité pleurant ses enfants* ('Humanity crying for her children', 1905) depicts a woman hugging two prostrate children who appear asleep or dead. The title expands the meaning beyond the experience of a single woman and two children to the level of social critique. More bluntly, Kees van Dongen's *J'suis ni musicien, ni chanteur ... Je suis crève-faim* ('I'm not a musician or a singer ... I'm starving!', 1901) depicts a man, possibly a busker, playing a violin. The title suggests the impossibility of being anything or anyone, much less a musician or artist, while starving.³² As Leighton notes, many of these works of art functioned as 'purposely provocative acts' of social critique.³³

Of course, many more examples drawn from past and present could be described, including paintings that vividly portray suffering and pain experienced by working people, song lyrics and poetry that evoke marginalised people's everyday lives of hardship, and performance art that draws attention to unjust human conditions. Each is a form of social 'dynamite' that may explode in mainstream consciousness, puncture complacency, break through dominant myths and lies to provoke thoughtful reflection about injustice and its sources, and potentially summon empathy and sympathy for others' suffering. At a minimum, each helps prevent wilful ignorance of others' lived experiences of pain and suffering.

Second, if social criticism exposes the injustices in the current social context, imaginative vision brings alternative worlds into focus. Some anarchists have emphasised a special role for art to play in expanding horizons and offering new possibilities for human experience. Some of this work emphasises the value of utopian works of art.³⁴ As noted by anarchist historian Peter Marshall, 'Without the utopian imagination it would be impossible to imagine a different world from the one in which we live. We would be stuck in the cloying mud of abject deference, endless toil and grinding poverty of body and spirit. Without the generous vision of a better society, there would be little hope and less change'.³⁵

Many different artistic expressions play this visionary role, sometimes in content and sometimes in form. In a public world dominated by commerce, graffiti and street artists help us imagine a world where public visual space is not for sale to the highest bidder. The renowned street artist Banksy asks us to 'Imagine a city where graffiti wasn't illegal [...] A city that felt like a living breathing thing which belonged to everybody, not just the real estate agents and the barons of big business. Imagine a city like that and stop leaning against the wall—it's wet'.³⁶ The content of Banksy's street art often imaginatively creates alternative worlds where, for example, little girls disarm soldiers and float effortlessly over imposing political barriers such as the Israeli West Bank wall. The form he employs—primarily stencils—also offers a vision of a democratised, easily duplicable art accessible to all, not just affluent art museum patrons. Graffiti and street artists prod us to imagine a world less dominated by commercial images and gross invitations to consume, and less deferential to private property in the service of domination. Fictional utopias use words to paint this picture of a better, more just world. Visual art typically offers its vision more

³² These paintings are reprinted in Leighton, *Ibid.*, 21, 19, and 43, respectively. The book contains many other examples.

³³ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁴ See, for example Clark, 'Anarchy and the dialectic'; and Laurence Davis, "Everyone an artist: art, labour, anarchy, and utopia," in Davis and Kinna, *Anarchism and Utopianism*, 73–98.

³⁵ Peter Marshall, *Preface to Anarchism and utopianism*, in Davis and Kinna, *Ibid.*, xii–xvi, xiv.

³⁶ Quoted in Cindy Milstein, "Reappropriate the Imagination!," in MacPhee and Reuland, (Eds), *Realizing the Impossible*, 296–307, 305.

metaphorically. Using paint on canvas, for example, pointillist painters metaphorically rendered a world where thousands of diverse people find unity in a harmonious and beautiful whole.

As artists experiment with different forms of art, they press on the boundaries of convention and perceived reality, and the assumptions, beliefs, and ideologies that legitimate that version of reality. Their art expands those boundaries by presenting wider and broader horizons, different experiences of reality, more expansive vistas of possibility. By creating ‘new languages of form’, they stimulate imagination and open new worlds of social possibility.³⁷

Third, art is a vehicle for direct action to change the world. Some anarchists use art to express political ideas, to advocate for social change, to organise communities of survival and resistance, to open spaces where their values and commitments can take root, and to advance social movement. Art can often draw attention, and motivate action, in a way that the spoken word alone may not. It taps into emotional reservoirs that, coupled with rational thought, engage our full humanity. Art draws on the whole human, rational and affective. It draws us into a fully engrossing and memorable experience capable of building empathy and motivating action against injustice. Popular forms of art also have the advantage of being accessible, including and especially to marginalised people, enabling widespread participation.³⁸

The forms that direct action take are multiple and varied, encompassing a wide range of visual and performance art. Some of these are memorably documented in MacPhee and Reuland: the Drawing Resistance travelling art show featuring a touring band of radical printmakers, poster-makers, painters, muralists, designers, and other artists doing political action in public spaces; protest and community-building puppetry in Minneapolis; the Department of Space and Land Reclamation, a Chicago-based performance art group doing ‘street interventions’ such as rolling a giant ball of trash down Michigan Avenue, and ‘liberating’ advertising kiosks for political free speech; and many more.³⁹ Most large-scale demonstrations and other social movement events now routinely include various forms of political art, much of it directly or indirectly anarchist.

Prefigurative Art

Many anarchists have recently adopted a strategy of prefiguration that brings together the constitutive and instrumental roles of art. Anarchist prefiguration has two related meanings. First, it means *descriptively* that current social forms offer hints of future possibilities. For example, the content and form of specific artistic expressions can be interpreted in terms of how they model future social relations, including potentially an artful life. Second, it means *prescriptively* that the ways we organise our lives in the present should model the characteristics of the world we want

³⁷ Patricia Leighton, “Reveil Anarchiste: Salon Painting, Political Satire, Modernist Art,” in MacPhee and Reuland (Eds), *Realizing the Impossible*, 26–41, p. 27. Leighton singles out Picasso and other Cubists for special consideration. On the role of art in stimulating and expanding imagination, see also MacPhee and Reuland, “Introduction”.

³⁸ I have argued these points at length elsewhere. See Mattern, *Acting in Concert: Music, Community, and Political Action* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Mattern, “John Dewey, art, and public life”; Mattern, *Anarchism and Art*; and Love and Mattern, *Doing Democracy*. On the affective power of art, see for example Jill Gregory, April Lewton, Mark Mattern, Stephanie Schmidt, and Diane Smith, “Body Politics With Feeling: The Power of the Clothesline Project,” *New Political Science* 24:3 (September, 2002), 433–448. On the capacity of art for building empathy, see Mattern, “Steve Earle and the Politics of Empathy,” in Mark Pedelty and Kristine Weglarz (Eds), *Rock Politics: Rock Musicians Who Changed the World* (London: Ashgate, 2013), 131–148.

³⁹ MacPhee and Reuland (Eds), *Realizing the Impossible*. See Mattern, *Anarchism and Art*, for many examples of direct action in the worlds of DIY punk music, poetry slam, graffiti and street art, and flash mobs.

to create in the future. Our means should be consistent with the ends we seek. A prefigurative strategy directs us to stop waiting for a better world to arrive and simply begin living it now, as best you can within constraints imposed by dominant neoliberal structures and institutions.

The strategy of prefiguration is rooted in a rejection of frontal assaults on the state, including the Marxist strategy of seizing the state, albeit temporarily, because of the suspicion that ‘temporarily’ will become permanent and the state is simply too powerful and the support for a direct assault too limited. It also recognises the limited value of working within the current neoliberal system, where centrist muddling becomes a way of life, and where any progressive step forward seemingly provokes a blowback resulting in two steps backward. Prefiguration offers a third alternative: creating interstitial spaces where anarchist values can be lived on a daily basis.⁴⁰ It directs us to find or create spaces within dominant structures and institutions, and on their margins, where anarchist values and commitments can take root and grow. Anarchists have theorised these as Temporary Autonomous Zones (TAZs), Permanent Autonomous Zones (PAZs), and Semi-Permanent Autonomous Zones (SPAZs).⁴¹

Some artistic expressions hint at specifically anarchist futures. Some art forms also offer a vehicle for living *now* the values we hold, rather than awaiting the establishment of an anarchist world in the future. They are comparable to other prefigurative forms described at length by other anarchist thinkers and activists: popular assemblies, autonomous social centres, small-scale decentralised agriculture, mutual banking, health clinics, squatting, neighbourhood collectives, co-ops, co-housing, community gardens, and many more examples, mostly rooted in civil society, cited and described by anarchists.⁴² Although the arts have largely been ignored in these discussions, art has a special role and potential in prefiguration because of its emphasis on creativity and imaginative rendering of social life. Innovation of new artistic forms supports the innovation of new social forms, including anarchist social forms and the artful life overall.

Artistic expressions that prefigure anarchist values and commitments offer options for strategic political action. They are tools for social critique, stimulation of imaginative vision, and direct action. In practice, they allow participants to critique, educate, create, and organise while living an artful life in the present: a meaningful, satisfying, creative life on one’s own terms, albeit in most cases within temporal and spatial constraints imposed by the state, capitalism, and other structures of domination.

Graffiti and street art provide vivid illustrations. Whether intentionally or not, and whether in the form of simple tags, complex ‘pieces’, stencils, or the beautifully rendered hummingbirds of Dan Witz, graffiti and street artists live many of the values and commitments embraced by anarchists. They often include a potent social critique that helps make us more aware of the domination, injustices, and ugliness woven into everyday life. Witz again merits mention. Responding to gentrification in his Brooklyn neighbourhood, Witz installed various art pieces as part of his ‘Ugly New Buildings’ project in 2008. He attached or painted grates on the lower por-

⁴⁰ Sociologist Erik Olin Wright called these ruptural, symbiotic, and interstitial strategies respectively. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London and New York: Verso, 2010). See also John Holloway’s defence of an interstitial strategy in *Crack Capitalism* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2010).

⁴¹ See, for example, Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (Brooklyn, NY: Autotopia, 1991); and Richard Day, *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 126.

⁴² See Mattern, *Anarchism and Art*, 7 for a relatively long list of these prefigurative forms, drawn from various academic and activist anarchist sources.

tion of various buildings. Behind some grates, he painted a human striving to see out or escape. Behind others, he painted a prone body, apparently dead. These installations evoked the human spirit trapped inside soulless buildings thrown up or ‘renewed’ as part of gentrification. Similarly, a yarn bomb grabs the attention of pedestrians who randomly encounter it, opening them to the possibilities of social critique. Yarn bombers have notoriously ‘decorated’ masculinist memorials such as military heroes or boxing icons with knitted petticoats, pink ties, sunbonnets, and even a giant tea cosy covering a military tank. Each of these installations at least potentially awakens pedestrians to the dominant masculine values captured in most traditional memorials while subverting them.

Graffiti and street art also help us imagine a different public visual world than the current one dominated by ubiquitous, ugly corporate messaging and state directives. They envision a world that contains more random beauty, creativity, spontaneity, and diversity, one that is more vividly colourful and surprising, and less Disneyfied. It is a world of striking beauty in unlikely public spaces, where access to art is open to all. Graffiti and street artists paint—literally and figuratively—a picture of a world where public visual space is more democratically controlled and adorned, torn from the grasp of corporate and state authorities, where the right of free expression adheres less to corporate and state power.

Finally, graffiti and street artists help common citizen artists reclaim public spaces that have been corporatised in commercial messaging and repellent glass towers and tightly regimented and controlled by state authorities telling us what we can do, when, and where in public spaces. Despite abatement efforts costing billions of dollars, graffiti and street artists persist and thrive. They undermine the state’s legitimacy by mocking its inability to protect the private property upon which neoliberalism is founded. Similarly, both challenge the commodification of art within a capitalist political economy. Once installed, no one owns graffiti and street art. With few exceptions, ownership is impossible. The art remains public until authorities or owners buff it out (leaving yet another blank canvas for decoration).

Graffiti and street artists prefigure a world in which people defer less to authority, submit less to control by dominant forces, and refuse to conform to social expectations derived from neoliberal domination. They suggest a world in which free expression by more people is the norm. In the world prefigured by graffiti and street artists, private property rights confer less power and authority over social resources and public space, and the state yields to common people’s assertions of autonomy. In this world, common people reclaim public space that has been sold to the highest commercial bidders in the neoliberal social order, and the state that protects that social order.⁴³

Challenges

I turn now briefly to three of the tensions that I have glossed over or ignored earlier in this chapter. First, the infamous critique by Murray Bookchin of so-called lifestyle anarchism has an analogous counterpart in the world of art. Bookchin accused contemporary anarchists who are pursuing interstitial, prefigurative strategies of focusing too narrowly on their own ‘lifestyles’

⁴³ For an extended analysis of the prefigurative work of graffiti and street art, see “Graffiti and Street Art,” Chap. 5 in Mattern, *Anarchism and Art*, 81–104. Other chapters address case studies on the prefigurative capacity of DIY punk music, poetry slams, and flash mobs.

and not enough on larger social movements and solidarities.⁴⁴ In the world of art, this takes shape as a tension between free individual artistic expression and larger social linkages and responsibilities. Do artists have a responsibility to produce works of art—including so-called realist art—that recognisably and directly address social injustices and potential (anarchist) remedies? And whatever the answer to that question, should the artist attempt to link to larger social movements? Without attempting a definitive answer here, I will only note that the tension is inaptly posed as a strict duality. In practice, whether intentionally or not, prefigurative art often functions politically in ways that reverberate socially beyond the artistic or practical intent of the individual artist. For example, whatever their intentions, graffiti and street artists attack the state and capitalism, while building a culture of anarchism at street level. Moreover, the Do It Yourself (DIY) dictum that permeates prefigurative anarchist communities is actually misleading, in that most anarchists do ‘It’ within communities of solidarity and mutualism. So DIY might more accurately be called Do It Together (DIT) or Do It Ourselves (DIO).⁴⁵ All that said, large-scale social movement is difficult, and perhaps impossible, without intentional collective effort. Bookchin’s critique at least alerts us to potential pitfalls of individual expression untethered to larger movements for social change.

Second, many artists with anarchist sympathies face a difficult choice between making a living as an artist and rejecting the commodification of art within a capitalist political economy. How can you create art and derive material sustenance from it without participating in the very markets that commodify art and define a capitalist political economy? There is no easy answer to this conundrum, and I offer only two qualified illustrations of anarchists’ efforts to resolve this tension. One is the artist cooperatives recommended by Camille Pissarro that would allow artists to sell directly to buyers. However, as pointed out by John Hutton, these cooperatives would not directly challenge the market system per se; they would just allow artists to eliminate part of the market by circumventing the middle dealers.⁴⁶ Another is the willingness of many DIY punk musicians to live essentially in poverty in order to avoid participating in a capitalist political economy, foregoing recording contracts and corporate advertising that would compromise their values. However, most of these musicians manage this only for relatively brief periods. When faced with mortgages and growing family obligations, most eventually either make necessary compromises or leave the DIY punk scene entirely.

Third, is the artful life in its more profound sense really possible? Can a world be created where the characteristics of art define the character of life itself? For example, can the distinction between work and play really be eliminated and, with it, alienation? Or is a certain amount of

⁴⁴ Bookchin’s charge was met with a chorus of criticism. See Bookchin, *Social Anarchism or Lifestyle Anarchism: An Unbridgeable Chasm* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 1995). For responses to Bookchin, see for example the debate in *Anarchist Studies* 4:2 (1996) and 6:1 (1998) among L. Susan Brown, Janet Biehl, and Thomas Martin; and Bob Black, *Anarchy after Leftism* (Columbia, MO: C.A.L. Press, 1997). See also Bookchin’s “Whither Anarchism: A Reply to Recent Anarchist Critics,” in Bookchin, *Anarchism, Marxism, and the Future of the Left: Interviews and Essays, 1993–1998* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 1999). Laura Portwood-Stacer’s *Lifestyle Politics and Radical Activism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) can be read as a defence against Bookchin’s charge.

⁴⁵ See Mattern, *Anarchism and Art*, 56–57. For an earlier, largely undeveloped discussion of DIT, see Evan London Wendel, “New Potentials for ‘Independent’ Music: Social Networks, Old and New, and the Ongoing Struggles to Reshape the Music Industry,” Master Thesis (Comparative Media Studies), Massachusetts Institute of Technology, June 2008,” 57. On DIO, see George McKay, *DiY Culture: Party & Protest in Nineties Britain* (London: Verso, 1998), 27.

⁴⁶ Hutton, *Neo-Impressionism*, 90. For more on this tension, see, for example, Christine Flores-Cozza, “Life, Labor, Art: A Discussion with Carlos Koyokuikatl Cortez,” in MacPhee and Reuland (Eds), *Realizing the Impossible*, 8–19.

drudgery necessary to produce the goods and services needed to meet all basic human material and psychological needs? Again, I can only here suggest two brief, tentative responses. One is the simple observation that many artists already merge art and life, wholly or partly. I have already mentioned DIY punk musicians' efforts to resist commodification. These same musicians live by the DIY principle applied to art: do it yourself, and do more of it, while avoiding or eliminating mindless work and consumption. As I write elsewhere, 'For them, this is more than a hollow exhortation or utopian vision. It is a way of life'.⁴⁷ As a second response, if we are to lead a more artful life, our material 'needs' will likely have to be scaled back, and careful distinctions made between needs and wants. We must be willing to produce more art and fewer consumer goods, transforming a current economy of excess into one of frugality and sufficiency.⁴⁸ Our lives would be richer—and more artful—for it.

⁴⁷ Mattern, *Anarchism and Art*, 59.

⁴⁸ On an economy of frugality and sufficiency, see especially Wolfgang Sachs, *Planet Dialectics* (Zed Books, 1999).

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Mark Mattern
Anarchism and Art
2019

The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism (edited by Carl Levy & Matthew S. Adams), chapter 33, pp.
589–602, DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-75620-2_33.

theanarchistlibrary.org