BOOK REVIEWS

Allan Antliff, *Anarchy and Art: From the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2007).

Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland, eds., *Realizing the Impossible: Art Against Authority* (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2007).

Art and anarchism compose a long-standing dichotomy that has its roots in the Aristotlean concepts of *poiesis* and *praxis*—each of which govern a distinct domain of activity. Although art and politics are not mutually exclusive, different ideals guide 'making things' and 'acting in the world', so one can expect some uncertainty or even tension to colour their interaction. This conceptual backdrop poses an inherent challenge for two recent publications that address how aesthetic practices relate to radical political action. Allan Antliff's *Anarchy and Art: From the Paris Commune to the Fall of the Berlin Wall* focuses exclusively on anarchistic art, while *Realizing the Impossible*, a collection of texts edited by Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland, covers a broad range of creative and political activities. Whereas the potential for collaboration between artistic production and sociopolitical praxis certainly exists, it is not obvious how and under what conditions this congruence arises. If harmony between fine art and radical politics is a desired outcome, then one would expect each text to argue or to demonstrate how these separate types of activity, with their extensive histories, might be reconciled, especially in light of the intense self-reflexivity and contentiousness that have attended the modern period.

Like Antliff's first book, *Anarchist Modernism*, this recent text collects social histories of various anarchist artists, however, his historical range now stretches from the mid-nineteenth century to 2004. Using a more polemical version of the argument of his previous book (i.e., that avant-garde practices grew from anarchism), Antliff continues to express his belief that fine art should follow a radical political agenda, though he mentions artistic process and aesthetic ideas rather sparingly over these eight chapters. Readers committed to such an agenda will discover several scattershot episodes of anti-authoritarianism by artists; however, this view of radical art poses challenges to many accepted understandings of aesthetic ideas and art practices, which have been preempted or dismissed. The tenuous relationship between fine art and radical politics emerges most clearly in Antliff's conceptualization of political art, which, though not spelled out, can be surmised from his material. In an excellent first chapter, Antliff offers a useful distinction between art linked to social conscience and art geared toward individual expression—a difference emerging from the 1850s debate between Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Émile Zola regarding the paintings of Gustav Courbet (22–30). Rarely deviating from Proudhon's more instrumentalist view, the author seems to avoid Zola's notion of art as free expression, thus, signaling the general view that politics ought to drive

aesthetic agendas. As the book moves chronologically through stories of artistic and political struggle, a straightforward argument is never mounted about why and how those with enlightened social conscience should control and direct creative resources. Even while side-stepping some admittedly difficult issues, the book, with its loose structure of social and oral histories, provides some strong material on how art serves anarchistic ideas—and, perhaps unintentionally, how it does not.

Opening with chapters on Courbet and neoimpressionism, Antliff describes how, in France before 1900, certain artists had either documented or played a direct role in social and political unrest. Written in an essayistic style, Antliff's discussion moves swiftly among historical context, artworks, and artists' texts and interviews, and the author skims across various important theoretical distinctions, without emphasis or follow-up—such as between rationalism and metaphysics, pacifism and militancy, and individualism and collectivism. The next two chapters discuss New York Dada and the Russian post-1917 avant-garde, striking a balance between political content and aesthetic ideas. Not only is art production in each case contextualized within cultural and political events but the material practices of the artists are discussed in their own right and in light of their capacity for sociopolitical and economic critique. By contrast, elsewhere in this book, artistic practices are mostly treated as a functional necessity for affirming political values, precluding many aesthetic practices associated with the Western tradition of art as an autonomous domain. While a tension between responsibility and freedom overshadows much anarchist discourse, it becomes attenuated in Antliff's recent work (though much less so in his previous book) due to his difficulty addressing how autonomous aesthetic practices converge and diverge with goal-oriented praxis.

Amid his implicit perspective that art rightly serves a sociopolitical function, the author maps shifting notions of anarchy and its relation to fine art. For example, anarchy is initially collective and utopian, then becomes more individualistic and confrontational, and later becomes collective and confrontational. As anarchical political philosophy is progressively reframed in the book, the concept of anarchistic art becomes increasingly constrained by its social and political context. When Antliff arrives at the mid-twentieth century, specific strategies of activism, for which fighting oppression and opposing bourgeois society are just generalized headings, comprise explicit aims for an anarchistic aesthetic. The book's longest chapter is a conversation with artist-activist Susan Simensky Bietila, who gives a first-person account of her departure from bourgeois aesthetic traditions and, later, of her manifestation of more directly political practices. In this chapter as in others, several strong arguments are made against an amiable coexistence of anarchy and art, since many types of art practice are rejected. At one point in their conversation, Simensky Bietila cautions Antliff that "anarchism needs to be more than a self-limited subculture." (170–172). As a contemporary echo of the Proudhon–Zola rift, this comment captures what can result from an overly instrumentalist approach to radical aesthetic practice—a self-imposed limitation based on

an overly literal approach to political objectives.

The instrumentalist approach to fine art tends to exclude activities that are sympathetic to libertarian and anti-authoritarian causes, though they might not be specifically anarchistic. As such, various types of criticality since World War II fall beyond the scope of this book, including social documentary, conceptual art, performance-based practices, video art, and, more recently, net.art and environmental art. At times, Antliff's concern for political art evokes the theme of hostility toward artistic freedom. "Death to Art!" a chapter on the Soviet post-1917 crackdown on expressive freedom is not particularly about anarchy, but constitutes an authoritarian worst-case scenario, against which libertarians, progressives, and anarchists fight. Also, in later chapters, political artists dismiss diverse artistic practices that are not anarchically inclined, including formalism, conceptualism, technological strategies, and (not surprisingly) those with commercial affiliation. By chronicling the recurring contentiousness between fine art and activism, Antliff inadvertently makes a strong case for a historical divergence of aesthetics and radical politics—which might be summarized as a necessary confrontation with bourgeois capitalism and state oppression, even if this means curtailing artistic expression.

Treating the same general theme of activist aesthetics, Josh MacPhee and Erik Reuland have edited *Realizing the Impossible*, a volume on art practices within anti-authoritarian movements, as well as in other collectives and political organizations. A multitude of views, histories, and ideas are packed into this astonishingly dense volume, which explores anarchism alongside other types of activism. The editors have accumulated numerous, sometimes conflicting, perspectives that cover a spectrum of socially conscious artists, progressive activists, and violent anarchists, and that traverse many themes and topics—from individual expression to collective action, from humorous riposte to demands for society's destruction, from historical analysis to timely suggestions of particular strategies and tactics. While certain views come across as narrow and militant, others are inclusive, nonprescriptive, and undogmatic. As a work that proves difficult to summarize, let alone to analyze point by point, *Realizing the Impossible* presents far more voices than the twenty-three listed authors, since interviews and conversations are interspersed throughout, along with several more academic texts.

Highlights from this rich mélange of essays and topics include, in no particular order: Morgan Andrews's history of radical puppetry; Department of Space and Land Reclamation's public works and urban interventions in Chicago; Black Mask's audacious street theater from the 1960s; political artists who use traditional techniques, such as Carlos Cortez (linocut), Clifford Harper (illustration), and Gee Vaucher (collage and painting); the media activism of Videofreex, the Zapatistas, and the Indonesian collective Taring Padi; Kyle Harris's call for higher-quality media productions; the do-it-yourself movement of the past few decades; a plethora of street performances and guerilla tactics; and a conversation among activist printmakers capturing the diverse attitudes on art making, distribution, sales, and

aesthetic purpose. Along with this topical diversity, the book contains essays that stand out stylistically or as particularly well-crafted arguments. For example, written in an academic style, Patricia Leighten presents her research on the anarchistic tendencies in cubism and French salon painting of the fin-de-siècle, while examining the historically complex relationship between political content and formal experimentation. In addition, Erik Lyle gives an in-depth journalistic account of stencil art in and around Buenos Aires since 2000, combining many interviews with his own meditations on how turbulent politics and strained economics have impacted these street artists and their work. Another notable contribution is Brett Bloom's overview of art collectives and aesthetic activism in Denmark since the 1960s; he documents contentious historical episodes while delving deeply into how activism was able to reconcile with, and be invigorated by, aesthetic production.

Despite an inadequate section delineation for this complex offering, *Realizing the Impossible* conveys the vitality of direct action and of embracing diversity—a vitality that a more agenda-driven version of aesthetics could not provide. In the absence of a rigorous peer review or of any similarly exclusive editorial criteria, this volume cannot be fairly evaluated using the standards of academic publishing; rather, it should be appreciated for its eclecticism and its inclusion of divergent or underrepresented voices. Inclusiveness also accounts for its uncommonly broad range of writing styles, including activist puff pieces, trenchant theoretical and historical queries, first-person testimonials, and journalistic brevity. Amid these stylistic and topical variations, MacPhee and Reuland do not eliminate voices seeking to overtly control artistic messages, nor do they exclude writers committed to the social and political efficacy of fine art. Instead, these views, which present implicit challenges to free artistic practice, are published alongside arguments to the contrary—for other types of aesthetic praxis. Art against authority is the stated theme of *Realizing the Impossible*, but tolerance and direct action are ideas that guided the editors and that emerge as explicit content in many of the texts.

Antliff's *Anarchy and Art* and MacPhee and Reuland's *Realizing the Impossible* both address art making in the context of political activism, and they both make similar claims regarding the import of art for social and political movements. On the one hand, Antliff, as a passionate agent of radical social change, implicitly criticizes many kinds of aesthetic practice, since he believes social conscience should guide individual (i.e., the artist's) action. For socially engaged art, however, problems arise when specific agendas limit aesthetic production a priori and when full expressive freedom is sacrificed for direct action. This is not to say fine art and sociopolitical action are mutually exclusive. It is just to say that, when both historical traditions and both sets of practice are respected equally, then efficacy becomes one of many considerations. Antliff begins *Anarchy and Art* by asking why fine art has played such an important role in anarchism (12), but he never makes a convincing case, while even giving evidence to the contrary.

On the other hand, MacPhee and Reuland navigate this difficult terrain

admirably—by combining confrontational politics with other more elusive forms of protest and by demonstrating that diversity and inclusion are also viable antidotes to oppression and injustice. The concepts of aesthetics and politics produce a field of an irreducible complexity, which generates vast potential for individual, communal, and societal change. This complexity can quite reasonably be approached with a predetermined agenda that may constrain artistic freedom, though ideally an argument would outline such a program; or this complexity can be handled as a productive resource, which accommodates differences and which can support experimentation and playful exuberance, along with the serious redress of grievances.

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Alan Wald, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

Some of the brilliance here shines on the University of North Carolina Press, for what university publisher these days has the nerve and the finances to promise a trilogy? For one thing, it evinces a rare confidence in a literary scholar who will really stay the course. Such academic multi-volume projects that have been permitted are typically reserved for the biographer (think Arnold Rampersad's Langston Hughes or Robert Lucid's prospective Norman Mailer). Perhaps Alan Wald's volumes are in a sense a biography: a generation, compelled to write inventively about its discomposed world, that looked and leaned leftward. Wald is the now surely the preeminent chronicler of that literary generation.

Trinity of Passion is the second of three linked books that track a generation of left-wing American writers from the 1920s through the early 1960s. The earlier study, *Exiles from a Future Time*, took us from the concurrent emergence of aesthetic modernism and of post-1917 forms of radical politics to the first months and years of the Depression. (The story of that concurrence takes Wald and us to the brink of understanding how and when modernism and communism could and could not converge—a big, important topic that Wald himself has played a major role in raising in other books and essays over the years.) The new work, focusing more on novelists (poets were the emphasis of *Exiles*), takes us through the Popular Front period. The third book, already researched and in states of draft, is to be called *The American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War*. Wald is right to claim that each of the three "stands alone as a self-contained book" (xiii) but, when taken together, the three will have coherently introduced dozens of fascinating heretical writers most readers will not have known before, and will have reworked—sometimes with the addition of stunning new information about their