



# POSTANARCHISM AND CRITICAL ART PRACTICES

**SAUL NEWMAN  
& TIHOMIR TOPUZOVSKI**

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# Postanarchism and Critical Art Practices

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## Preface

Artists and artistic collectives have long played an active role in social movements and political activism, confronting conditions of oppression, state violence, economic inequality, social exclusion and environmental destruction. In doing so, they have affirmed the idea that art is more than simply an object of aesthetic contemplation but an active expression of resistance to domination and a demand for radical change. This book is an exploration of the politics of art today. It asks the question: What is the political vocation for art in the contemporary world? How should we understand the relationship between the artist and the political action that he or she undertakes? What kind of politics is the artist doing when he or she engages in activism, and how does his or her artistic practice inform this activism? And how does artistic practice allow us to conceive of politics differently? It may be that, at a time when our existing political categories and concepts have become all but exhausted, art can provide one of the few remaining sites for the revitalization of politics.

The relationship between art and politics is of course an old question. Plato recognized the threat that certain forms of art such as poetry posed to the stability of his ideal republic – which is why he wanted to banish artists and poets from the city. Artists, he believed, dealt in illusions and presented a false image of reality; rather than cultivating our rational and intellectual faculties, art played on our emotions and led us astray. Art thus disrupted the hierarchical order of the polis, introducing an anarchical element into political life. Of course, in other contexts, artists have been welcomed into palaces and citadels, feted and patronized by the wealthy and the powerful. Art has had, and continues to have, an ideological function, participating in the spectacles and rituals of power. Indeed, one of the key ethical and political questions for artists today is how to maintain a distance from what Guy Debord in the 1960s termed the ‘society of spectacle’, referring to the way that commodification under late capitalism had assumed the form of an ‘immense accumulation of spectacles’ – a series of images and media (including art works) in which

the whole of life is represented and, thus, alienated.<sup>1</sup> How can artists prevent their work from being commodified in this way and recuperated into the logic of power? Moreover, how can artists maintain a certain independence and autonomy from political and cultural institutions – like art galleries and museums – institutions they are critical of, yet at the same time dependent on, for recognition and funding?

This book explores some of these quandaries. It focuses on ‘critical art’ practices; in other words, artists and artistic collectives who participate in performances and productions intended to unmask power and to stage a confrontation with it. In various public actions, critical artists expose and contest different practices and relations of domination, exclusion, inequality and violence. In doing so, they call into question the legitimacy of state and cultural institutions as well as the mechanisms of the market, including, and especially, the art market. Whether in drawing attention to the environmental crisis, protesting against police violence and racism, campaigning against state militarism, disrupting border control policies and highlighting the condition of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants, countering technologies and practices of surveillance, or exposing the lies and propaganda of authoritarian governments, critical artists condemn the abuses of power. Yet, in doing so, they go ‘beyond critique’ in creating alternative political spaces in which autonomous relations, practices, communities and forms of exchange can emerge. Critical artists collaborate with local communities and marginalized groups, organize support networks for vulnerable people and experiment with alternative forms of direct democracy and practices of commoning. Artists work in collective settings, outside formal institutions, where they determine their own rules and norms of behaviour. Rather than simply unmasking the illusions of power, critical art is also an experimentation with a new kind of politics that seeks autonomy from the market and the state. In doing so, it *prefigures* alternative visions of society.

The notion of prefiguration, we go on to argue, is important for interpreting the politics of contemporary critical art. Prefiguration might be understood in two broad senses, both of which are applicable here. First, prefiguration means that there should be a certain alignment between the means and ends of any political action. In other words, the end one pursues should already be reflected or ‘prefigured’ in the means one employs to achieve it. If, for instance, one’s goal is a society without violence or without centralized authority, then one should

not use violent or authoritarian means to achieve this. The means must not be sacrificed to the ends but, on the contrary, already embody them. Prefiguration thus implies an 'anti-strategic' and ethical approach to political activism. Prefiguration also implies a rejection of the idea of the great revolutionary event to come that would emancipate the whole of society, and which must be delayed until the conditions are 'right'. This sort of revolutionary metanarrative – characteristic particularly of the Marxist tradition – has all but disappeared today. For various reasons, we no longer tend to think in these terms. Instead, prefiguration places the emphasis on a transformation of relations at a micro-political level in the present moment, in localized spaces and settings and in the cracks and fissures of existing structures and institutions. In reinventing collective spaces, and in transforming relations within those spaces, critical artists engage in precisely this kind of prefigurative action. Central to this process is the ethical transformation of oneself and one's relations with others: a form of 'care' for oneself, as Michel Foucault would have it, which is always a practice of freedom.<sup>2</sup>

Our central claim in this book is that the best way of understanding the politics of critical art is through anarchism – or what we call *postanarchism*. Much of the following chapter is devoted to justifying this claim, as well as to clarifying what we mean exactly by postanarchism. But our point is that the anti-authoritarian politics of (post)anarchism – the rejection of all forms of domination and hierarchy, both political and economic – is something that resonates closely with the critical impulse of art, and especially activist art. The historical connection between anarchism and, particularly, modernist art and the avant-garde is well established in the literature.<sup>3</sup> While we explore some of this history, our focus is on contemporary art practices. In challenging and contesting different forms of domination, hierarchy, exclusion, exploitation and violence, as well as prefiguring alternative forms of association within extra-institutional spaces, critical artists today engage in an anti-authoritarian politics that is closely connected with anarchism. This is not to say that all critical artists would call themselves anarchists – although many of them do – but rather that, in their dissenting practices, they call into question, in a radical sense, the principle of political obligation and the legitimacy of state and institutional authority. Moreover, the way they organize themselves collectively and in a decentralized and democratic way seems to reflect anarchist principles of horizontality, direct action, mutual aid and solidarity.<sup>4</sup>

Yates McKee, in his book *Strike Art*, has argued that artists' involvement in the Occupy and post-Occupy movements – particularly in the act of occupying art museums and other public spaces – can be considered a form of anarchism or what he calls New Anarchism.<sup>5</sup>

We instead use the term 'Post-Anarchism'. This is not to suggest, in any sense, a 'being after anarchism' – as if the anarchic impulse central to radical political struggles could ever be superseded – but, rather, a different way of understanding anarchism as inflected through poststructuralist theory, particularly of thinkers like Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida. It is a theory of anarchism that is heavily informed by the individualist 'egoist' anarchist philosophy of the nineteenth-century thinker Max Stirner, who also had a big impact on artistic avant-gardes. Postanarchism is also shaped by the ontological anarchism of the Heideggerian philosopher Reiner Schürmann and the contemporary thinker Giorgio Agamben, among others. Our postanarchist approach to critical art practices is set out in more detail over the following chapters. But the basic idea is that certain assumptions that characterized the classical anarchism of the nineteenth century – such as ideas about natural law, mutual aid as an organic principle of social relations and the stateless society – no longer really hold, or at least cannot be understood in the same way as they were initially conceived by the revolutionary thinkers who defined this tradition (Mikhail Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon). Instead, postanarchism places a greater emphasis on the *micro-political* transformation of relationships and places, as well as on the creation of autonomous modes of interaction and association, which is why it is particularly relevant as a way of understanding contemporary critical art practices. Postanarchism takes as its defining principle the very absence of an *arché* – that is, the absence of the principle of authority and the point of origin which guides and pre-determines action according to a rational *telos*. Put more simply, postanarchism takes from anarchism the basic idea that *no* form of authority or power can be considered as automatically legitimate. Yet, from this it does not derive a particular conception of the social order, but rather an approach to political action that is contingent and open-ended. Postanarchism is a form of anarchism that *begins* with anarchy rather than (necessarily) ends with it.

At the same time, we do not want to place too great an emphasis on the difference between anarchism and postanarchism. Both are an anti-authoritarian form

of politics guided by an ethics of autonomy, solidarity, decentralization, direct action and the rejection of representation. Postanarchism might be seen as an attempt to revitalize the politics of anarchism and to think it anew. How might anarchism respond to contemporary challenges of ecological devastation, the rise of right-wing populism and new forms of authoritarian governance, as well as new networked and algorithmic forms of power – what we might call surveillance capitalism? We also need to think about what anarchism means in the context of the collapse of mass working-class movements and revolutionary organizations, and the appearance of new forms of revolt and insurrection which seem to emerge spontaneously around issues like police violence, racial injustice, environmental destruction, the marginalization of migrants, economic precarity and access to common resources.

Our postanarchist approach is, however, distinct from other theorizations of the relationship between art and politics, such as those of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière. While these two thinkers have been influential in the field of art and politics, we point out various limitations in their theory in the next chapter. For instance, we argue that Mouffe's 'agonistic' approach limits her to a populist model of politics based on an outdated figure of 'the People' wedded to the structure of the sovereign state. We prefer anarchism to agonism; we invoke a more anarchistic idea of insurrection and destituent action to indicate a form of politics that does not seek to hegemonize the social field or take control of the state but, rather, to create autonomous spaces outside the control of state institutions.

These are the general parameters of the question concerning the connection between art and postanarchism. The question relates to the context of a transformed notion of art, a notion which reflects the crises we are living through and which has the ability to reshape cultural and artistic dynamics, and, as a result, wider society. On this basis, then, practices in art are not separated from any given societal context, but, rather, arise inherently from existing political and social conditions. Moreover, these specific practices themselves are also developed intrinsically, and are born out of their relation to their societal surroundings and challenges. Artists have a close proximity to what shapes radical politics today; they share a common imaginary and political and ethical horizon. Thus, artists and artistic collectives reside precisely in a space in which they re-scale their approaches beyond the domain of how art is conventionally perceived.

This is why these radical artistic approaches are detached from conventional cultural institutions. Foucault said that ‘a culture invents modalities of relations, modes of existence, types of values, forms of exchange between individuals.’<sup>6</sup> Within the context of institutional culture and art, this instrumentalization of artistic production that supports the established systems is to be found, in particular, in cultural programmes that align with government strategies and economic policies. Culture is very important to the operation of governing institutions; it is a function which, through numerous agents and cultural practices, secures the survival of the system by multiplying its schemes in the context of the existing economic models.

Among the most urgent questions, we are concerned with understanding the way in which artistic practices address current social challenges. What follows is a discussion of artistic practices that involve the rejection or disruption of power structures. The social engagement of the artist also includes ethical autonomy as a central element. The ethical stance of the artist should be seen as the key issue, more important than the actual art production. It is essential for certain artistic practices to possess an ethical and political focus. Artists and artistic approaches relate to the contemporary relevance of anarchist ideas and strategies, and their contribution to activism, social movements, theoretical debates, conflicts and various social struggles.

These possibilities, in the context of artistic action – that is to say, in the creation of novel subjectivities – concern not only the artist but also many other cultural workers. These participants form collectives in collaboration with social movements and local community groups, enacting a kind of political and social autonomy beyond the main institutional principles and mechanisms of conventional artistic production. The emergent artistic collectives have served as a platform for generating anarchist principles and new conditions of artistic action.

In the chapters that follow, we investigate, through the lens of postanarchism, the possibility that artistic collectives imply a new way of constituting political agency and action – one that goes beyond fixed categories of ‘identity’. The problem with a politics based around identity (‘identity politics’) is that it can be easily assimilated by cultural institutions, which – like many other institutions today – pursue agendas of ‘inclusion’ and ‘equality and diversity’. While the institutional recognition of marginal groups and identities is to be welcomed on one level, we regard this as a limited form of politics that does

little to challenge institutional structures of power. By contrast, a postanarchist approach to critical art practice places the emphasis on the constitution of new forms of ethical subjectivation – what we might call a politics of singularity – in which the subject constitutes him- or herself in an autonomous fashion outside governing rationalities. What we call the insurrection in critical art practice refers to the way that artistic work is also an ethical transformation of artists themselves.

This book is also an artistic collaboration of sorts – between a political theorist and an art practitioner/curator. While we approach our topic from different angles, we have a common interest in (post)anarchism, seeing this as the best way of interpreting the politics of critical art. We both work in institutions – academic and cultural – and indeed we depend on these institutions to support our research activities. We cannot therefore say that we are ‘against’ institutions as such. Rather we would describe our theoretical and methodological approach as ‘extra-institutional’, in the sense that we are interested in the way that critical art practices work on the margins of institutional power, creating autonomous spaces *within* public institutions while at the same time questioning their authority and organizational structure. We regard the institution, in other words, as a space to be used and, thus, deconstructed and reimagined: the institution as a kind of artistic ‘readymade’.

## Outline of chapters

Chapter 1 examines the relationship between art and anarchism. It shows how social realism, modernism and the avant-garde were influenced, albeit in quite different ways, by the anti-authoritarian ethos of anarchism. We then go on to explore the contemporary interaction between radical, anarchist-inspired social movements, like Occupy, and artist collectives. Yet, in doing so, we chart a move from classical anarchism to postanarchism, particularly over the question of art’s relationship to the representation of social reality. Anarchists in the nineteenth century believed that the role of art was to accurately depict the conditions of the working class at the time, and, furthermore, that art should be recruited to the cause of revolutionary politics; whereas avant-garde movements in the early twentieth century, in particular, Dada and Suprematism – which were equally inspired by anarchism – proclaimed the autonomy of

the artist and believed that the role of art was to destroy existing aesthetic norms and to *reimagine* social reality. Thus, the anarchist critique of political representation is carried through into a critique of aesthetic representation. It is here that we outline the contours of a specifically postanarchist theoretical model for art and politics, building on ideas of ontological anarchy in Reiner Schürmann and Foucault's notion of 'non-power'. Here we distinguish our approach from that of Chantal Mouffe and Jacques Rancière.

The following chapters develop different aspects of a postanarchist theory of critical art practices. Each pursues a particular theme, showing how this is reflected in interventions from critical artists and collectives. So, Chapter 2 is on the theme of *singularities* as an alternative way of understanding the contemporary political and artistic subject. Here we aim to go beyond (neo)liberal identity politics through an exploration of different theories of subjectivation: from Foucault's focus on the practices and cultures of the 'care of the self', Schürmann's notion of 'anarchic self-constitution', Stirner's conception of the 'ego' as a self-creating void, to Jean-Luc Nancy's idea of being 'singular-plural'. All these different approaches reflect the idea of the subject as ontologically anarchic and self-constituting, rather than being founded on an essential identity or fixed set of characteristics that is representable to the state. In the examples we provide – MTL Collective, AnarkoArtLab and Black Lives Matter – we show how artistic actions, interventions, public occupations and performances stage a kind of revolt of the subject. We argue that contemporary critical artists create autonomous spaces in which new forms of subjectivity, new ways of being in the world can be constructed. Contemporary critical artists are engaged in what might be called a politics of *disidentification*, in which one's 'essential' identity is radically called into question. This can involve the appearance of new collective mobilizations, in the form of protest actions and public manifestations, as well as more clandestine forms of resistance and gestures of anonymity and invisibility.

One of the key questions for political theories of art to consider is what forms of power critical artists are resisting. What forms of governmental power are being contested in these new forms of dissent? This is what we look at in Chapter 3. Yet here we run up against a problem. While there are clear and numerous instances of state violence and domination, the actual locus of sovereignty is increasingly difficult to identify. The state in advanced capitalist societies is no longer a completely centralized entity, but

rather a complex, hybrid, networked form of organization. Yet, we argue that this ‘decentralized’ form of power is also fully compatible with new forms of authoritarian governance which we see emerging around the world, including in societies that are formally ‘democratic’. Here we look at the ways in which new forms of power are unmasked, problematized and resisted by critical artists, such as the Russian collective Chto Delat and the artist Jonas Staal.

In Chapter 4 we develop the notion of *insurrection* as a central category for understanding critical art practices as well as radical politics more generally. If one looks at recent uprisings around the world, one observes a form of action and mobilization that is reducible neither to simple acts of protest nor to a revolutionary model of politics. Instead, these movements and actions signify a kind of withdrawal and suspension of formal systems of power. Their emphasis is more on the creation of autonomous political spaces and modes of interaction than on the construction of political agendas and the representation of demands to the state. In interpreting these actions, we explore Max Stirner’s notion of the ‘insurrection’ – or what he calls the ‘uprising’ – which he distinguishes from revolution, to signify a mode of action by which the individual works him- or herself out of systems of power. We read this idea in parallel with Giorgio Agamben’s notion of destituent action or destituent power, specifically relating this to the dimension of ‘inoperativity’ found in both art and politics. As examples of this insurrectionary or destituent action, we look at the interventions of the Russian art collective Voina (‘war’) and the German collective, Center for Political Beauty.

Chapter 5 explores one of the central enigmas for radical politics, which is why people seem to desire their own domination: Why they obey authoritarian figures and regimes even when not directly coerced and when it is against their own interests to do so, and why they freely insert themselves into networks of power and control in which their freedom and autonomy are diminished? This refers to the ethical and political problem of ‘voluntary servitude’ first raised in the sixteenth century by Étienne de La Boétie – something that, we argue, has lost none of its pertinence today. Here we read La Boétie in conjunction with Foucault and his claim that the practice of ‘critique’ can be considered as a form of ‘voluntary inservitude’ or ‘willful indocility’. We relate this to the question of ‘civil disobedience’ today, which is central to new radical political movements as well as critical art practices. Yet, here we interpret the politics of voluntary

inservitude not only as a refusal of power and political authority but also as involving new forms of ethical association and community. As examples, we look at a number of initiatives and actions by art collective such as Project Art Works, PAIN (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now) and Gentle Radical, whose practice involves working closely with local communities in developing networks of care for vulnerable people.

Finally, we come to consider (Chapter 6) the question of ‘post-truth’, which, we suggest, refers to a new political paradigm in which truth has lost its symbolic value and legitimacy. Today ‘factual’ truth and traditional sources of knowledge and information are drowned out by ‘fake news’, mis- and disinformation, conspiracy theories and ‘alternative facts’, deliberately propagated by right-wing populist politicians and authoritarian governments, and intensified in the current climate of ‘culture wars’ and ideological polarization. This poses crucial and urgent questions for art today, primarily because, while one of the functions of critical art has been to ‘speak truth to power’, certain forms of avant-garde art – Surrealism, Dada and so on – have seen as their main aim the reimagining of social reality rather than its accurate depiction. Is there an unwitting complicity, then, between contemporary art and post-truth discourse? Has the alt-right, in its peddling of conspiracy theories – not to mention its sophisticated use of memes – become today’s countercultural movement, something like Dada in the early part of the twentieth century? However, there is an important difference here, which relates to the ways in which the epistemological question of truth is framed. For artists, there is a certain inventiveness and playfulness in representation; a deeper truth is revealed by freely experimenting with different representations of the social object. Purveyors of post-truth, on the other hand, are fundamentalists of their own version of the truth (while denigrating other versions of the truth), seeking to mobilize disinformation as part of a deadly serious ideological project of power. In considering this difference, we focus on the controversy over whether postmodernism – in its assault on institutionalized truth and knowledge – was actually to blame for the current ‘post-truth’ predicament. Contrary to this allegation, we argue that ‘postmodern theory’ may provide us with important critical tools to analyse and confront post-truth politics. Here we point to Foucault’s later interest in the ancient Greek practice of *parresia* as a form of free and frank speech. We see critical artists today as modern-

day parrhesiasts who, through various public interventions, ‘speak truth to power’ and, in doing so, revitalize the democratic public sphere. We give the examples of the collectives Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC), Illuminator and ARTIFAKE, who employ specific strategies that involve denouncing the lies and deceptions of those in power.

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Chapter 5 reproduces sections from: Saul Newman, 'Power, Freedom and Obedience in Foucault and La Boetie: Voluntary Servitude and the Problem of Government', *Theory, Culture & Society* 39 (1) 2022: 123–41.

Chapter 6 reproduces sections from: Saul Newman, 'Post-Truth and the Controversy over Postmodernism. Or, Was Trump Reading Foucault?' *Continental Thought & Theory: A Journal of Intellectual Freedom* 3(4) Foucault's Method Today, 2022: 54–72.

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## The postanarchist horizon of artistic practices

Today one of the major questions that artists confront is how to retain a critical distance from the system of social and economic relations they are at the same time caught up in. How are they to maintain an autonomous position in relation to institutions they depend on for recognition or for funding? How are they to resist the commodification of their work and the recuperation of their ideas and practice by the capitalist market whose hegemony they oppose and yet whose circulation they are necessarily involved in and perpetuate? As Guy Debord showed in the 1960s with his analysis of the 'spectacular society', the fetishism of commodities under late capitalism takes the form of the circulation of images. Commodification finds its most extreme and nihilistic form today in NFTs or non-fungible tokens, where the artwork is reduced to a digital simulacrum that becomes a pure object of investment, similar to the operation of cryptocurrencies. As many theorists and artists have argued, the critical political capacities of art today are rendered highly ambiguous in the era of total market subsumption. The diminishment of the critical power and autonomy of art is especially true when the political realm itself has become virtually indistinguishable from the mediatic spectacle, and when the proliferation of 'fake news', disinformation and conspiracy theories becomes something like an art form. When political power becomes a parody itself, when the alt-right has effectively become today's radical countercultural movement,<sup>1</sup> surely the critical role of the artist in unmasking power's imposture becomes somewhat redundant. When power itself becomes anarchic and starts dismantling the established rules and norms of political discourse, what kind of role remains for the critical artist?<sup>2</sup>

In this book, we interrogate the critical capacities of art today. What does it mean to be a critical artist and what role can contemporary art play in exposing

and resisting domination, economic inequality, racial injustice, state violence and ecological destruction? The question of the relationship between art and the political is a crucial one today given the current climate of ideological polarization, ‘culture wars’, and new forms of authoritarianism. After decades of political consensus around neoliberal economic policy and the preservation of an international system based on globalization and free trade agreements, the liberal order today finds itself suffering a major and perhaps terminal crisis of legitimacy, challenged on all sides by right-wing populists as well as by new social movements for economic, racial and environmental justice. In a time of political upheaval and instability, art finds itself called upon to respond. This book seeks to answer the question: What is the political vocation of art today?

Many contemporary artists see themselves as creating a new kind of critical political space in which major issues such as war and state violence, authoritarianism, surveillance, consumerism, the exclusion of migrants and ecological devastation are explored. It may be that art offers one of the few remaining spaces today for philosophical and critical reflection on major political questions. Perhaps critical art can open up an alternative public space – one that exists in the interstices or cracks between state institutions and the marketplace. This is not exactly a utopia (this is too permanent a state) but something more like what Foucault called a ‘heterotopia’ in which existing social relations are temporarily suspended and alternatives experimented with.<sup>3</sup> There are numerous examples of this in contemporary art. Indeed, some time ago Nicholas Bourriaud coined the term ‘relational aesthetics’ to describe the emerging form taken by contemporary art. Art comes to be seen as a sort of laboratory for experimenting with new relationships outside normal social existence. He calls these ‘hands on utopias’.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, we should not be naïve about the critical power of these ‘utopias’. Such participatory practices and experimental spaces are often caught up in the institutional and market dynamics they seek to escape. Claire Bishop has pointed to the ambiguous nature of much of participatory art today, questioning its political importance and its emancipatory claims.<sup>5</sup> She shows that the obsession with artistic collaboration and public participation in art is often reflective of a neoliberal rationality that measures aesthetic value in terms of audience engagement. There is a risk, in other words, that contemporary art becomes a model not so much for critical political practice and thought, but rather for the sort of public/private partnerships and discourses of social