

Anarchist Art in the Gallery

Does it become chic ornamentation, a spectacularization of resistance, or a way to spread the ideas of anarchy?

by **Tom Nys**

Fifth Estate # 392, Fall/Winter 2014

There is a common notion of the art world, a shared idea of what it is and what it is about. However, that also comes with a popular misconception: the perception of the art world as one, univocal concept when in fact there is a multitude of art worlds. Some intersect and overlap while others function isolated from the others, often informed by a number of opposing principles.



For the most part the art world is understood to be the global network of institutions such as museums, public and private galleries, art spaces, foundations, and commercial galleries, of individuals such as artists, curators, collectors, advisors, gallerists, auctioneers, critics and scholars, as well as the yearly calendar of major events such as exhibitions, gallery openings, biennials and art fairs. As such, it constitutes a significant social as well as economic system in which the art production can be subdivided according to genre, material, content, region and/ or period. Thus, the term

contemporary art covers the whole gamut of what is happening in our time within this circuit.

This is not a particularly closed circuit but for artists entry into the market is typically facilitated or obstructed via whimsical and hardly predictable matters apart from the traditional supply-and-demand route, such as taste, fashion and networks. For a large part of the target audience, there is a perceived barrier of elitism, intellectualism and often high ticket prices and expenses. Still, on many levels, several art institutions, publications and events at least try to reach out to as many people as possible in different, well-considered ways.

As has already become clear, one can easily claim that the contemporary art world has been conflated almost completely with the capitalist market system and that it has proven to be a perfect ally for capitalism.

As artist Hito Steyerl has put it, "If contemporary art is the answer, the question is: How can capitalism be made more beautiful?" Moreover, the art world is a sphere of want rather than of need where everything, however ephemeral or immaterial, can be sold as a unique commodity.

The valuation of works of art is dependent on desire, on their capacity to be used in identity

construction and image-building, on their social worth, on their anticipated and future position on the market and on sheer illogical impulse. The market structure that permeates the field of art manifestly creates concentrations of power and hierarchy, exemplified by the yearly published “Art Review’s Power 100,” which blatantly identifies itself as “a ranked list of the contemporary art world’s most powerful figures”.

After considering all these remarks, anarchists may indeed feel some aversion toward this system and its practices. Still, the contemporary art world is certainly not a homogeneous entity, rather a patchwork of very diverse ways of thinking, *modi operandi*, and phenotypes, which definitely is a huge plus point.

Furthermore, throughout the course of art history, sufficient critical voices have made themselves heard, questioning the relationship between art and society as well as the mechanisms of the art world and its institutions via the so-called institutional critique.

In many cases, these assessments boiled down to the question whether art should be kept in a proverbial ivory tower or that it has to assimilate with life itself, as for instance, the Dadaists wished to accomplish. But in the end most artists posing institutional critiques did so while still remaining within the confines of the art world and as a result were still dependent on the same networks.

Eventually, the art world simply incorporated every criticism into its assemblage, thereby effectively nullifying it—a mechanism that also characterizes capitalist democracy.

This annexation has become an established practice, although the amount of politically inspired art nowadays is larger than ever. A notable shift in this direction occurred in the mid-nineties. Documenta X in 1997, curated by Catherine David in Kassel, Germany, proved to be an exemplar. The show was almost completely comprised of artworks, mostly documentary or poetic in nature, that were informed by global sociopolitical issues. The subsequent editions of this influential quinquennial event further explored such themes abundantly in diverse constellations.

Meanwhile, socially-engaged art, community-based art, participatory or emancipatory art bloomed. This was declared “the social turn in art” by author Clare Bishop in a 2006 article in *Artforum*, on which she elaborated a few years later in her book, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. Here, she correctly argues that this type of art is hard to discuss and to analyze critically, since a double evaluation is necessary: should one review these projects as art or as an ethical intervention?

Many of the works that can be considered part of this social movement exhibit an anarchist sensibility or anarchist principles. Take for instance the “Free Manifesta” project by Sal Randolph. When Swiss artist Christoph Büchel was selected for Manifesta 2002 in Frankfurt, he put his spot at this prestigious European Biennial for sale on eBay as a gesture to undermine curatorial authority and market forces.

New York artist Randolph paid more than \$15,000 to get it. In her turn, she offered any artist who wished to exhibit in Frankfurt a free spot at her exhibition-within-an-exhibition, thus establishing the principle of self-selection in the spirit of the gift economy.

Another striking example was the much discussed and heavily criticized seventh Berlin Biennial in 2012. The controversial Polish artist Artur Zmijewski was chosen as curator because of his strong opinions about art’s ineptitude to properly produce any social impact. To his credit, his curatorial statement and the numerous reviews and reactions it spawned became one of the most interesting debates of the last two decades about art and politics.

The most divisive intervention was the decision to organize an autonomous zone at the heart of the event in the main hall of the KunstWerke art institution with the intention to let uncensored unpredictability reign. This became a camping place for invited activist groups such as Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, the Indignados, and Movimiento M-15.

Although this so-called Global Square was perceived as an artwork by Zmijewski, thousands of visitors gazed upon the gathering from a platform above, effectively transforming an expression of nonhierarchical protest into a mere spectacle.

These tendencies grabbed the attention of a young curator, Natalie Musteata, a Ph.D. City University of New York graduate whose mentor was Clare Bishop mentioned above. Musteata was incited to organize an exhibition about art and anarchism, which took place earlier this year at the Cantor Fitzgerald Gallery at Haverford College, in a Philadelphia suburb.

As a title, Musteata picked the famous (mis)quote by Emma Goldman, “If I Can’t Dance, It’s Not My Revolution,” yet Musteata correctly disclosed the myth around the origin of the passage in a statement about the exhibit.

Her project, however, was not an anarchist exhibition, but an exhibition about anarchism and anarchist attitudes in contemporary art.

In her role as curator, Musteata approached her subject as a scholar and chose to present this collection of works almost as didactic material, complete with illustrations. This interpretation was in accord with the fact that the venue was a university gallery, and the idea was further extended in the extensive texts that accompanied the show.

Although the approach was a legitimate one, the subject matter also rendered it awkward. For instance, despite all her references to horizontality and collectivity, in the end Musteata fell back on the classic curator-role as a knowledgeable, authoritative and controlling selector.

“Horizontality” was one of the three themes Musteata used to classify general anarchist ideas, the other two being “Free Love,” and “Black.” This division probably was again didactical, but from an anarchist viewpoint, it was actually redundant. Moreover, classifications such as these are always subject to contestation and Musteata’s motivations in this case (which she also explained in her accompanying essay) aren’t always all that strong or well enough informed.

This led to the inclusion of works that are contradictory to the anarchist creative spirit that the exhibit intended to project. A case in point is the illustrations of Gayle “Asali” Dickson and Emory Douglas, both of whom produced drawings for the heavily authoritarian Black Panther Party’s weekly newspaper, which denounced anarchism in its pages.

That said, “If I Can’t Dance...” featured some remarkable and splendid works of art from the 1960s to present that were excellently displayed. Sam Durant, an acclaimed multi-media artist who has paid tribute to anarchism throughout his career, contributed a proposal for a fountain monument in black marble consisting of a water cannon aiming a jet of water at a demonstrator carrying a black flag.

The artist duo Claire Fontaine delivered a poetical piece that combined theory and action in a witty object-as-statement: their “La Société du Spectacle Brickbat” is a clay brick disguised as Guy Debord’s famous book. It is, indeed, a clever idea, although undoubtedly several European anarchists would have preferred a cover of a book by Raoul Vaneigem.

Although the Situationist International is very much in vogue in art circles at the moment and

some of their social interventions seem anarchist, it was Vaneigem and more so than Debord who was truest to anarchist ideas.

Texts were indeed prominently featured: a text collage by John Cage from 1988 entitled “Anarchy” was included, as well as a comprehensive selection of editions of *Black Mask* magazine, the periodical created in the late 1960s by the forerunners of New York’s Up Against the Wall Motherfucker group.

Furthermore, Andrea Bowers and Olga Koumoundouros collaborated with Philadelphia-based anarchist collective Wooden Shoe Books to put up a small-scale book exchange center, an anarcho-feminist library as well as an anarchist bookshop with a more than decent catalogue. In a stunningly beautiful as well as practical juxtaposition stood Adrian Blackwell’s, “Circles Describing Spheres” (2013), a seemingly abstract sculpture, although laden with symbolism, that can also function as a reading bench.

Finally, several essays have been written alongside “If I Can’t Dance...” and these, together with more information about the artworks shown, can be consulted freely on exhibits.haverford.edu/ificantdancetoit, although in an unfortunate, ironic twist, all material turns out to be copyrighted.

Despite several imperfections, Natalie Musteata’s show at least deserves the credit for opening up the ideas of anarchism to a new audience.

As mentioned, this must have been her intention if we go along with the pertinent didacticism. It leaves us the question whether a historical, well-researched major exhibition about art and anarchism since the nineteenth century can and must be organized. It could help spreading ideas and instigating actions.

On the other hand, only a massive art institution backed with sponsorships and deals with other institutions could undertake such an enterprise.

What is ultimately posed by many DIY creative anarchists is a challenge to the validity of advocating art as a separated and specialized commodity by those who actively seek to overturn its specialization.

Tom Nys is an independent author/researcher and curator. His specific interests are art and feminism, landscape art, and dance music. He is involved in the lively, European techno scene, and works for an organization of five abortion centers in Belgium.

Photo caption: Sam Durant, “Proposal for Public Fountain,” 2013

