Revolutionary Aesthetics:
Anarchist Thought through
Neo-Impressionism and Dadaism

Natalie Wire
Professor Lisa Tiersten
Department of History, Barnard College
April 13, 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I owe a major debt of gratitude to my thesis advisor, Professor Lisa Tiersten. Without her dedication, guidance, and knowledge, this paper would be nowhere near what it is today. Professor Tiersten's unwavering support has allowed me to grow as both a writer and a scholar, and I am so deeply thankful for all of her advice over the past year.

The biggest thank you is reserved for my family, for all of their love and encouragement. To my mom, my dad, and Colin: you are my favorite people in the world, and I am the luckiest girl to have you on my team. Thank you for everything, always. To Grandpa, Cici and Soni: I would be nowhere without all of you, and I feel so fortunate to have grown up surrounded by your constant affection, your endless love of learning and your delightfully wicked sense of humor. And, of course, thank you to my wonderful aunts and uncles and cousins, all of whom I so deeply admire. I love you all!

Finally, I could not have done any of this without the moral support of my friends at Barnard and back home. All of you make everything better.

Introduction

Though Spanish painter Francisco Goya completed his print series *Disasters of War* in 1820, it took nearly half a century for his brutal, intricate sketches to finally be released to the public. Despite Goya's fame, curators chose to delay publication out of fear of the public's reaction to the artist's unflinching, graphically violent portrayal of the horrors of war.[1] Each of Goya's prints depicted the atrocities of soldiers or the murder of innocents, diverging sharply from the triumphant, reverent tones that had characterized earlier battle art. With his candid representations of the brutality of war, Goya was one of the first to express political grievances and ideals through his artwork.[2] Art's role in reflecting political beliefs or theory has significantly expanded since Goya's original contribution, with the form becoming an essential means of "critiqu[ing]... condemn[ing], and generally engag[ing] political power."[3]

These creative expressions of artists' political views hang on the walls of distinguished museums across the globe, testifying to art's long-lasting, powerful connection to political theory. In the Louvre Museum, Eugene Delacroix's 1830 painting *Liberty Leading the People* portrays a young working-class woman proudly leading the soldiers of the French Revolution to victory. Delacroix's emphasis of the woman's power and beauty, as well as his depiction of the fierce bravery of the common people she leads, serves as an expression of his support for the revolting forces. More modern art is similarly utilized as a means of expressing political ideology; the 1987 Silence = Death poster hangs in the Brooklyn Museum, featuring a pink triangle against a black backdrop and the words "SILENCE = DEATH." This poster was created by a group of AIDS activists, whose inclusion of the pink triangle - the symbol Nazis used to

---

[1] Mark Swartz, "The Disasters of War," *MoMA* 4, no. 1 (2001): 11. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4420545.
[2] Swartz, "Disasters of War," 11.
[3] Christian Viveros-Fauné, *Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art* (Norway: David Zwirner Books, 2018), 2.

identify and persecute LGBTQ+ citizens in the 1930s and 1940s - expressed their fury at the U.S. government's handling of the AIDS crisis.[4] Since the turn of the nineteenth century, artwork has served as more than just an object of aesthetic pleasure; it has become a tool that allows creators to communicate social and political ideals.

A significant episode in this long-lasting intersection between art and politics belongs to the anarchist movement in France, which maintained ties with two distinct artistic movements: the neo-Impressionists in the 1890s, and the Dadaists in the 1920s. This paper will contribute to the study of artistic representations of political thought by examining the extent to which anarchist ideology was expressed in neo-Impressionist and Dadaist content and technique. It will also argue for the powerful connections between politics and art by demonstrating how the divergence between neo-Impressionism's anarchist theory and Dadaism's radical ideals reflects a larger ideological shift in the anarchist movement, from constructive, forward-focused principles to violent, nihilistic theory.

This paper will demonstrate that the neo-Impressionist and Dadaists' respective works each display distinctive anarchist ideologies. A close analysis of select neo-Impressionist paintings will confirm that the harmonic artwork reflects anarcho-communism's utopian ideologies, while an examination of particular Dadaist works will connect the nihilistic art movement to destructive anarchist theories. This essay will also demonstrate how the different revolutionary ideals portrayed within each movement's artwork are representative of large-scale shifts in anarchist thought between the 1890s and the 1920s, as the Russian Revolution and World War I created a newfound sense of desolation and anger among the radical activists. It

---

[4] "SILENCE = DEATH," Brooklyn Museum, accessed March 16, 2022, https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/159258.

seeks to prove that neo-Impressionists and Dadaists not only represent particular anarchist philosophies through their art, but also demonstrate a wider change in the political movement.

Historiography

A large scholarly literature examines the intersections between anarchist theory and neo-Impressionist and Dadaist art, with most historians linking the artistic movements to two contrasting anarchist philosophies. In analyses of the radical ideals within neo-Impressionist work, scholars typically associate the pieces with anarcho-communism's "well-articulated, positive doctrine," which focused on establishing a harmonious anarchist future.[5] Dadaism's more destructive messaging meant that the movement was "defined… in anarcho-individualist terms" espoused by Max Stirner and Bakunin, who called for the immediate, violent overthrow of society.[6] Historians have established these distinct political leanings through a careful, ongoing examination of both movements' ties to radical thought.

Historians first began to examine the relationship between neo-Impressionism and anarchism in the 1960s, when a "social history of art became popular."[7] Through the subsequent decades, researchers separately identified three primary connections between neo-Impressionism and anarchy – the painters' personal relationships, artistic content, and artistic technique – which greatly influenced the focus of this paper's analysis. A significant amount of this information can be attributed to the scholarship of Robert L. Herbert and Eugenia Herbert, who published journal articles and a book on the subject in the 1950s. In their analysis of the artists' and activists'

---

[5] Robert L. Herbert and Eugenia W. Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others – I," *The Burlington Magazine* 102, no. 692 (1960): 474. http://www.jstor.org/stable/873246.

[6] Theresa Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent of Paris Dada: Art and Criticism, 1914-1924*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 8.

[7] Laura Prins, "L'Art pour l'Art or L'Art pour Tous?" *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 4, no.1 (2016): 94. https://doi.org/10.18352/hcm.505.

letters, the Herberts introduced the idea that the relationship between both groups extended far beyond a mere association, and instead indicated a close friendship and shared dedication to radical political thought. They also established the presence of anarcho-communist ideology within neo-Impressionist work, as the painters' content included implicit references to the glory of the working classes and to an approaching anarchist utopia. This paper will build on these previous, more generalized studies by examining specific pieces of neo-Impressionist art, to offer a more detailed analysis of their anarchist content.

Later research moved away from content and concentrated instead on the neo-Impressionists' painting technique, as scholars introduced the idea that the artists' pointillist approach developed out of their desire to create solidarity out of small, separate units. In 1990, Robyn S. Roslak briefly connected the harmonic goals of this neo-Impressionist color theory to anarcho-communist values, which called for "a cohesive, classless social fabric," while discussing both movements' ties to science.[8] Although scholars have established that both features of neo-Impressionist art included a reference to anarchist ideology, the pieces' content and technique have all been studied separately, leaving the historical narrative without an in-depth, unified analysis. This paper will seek to fill this gap by examining specific pieces of neo-Impressionist art for both their subject matter and their technique, and then tying these artistic concepts directly to positive anarcho-communist theory, as expressed by Piotr Kropotkin, Jean Grave and Elisée Reclus.

While historians examined neo-Impressionism's ties to anarchism through multiple elements of their artwork, their analysis of the relationship between Dadaism and anarchism was far more general and abstract. From the earliest studies of the connection between Dadaism and

---

[8] Robyn S. Roslak, "The Politics of Aesthetic Harmony: Neo-Impressionism, Science, and Anarchism," *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 3 (1991): 383. https://doi.org/10.2307/3045811.

anarchism to the most recent, historians have directed their attention towards theoretical similarities almost exclusively, highlighting both movements' desire for a violent overthrow of modern society. The long-lasting nature of this strand of analysis can be seen in the similarities between Ralph Renwick's 1958 article, which focused on how Dada's values of revolution within their art represented a "purposefully contrived anarchy," and Theresa Papanikolas' 2016 book, which argued that Dadaism was based on an "anarcho-individualist prescription for social renewal."[9]

Historians' attempts to demonstrate a closer, more individualized relationship between the two groups managed to personally link only painter and sculptor Marcel Duchamp to anarchism, through his brief study of radical individualist Max Stirner.[10] Although researchers provided strong evidence for the connection between anarchism and Dadaism through both groups' ideological similarities, the scholarship neglects any discussion of anarchism's impact on Dadaism's actual techniques or content. This paper will seek to further support historians' association of Dadaism and anarchist theory, by providing more concrete evidence of anarchism's influence on the subject matter and artistic approaches of Dadaist art.

Beyond the separate studies of each Dadaism and neo-Impressionism's ties to radicalism, researchers' overarching examination of the relationship between art and anarchism reveals a gap in their historical analysis. Despite the abundance of scholarly material discussing neo-Impressionism and Dadaism's respective ties to anarchism, there is no comprehensive examination comparing both movements' associated revolutionary ideologies. This essay will

---

[9] Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent,* 84; Ralph Renwick, "Dadaism: Semantic Anarchy," *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 15, no. 3 (1958): 203.
[10] Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Duchamp's Ego," *Textual Practice* 2, no.18 (2004): 221.

attempt to remedy this lack of large-scale analysis by studying the overarching shifts in anarchist theory through neo-Impressionist art and Dadaist art.

This essay is divided into three chapters. Chapter 1 will provide background on the overarching transition in French anarchist thought between the 1890s and the 1920s, revealing how the Russian Revolution and World War I destroyed the popularity of constructive, future-focused anarcho-communism and invoked a shift towards more violent, angry anarchist ideology. Chapter 2 will establish the personal and professional ties between neo-Impressionist painters and anarchists, before tying hopeful anarcho-communist ideology to neo-Impressionist content and technique. The final chapter will focus on Dada, first discussing the artists' attraction to the anarchist ideals of Max Stirner and Mikhail Bakunin and then connecting Dadaist content and technique to more destructive, cynical anarchist theories. To best detect and interpret the ideology present within both movements' subjects and methods, Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 will each examine a few specific works by two prominent painters from neo-Impressionism and Dadaism, respectively.

CHAPTER ONE

Shifts in Anarchist Thought

In 1871, for exactly two months and ten days, the city of Paris was ruled by its people. Although the revolutionary Paris Commune was quashed in an extremely bloody battle that burned down much of the city, it still served as a beacon of hope to the world's most radical political thinkers. The Commune's separation of church and state, postponement of all debt obligations, and support of workers' rights provided many anarchists and other revolutionaries with a model of the future great social revolution.[11] However, after the Paris Commune's fall and the Third Republic's decimation of the revolting *communards*, nearly all remaining French anarchists and radicals were heavily persecuted, limiting their activity.[12]

As the turn of the century approached, though, the French government lifted its "restrictions on political activity" and anarchists became active once again, spreading their ideology throughout the country and "[winning] wide sympathy in France."[13] During this period, many anarchists began to express an optimistic, constructive worldview, as seen in both the increased popularity of anarcho-communism's future-focused ideals, and the group's emphasis on a peaceful revolution. However, just over a decade later, the hopeful character of anarchist theory was destroyed by the devastating impact of World War I and the Russian Revolution, leading the movement to turn towards a more destructive, cynical ideology. This chapter will demonstrate the dramatic shift in anarchist ideology, as the desolation of the Russian Revolution

---

[11] "Timeline of The Civil War in France," Marxists International Archive, accessed March 16, 2022, https://www.marxists.org/history/france/paris-commune/timeline.htm.

[12] Tom Wheeldon, "The Paris Commune, 150 years on – from the siege of the capital to 'Bloody Week'," *France 24,* March 18, 2021, https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210318-from-the-siege-of-paris-to-the-bloody-week-the-commune-150-years-on.

[13] Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: HarperCollins Publisher, 2012), 437; Piotr Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Company, 1899), 447.

and World War I encouraged the radical activists to abandon their earlier idealistic ideology for a negative, violent worldview.

Anarchist Idealism at the Turn of the Century

The anarchists' acceptance of a more constructive worldview can be seen in their widespread adherence to anarcho-communist philosophy. In the 1890s, anarcho-communism was led by three iconic revolutionary figures: Piotr Kropotkin, Élisée Reclus, and Jean Grave. While some anarchists at the turn of the century focused on the immediate destruction of society through bloodshed and brutality, these anarcho-communists instead emphasized the brighter, autonomous future that lay ahead of them.[14] Their political narrative, as seen in the many anarcho-communist journals published at the time, centered around anarchism's ability to eventually establish a "harmonic social state," founded not only on individual autonomy, but also on "mutual aid and support."[15] The anarcho-communists' primary focus on the eventual creation of a brighter future, established on the principles of cooperation as well as independence, demonstrates their unique philosophy's more utopian character.

Anarchists' widespread devotion to these constructive writings and theories reflects the growing optimistic tone that characterized the entire movement at the turn of the century. The burgeoning number of adherents to anarcho-communism's ideals can be seen in the extensive dissemination of the group's many political journals during this period. Kropotkin, Reclus, and Grave all contributed to the publication of numerous anarcho-communist journals, such as *Le Révolté* or *Les Temps Nouveaux*, where they continued to concentrate on the future, and the eventual establishment of "a system founded roughly more or less on the principles of individual

---

[14] Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, 437.

[15] Jean Grave, "Autorité et Organisation," *Le Révolté* 6, no. 6 (1884): 1; Piotr Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (United Kingdom: McClure, Philips & Company, 1902), 282.

liberty" and "[their] ideal: harmony."[16] The journals' immense popularity among anarchists was described by Kropotkin himself, who stated that "[their] paper began to spread in [France]," creating such an impact on its readers that "letters were exchanged in great numbers with French workers." [17] This increased demand for the anarcho-communists' future-focused writings reveals the larger anarchist movement's more hopeful tone at the end of the nineteenth century.

The idealistic character of turn-of-the-century anarchism can also be seen in their calls for a peaceful social and political revolution. Although much of the anarchists' optimistic attitude can be attributed to their emphasis on the eventual establishment of an anarchist paradise, this same constructive perspective appears in their refusal to devolve into the "violent character" of past revolutions.[18] Their vocal support for a nonviolent "profound and rapid social reconstruction" further reflects the movement's more productive, harmonic nature.[19] Anarchists' increased dedication to anarcho-communism's visions for a brighter anarchist future, as well as their desire for a peaceful social revolution, demonstrates the movement's idealistic ideology at the end of the nineteenth century.

The Russian Revolution and Anarchist Disillusion

This sense of hope, which extended throughout the entire anarchist movement, was at first only bolstered by the news of a growing revolution in Russia in 1917. For many anarchists, this was the revolution they had been dreaming of for decades; they believed that their visions of an autonomous utopia would finally be realized. Anarchist activists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman represented the majority of their peers when they described the Russian

---

[16] Piotr Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (United States: Putnam, 1907), 36; Grave, "Autorité et Organisation," 2.
[17] Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 447.
[18] Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 301.
[19] Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 502.

Revolution as a "miracle" and a "long-cherished dream."[20] Although anarchist ideology did not

exactly align with the Bolsheviks' social and political thinking, anarchists frequently identified

similarities between their own ideals and the revolutionary actions of the Russians,

demonstrating how much the Revolution served as a source of excitement and inspiration.

Berkman even once designated Russia the "land of the Social Revolution," language which

echoes the anarchist's constant calls for a total "overturn of society," suggesting that the group

truly believed the Revolution would be the ultimate culmination of all their dreams.[21] Many

anarchists also consistently emphasized the fact that the Revolution had been conducted by and

for the people, reflecting anarcho-communist thinking which optimistically claimed that the

"spirit of organization [was] inherent in the people," a trait which would allow revolution able to

spread across the globe.[22] The Bolsheviks' apparent adherence to values that closely matched

anarcho-communism not only amplified anarchists' belief in the approach of a brighter, more

autonomous future, but also seemed to support the utopian views of Kropotkin's philosophy. At

first, the Russian Revolution appeared to support the idealistic revolutionary thinking that had

come to define the movement in the late 1800s and early 1900s. However, the Russian

Revolution ultimately proved to be a source of extreme disillusionment and betrayal for the

anarchist revolutionaries, leading many to abandon their optimistic ideals for more destructive,

pessimistic theories.

    A significant aspect of anarchism's growing tone of disappointment and cynicism was the

Bolsheviks' failure to adhere to the principles of autonomy and equality that they had originally

[20] Emma Goldman, *My Disillusionment in Russia* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co, 1923), xi; Goldman, *Disillusionment*, v.
[21] Alexander Berkman, *The Russian Tragedy: A Review and An Outlook* (1922), 12; Mikhail Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works of the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism*, ed. Sam Dolgoff (Allen & Unwin, 1973), 68.
[22] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, 74.

established as the revolution's founding doctrine. Russia's emphasis on these concepts of freedom were a significant force behind the anarchists' support and their growing hopes for a liberated utopia. However, as time passed and more anarchists arrived in Russia to observe the great social change, they began to realize that the Bolsheviks were not holding to the ideals that they claimed to practice, creating a sense of betrayal and disappointment. The anarchists' firsthand observations in Russia consistently noted the way that the "Revolution is divorced from the people," and how the Bolsheviks "[entered] upon [a] dictatorship over the proletariat."[23] Their focus on the Russian leaders' refusal to listen to the people for whom they had originally been revolting, demonstrates the anarchist's growing realization that their dreams of the people "free[ing] themselves from every form of government" will not be reached.[24] By repeatedly describing the ways in which the Russians have not adhered to basic egalitarian principles in their overthrowal of the Tsar, the anarchists demonstrate their disillusionment and their belief in the revolution's ultimate failure. Anarchists were also unafraid to explicitly express the feelings of betrayal and disappointment that developed out of Russia's abandonment of their revolutionary principles, as well as the establishment of a new oppressive government. Oftentimes, anarchists like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman contrasted their new perspective to their earlier feelings of excitement, calling Russia "an appalling caricature of the new life, the world's hope," and even noting that they had "come to doubt almost everything, even the Revolution itself."[25] This disappointment with, and lack of faith in, a significant social revolution marks a stark difference from anarchists' idealistic dreams just a decade or two

---

[23] Berkman, *Russian Tragedy,* 22; Berkman, *Russian Tragedy*, 21.
[24] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, 37.
[25] Berkman, *Russian Tragedy*, 14; Goldman, *Disillusionment in Russia*, 155.

earlier, and illustrates a transformation of anarchists' hopeful nature towards one of cynicism and frustration.

Anarchists' growing disillusionment with the Russian Revolution, as well as their diminished faith in the possibility of any constructive anarchist revolution, also developed out of the violent, tyrannical actions of the Bolsheviks during their rule, beyond the party's betrayal of their supposed revolutionary ideals. After establishing control, the leaders of the Russian Revolution began to imprison and persecute opposing thinkers, including anarchists, even if they had not engaged in counter-revolutionary activities; a great number of anarchists were put in prison, while others were shot.[26] Anarchists across the globe had to watch as their friends and allies were tortured and detained solely for the purpose of their political affiliation, imbuing the movement with a sense of "hopelessness" and "despair," which further distanced the group from their earlier hopefulness.[27] The direct attacks on their fellow radical thinkers were not only upsetting because of their personal connections to the victims, but also because anarchists realized that these actions showed that nothing had changed between the former Tsarist rule and Lenin's new government. Anarchists describing their peers' terrible oppression and torture made sure to note that the Bolsheviks "resurrected the old Tsarist methods" with these actions, demonstrating their recognition of the fact that the Russian Revolution had truly failed, and that social revolution was unable to bring about the brighter, autonomous future they had dreamed of.[28] The stark contrast between the painfully oppressive, violent reality of post-revolutionary life and the anarchists' previous hopes of creating a new, egalitarian society continued the breakdown of the group's "revolutionary faith," as they turned away from the utopian, hopeful

---

[26] Goldman, *Disillusionment in Russia*, 106.
[27] Goldman, *Disillusionment in Russia,* 145; Goldman, *Disillusionment in Russia*, xvii.
[28] Goldman, *Disillusionment in Russia,* 106.

theories that had dominated the movement just a couple of decades before.[29] The Russian

Revolution's great failures - both in their revolutionary methods and their post-war ruling –

destroyed the idealistic dreams and forward-looking attitudes that had previously characterized

the anarchist movement, and instead created a deep sense of sorrow and cynicism.

World War I and Anarchist Disillusion

During this same period, World War I provided another source of contention and

desolation for anarchist thinkers, driving them further away from their earlier utopianism. Some

of the most visible and well-loved anarchist thinkers became divided on the appropriate response

to war, creating widespread dissatisfaction with the movement's leaders and a sense of betrayal

at the rejection of their shared beliefs. For decades leading up to the war, anarchists had

collectively maintained a firm anti-war stance, arguing that any form of militarism was an

expression of imperialism that encroached on their ideals of autonomy. This perspective served

as a "cohesive movement" for anarchists and became a key foundation of their ideology, while

also reflecting the anti-violent rhetoric of anarcho-communism.[30] However, as World War I

began, a number of well-respected leaders of the movement, including Kropotkin and Jean

Grave, began to break away from this traditional perspective, voicing their support for the French

and affirming the need for a war. Most anarchists viewed this war as a "'ruling class' conflict,"

meaning that the anarcho-communists' support would directly violate the ideals of autonomy and

independence that defined their political movement.[31] Specifically, Kropotkin's acknowledgment

of a nation's right to send their people to defend the state and die against their will, even in the

---

[29] Goldman, *Disillusionment in Russia*, xvii.
[30] Constance Bantman and David Berry, "The French anarchist movement and the First World War," in *Anarchism, 1914-18: Internationalism, Anti-Militarism and War*, ed. Ruth Kinna and Matthew Adams, (Manchester Scholarship Online, 2018), 156.
[31] Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible*, 332.

context of a wrongful invasion, validated the principles of "militarism, nationalism and Statism," and went against everything the anarchists believed.[32]

Many anarchists recognized this support as a deep betrayal of one of their primary ideals, with one anarchist, Louis Lecoin, explicitly stating that the "leaders… who had been [his] teachers now caused [him] only revulsion."[33] With this phrase, Lecoin managed to convey the immense level of pain and anger felt by many other followers, as he first stresses his dedication to the movement's previous leaders by emphasizing the important role they played in his journey, before negating this past affection with his newfound disgust. The feelings of treachery and hatred between many anarchists, as illustrated Lecoin, not only caused deep divisions within the movement, but also destroyed the feelings of hope and enthusiasm that had defined the movement at the turn of the century. The pessimism and frustration that had come to characterize the movement, as well as a sense of disgust with Kropotkin's views, also led a number of anarchists to abandon the constructive nature of anarcho-communism. The downfall of anarcho-communism can be seen in the cancelled publication of most of his publications, as well as many anarchists' explicit desire to "look elsewhere" for a new anarchist ideology.[34] Just as with the Russian Revolution, anarchists experienced extreme disappointment and frustration throughout World War I, creating not only a newfound sense of pessimism in the place of their earlier idealism, but also encouraging the revolutionaries to seek out new anarchist perspectives besides the idealistic anarcho-communism.

Beyond the Great War's role in destroying the influence of the utopian anarcho-communism, it also encouraged anarchists to seek out a more destructive, cynical worldview.

---

[32] Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible,* 336.
[33] Bantman and Berry, "French anarchist movement," 164.
[34] Bantman and Berry, "French anarchist movement," 165.

The statism and violence of the war, as well as the breakdown of anarchist unity, meant that most radicals had experienced an "[accelerated] change of attitudes in the movement," suggesting that they would seek out a new way of thinking that contrasted greatly with the hopeful pre-war anarchism.[35] The movement's transition towards a more pessimistic point of view, in particular, can best be seen in how closely iconic anarchist Mikhail Bakunin's destructive ideals were followed and admired at the time. During his lifetime, Bakunin had called for an "all-embracing upheaval, a true revolt of the masses" in order to create true social change, a message of chaos and violence echoed by anarchists who sought to "doggedly [undermine] and [break] up the various States" during the Great War.[36] Just like Bakunin, anarchists' new ideology focused primarily on the dismantling of contemporary social systems and the establishment of a damaging "revolution to… [end] all of society's iniquities," diverging greatly from the more hopeful emphasis of anarcho-communism.[37] The increase of nationalist sentiment that accompanied the outbreak of World War I led anarchists to focus more on the dismantling of the restrictive, immoral social systems that allowed such authoritarian behavior, reflecting Bakunin's more bitter, destructive theories.

The anarchists' pessimistic, wrathful worldview, brought about by a growing sense of discontent and betrayal after the Russian Revolution and World War I, marked an abrupt shift from the utopian anarchist ideology that dominated at the turn of the century. Specifically, the Russian Revolution demonstrated the revolution's failure to remain egalitarian and representative of the people, as well as its inability to prevent despotism after the revolt ended, replacing the hopeful idealism of the earlier period with cynicism and frustration. Similarly, infighting over

---

[35] Bantman and Berry, "French, anarchist movement" 166.
[36] Bakunin, *Selected Works*, xvi; Leonard Abbott et. al, *Anti-War Manifesto*, 1915.
[37] Abbott et. al, *Anti-War Manifesto*, 1915.

anarchism's position on the First World War and growing nationalism across the globe led to the frustration and disappointment of many of the movement's members, drawing them away from Kropotkin's more constructive views and towards the destructive ideals of Bakunin.

This marked change in anarchist theory permeated each facet of the movement. Most notably, the transformation of anarchist attitudes can even be found in the two artistic movements that dominated the late nineteenth century and the 1920s, respectively: neo-Impressionism and Dadaism. Many of the neo-Impressionists and Dadaists maintained close ties to anarchist thinkers or adhered to anarchist ideology; these relationships, as well as the movement's tonal shift from utopian to nihilistic, influenced the unique content and the specialized techniques of the two movements. This paper will not only examine the ties between the political movement and both artistic movements, but it will also demonstrate the influence of Kropotkin's earlier optimistic ideology on neo-Impressionist subject matter and technique, as well as the effect of Bakunin's later cynical, destructive thinking on Dadaism's content and methods. Through these two artistic movements, anarchist theory's transformation from constructive and hopeful to hostile and harmful becomes even more apparent.

CHAPTER TWO

Neo-Impressionism and Anarchist Idealism

In 1886, the eighth and final Impressionist Exhibition took place in a cramped second-floor space, directly above the famed Maison Dorée restaurant in Paris. From the start, the exhibition faced difficulties; despite their contributions in earlier years, some of the most famous Impressionist artists – including Claude Monet, Auguste Renoir, and more - refused to include their work in the showing. There was also some tension over who would be featured in the presentation, as the Impressionist leaders were hesitant about including the new pointillist styles of Paul Signac and Georges Seurat. Despite these doubts, when the exhibition opened on May 15, the collection included the unique stylings of Signac, Seurat, and Camille and Lucien Pissarro. It was also at this Impressionist Exhibition that anarchist and art critic Félix Fénéon first encountered a distinctive pointillist technique, leading him to coin the term "neo-Impressionism" to identify the works that used this novel style.[38] This would not be the only interaction between anarchism and neo-Impressionism, as members of both movements grew extremely close and often contributed to one another's work. Through these strong professional and personal connections, neo-Impressionists included constructive, utopian anarchist ideals in the content and technique of their work, reflecting widespread anarchist views at the turn of the century.

---

[38] "Eighth & Final Impressionist Exhibition, Impressionist Arts, accessed March 20, 2022, https://impressionistarts.com/eighth-impressionist-exhibition#4a.

Neo-Impressionist Artists and Anarchists

Both groups openly contributed to the development of one another's movements, with many neo-Impressionists gladly offering works of art to incendiary anarchist publications.[39] Radical activists responded in kind, with Fénéon dedicating a significant portion of his writings to explaining the neo-Impressionists' unique style and technique. To gain a better understanding of the strong political and professional ties between the artists and the anarchists, this paper will closely examine iconic neo-Impressionist painters Paul Signac and Camille Pissarro's ties to anarchist thinkers.

Like many of his fellow neo-Impressionists, Signac happily contributed his art pieces to Jean Grave's anarchist journal *Les Temps Nouveaux*. He was so intensely devoted to this work that he occasionally refused to accept payment for his drawings, instead joking that Grave should "pay [him] in propaganda brochures."[40] However, Signac's dedication to Grave's utopian anarchist thinking extended beyond artistic contributions into the realm of authorship. Signac wrote one anonymous article entitled "Impressionistes et Revolutionnaires" for *La Révolté*, a publication first founded by renowned anarcho-communist thinker Piotr Kropotkin. In his piece, Signac compared neo-Impressionists to anarchists, as they ignored the traditional aesthetic principles of Impressionism. He once even celebrated the inclusion of one of his booklets in *Les Temps Nouveaux*, a "journal which [was] so dear to [him]."[41] Signac's willingness to contribute not just his art, but his own written thoughts and ideas, to anarchist publications demonstrates his deep belief and conviction in the anarchist cause, as well as his strong working relationships with anarcho-communist thinkers.

---

[39] Robert L. Herbert and Eugenia W. Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others – II," *The Burlington Magazine* 102, no. 693 (1960): 521.
[40] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 519.
[41] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 519.

Pissarro was similarly dedicated to providing support and materials for revolutionary papers, while also establishing strong working relationships with anarchists. Although he did not offer written material, or explicitly reveal his own ideas about the political movement, Pissarro's devotion can be seen in his ongoing support for idealistic anarchist journals. He often voluntarily offered own time and work to *Les Temps Nouveaux*, telling Grave that he was "entirely at [the anarchist's] disposal for an engraving or drawing [and his] sons obviously will be too."[42] His eagerness to contribute to the paper, in whatever possible manner, illustrates the artist's dedication to the forward-looking anarcho-communist cause and to Grave's work. Beyond his generous offer of his own pieces for the journal's content, Pissarro also worked hard to ensure the continuation of the paper through fundraising. He donated his own work, as well as his son's, for raffles to raise money for Grave and *Les Temps Nouveaux*, in an attempt to ensure a long-lasting, sustainable future for the paper and its presentation of anarchist ideology.[43] Pissarro's letters to Grave further reveal his dedication to *Les Temps Nouveaux* and his desire to learn more about this constructive anarchist ideology. As he moved across France, Pissarro regularly wrote back to Grave to ensure that each issue of the journal would be sent to his family's new addresses. Pissarro's intense commitment to anarchist thought, as well as his generous contributions to their journals, demonstrate his strong ideological bond and professional relationships with anarcho-communists.

The tie between neo-Impressionist artists and anarchists was far more than a union of men with similar political ideologies, actually providing the basis for genuine fondness and friendship. Members of the two movements maintained close emotional ties, many of which lasted throughout their lifetimes. For Jean Grave, avowed anarchist and publisher of the

---

[42] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 517

[43] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 517.

revolutionary journal *Les Temps Nouveaux*, most of his "unpublished correspondence… is almost entirely with artists, and most especially… Neo-Impressionists,"[44] indicating the heavy presence of the painters in his personal life. The firm connections between both groups are especially visible in the artists' written interactions with anarchist Grave; they often discuss mundane life events or their affection for one another as if they are nothing more than old friends, and not radical political allies.[45] These letters do not even fully demonstrate the depths of the friendships between both movements, as "frequent meetings… obviated the necessity of much correspondence."[46] Regardless of whether their feelings were expressed through the written word or in physical interactions, the neo-Impressionist artists and anarchist thinkers – Jean Grave and Kropotkin, in particular – held deep affection for one another.

These intense emotional and social bonds between anarchist and artist are exemplified by Signac's relationship with Jean Grave. His exchanges with Grave demonstrate the loving connection between his own family and the editor of *Les Temps Nouveaux*, which extends far beyond the quiet friendliness of colleagues or political allies. Signac's inclusion of his spouse in his well-wishes, writing "my wife and I extend our best regards to you," makes the message far warmer and more personal than a typical farewell, and implies that their families have interacted with one another before.[47] The connection between their families, and the apparent merging of their personal lives with their working relationship, is emphasized when Signac mentions that "[his] mother would also have been very happy to receive [Grave]" during the latter's trip to St-Tropez.[48] As a member of his extended family, Signac's mother would have had no reason to

---

[44] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism I," 473.
[45] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 522.
[46] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 522.
[47] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 519.
[48] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 520.

meet or interact with Grave if he were nothing more than a colleague or acquaintance; her apparent desire to spend time with the anarcho-communist suggests that the ties between the two men and their families were far greater than casual or professional. Beyond the multiple points of textual evidence which indicate an extremely strong sense of affection between the two men, Signac expresses their relationship best in his own words, asking Grave to "believe that I am very touched by your delicate friendship."[49] Their closeness indicates that the bonds between neo-Impressionists and optimistic anarcho-communists developed far beyond those of typical professional relationships, transforming into close and loving friendships.

Camille Pissarro's interactions with Grave only provide further evidence of the depth of friendship and affection between the two groups. Just as in Signac's letters, Pissarro's words are filled with warmth and friendliness, and often refer to the bond between his own family and Grave's. In one note, Pissarro discusses his subscription to an anarchist paper, only to follow this matter of business by inviting Signac over to a family dinner the following week, as "Madame Pissarro is gone until the end of the week."[50] In another, he thanks Grave for sending him pictures of his vacation, writing about the pleasure that these images brought him and complimenting Grave's skillful photography.[51] Both of these interactions reveal the familiarity and friendship between both men and their families, emphasizing the close personal relationship between the anarchist and the painter. The greatest indicator of their intense bond, however, was Pissarro's willingness to send his friend money, to support his endeavors and his lifestyle. As a painter at the head of a new, controversial stylistic movement, Pissarro was not a wealthy man, and he had a family to provide for. Despite these hardships, he did not hesitate to help his friend

---

[49] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 519.
[50] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 518.
[51] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 518.

in difficult times, offering him "fifty francs [for] lectures and the rest for [his] journal."[52]

Pissarro's willingness to provide financial aid, even as he struggled to support his own family,

shows the depth of his devotion and friendship, indicating a far more personal tie between the

two men. These powerful individual and professional bonds between the artists and the

optimistic revolutionary activists confirm a strong connection between neo-Impressionism and

anarchism.

Neo-Impressionist Content and Anarchism

The neo-Impressionists strongly believed that art served as an important vehicle for

representing political ideals, with Signac writing that "justice in sociology [and] harmony in art

[are] the same thing."[53] The artists' true dedication to anarcho-communism can be seen in their

depiction of hopeful yet revolutionary ideals within the content of their works, reflecting general

anarchist attitudes at the time. A wide range of Neo-Impressionist painters, from Maximilien

Luce to Hippolyte Petitjean, incorporated and occasionally even celebrated constructive anarcho-

communist ideologies within the subject matter of their paintings. Artists Paul Signac and

Camille Pissarro, who maintained especially strong connections to anarchists like Jean Grave

and Piotr Kropotkin, provide a compelling demonstration of popular anarcho-communist ideals

within their artwork, though the presentation of these radical concepts is subtle. Signac and

Pissarro specifically emphasized anarcho-communist focus on the creation of a brighter future,

founded on a combination of individualism and cooperation. This section will examine four

different paintings by Paul Signac and Camille Pissarro, containing hopeful anarchist content.

---

[52] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism II," 519.
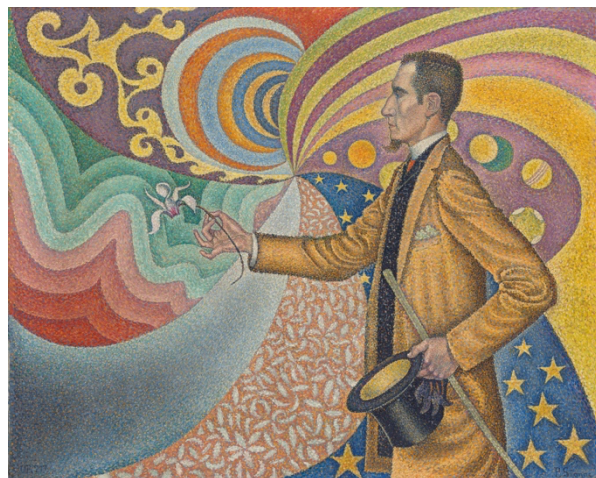[53] Herbert and Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism I," 473.

Figure 1. Paul Signac, *Opus 217, Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890*, 1890, oil on canvas. New York, The Museum of Modern Art.

The content of Paul Signac's painting *Opus 217, Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles, Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890* – seen in Figure 1 – reveals a direct reference to idealistic anarchist ideals. The most explicit connection tying Signac's masterpiece to the political movement is the primary subject of this portrait himself: art critic and avowed anarchist Félix Fénéon. Beyond his involvement with the neo-Impressionists and the world of art, Fénéon was known as an aggressive, enthusiastic revolutionary. He contributed to multiple anarchist publications and was tied to a number of violent anarchist attacks, including bombings of the local police precinct in 1892 and the Hotel Foyot in 1894. For this assault, he was put on trial alongside twenty-nine other anarchists in The Trial of the Thirty, and although he was eventually acquitted, his actions and "wit made him the undisputed star."[54] Signac painted the portrait at least two years before most of these events, but Fénéon was still a recognizable figure in the insurgent political movement.

By selecting Fénéon as the subject of this portrait, Signac ensured that his artwork would remain tied to the anarchist and his principles. Despite the more negative connotations that accompanied Fénéon and anarchism, Signac utilized the background and the props within the

---

[54] Félix Fénéon, *Novels in Three Lines,* trans. Luc Sante (New York: New York Review Books, 2007), Introduction, Kindle.

painting to ensure that this connection portrayed the controversial anarchist in a bright,

whimsical light. Signac paints Fénéon with a top hat, a cane, and a beautiful flower, which the

anarchist appears to be offering to some unknown person standing off-canvas. The hat and cane

grant him a sense of gentility and elegance, contrasting anarchists' more threatening reputations.

His presentation of the lily paints him in a vulnerable and romantic light, only adding to the

favorable portrayal of this figure of anarchism. The vibrant, swirling background also creates a

feeling of whimsy and magic, making it seem as though the violent man who stands in the

middle of the portrait is far more lighthearted than one might think. Signac not only connects his

painting to anarchy through his depiction of revolutionary Félix Fénéon, but also reflects the

movement's growing emphasis on gentler, more hopeful tones in the man's flattering and kindly
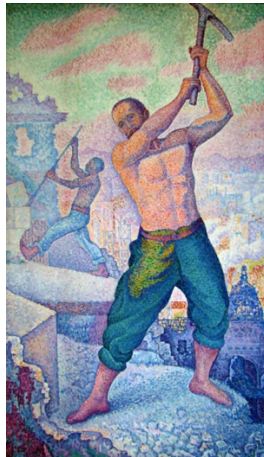
portrayal.

Figure 2. Paul Signac, *Le Démolisseur,* 1897-99, oil on canvas. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

Signac similarly depicts utopian anarchist principles within the content of his 1897

painting *Le Démolisseur,* or *The Demolition Worker,* which appears in Figure 2. The subject of

this piece is not a well-known anarchist, as in *Opus 217*, but is instead an ordinary laborer,

toiling away at backbreaking work. Although the worker appears unrefined and base, as he

works without a shirt and in loose-fitting jeans, rolled up at the ankles, Signac still ensures that

the man is characterized as a heroic, powerful figure. The scale of the painting itself, standing at

around eight feet high, makes the laborer appear literally larger than life, granting him a sense of strength and importance not typically attributed to people in his station. Signac also emphasizes his subject's perfect physical condition by bathing his muscular chest and arms in light and centering his torso directly in the middle of the painting. Rather than stress the man's poverty or his struggles, Signac choose to depict the demolition worker as a striking champion.

His lionization of the laborer reflects anarcho-communist ideology's idealization of common citizens and workers specifically, with famous anarchist thinker Elisée Reclus concluding that "nothing is more sacred than… labor."[55] Piotr Kropotkin glorified the lifestyle of peasants and workers as well, as they "retained [their lands] in communal ownership," reflecting Kropotkin's optimistic dreams for a future anarchist paradise.[56] The backdrop of the painting, which shows the destruction of an old, decrepit city as a new dawn rises in the sky, also reflects hopeful revolutionary principles. This imagery echoes the hopeful, forward-looking aspects of Kropotkin's and Reclus's anarchist writings; it symbolizes the emergence of a better, more peaceful anarchist civilization, centered around "[their] ideal: harmony!"[57] Just as in his *Opus 217*, through the subject matter of his *The Demolition Worker,* Signac's subject matter in *The Demolition Worker* represents late nineteenth century anarchism's more idealistic nature, as the group focused on creating a pastoral, harmonic anarchic society.

---

[55] Elisée Reclus. *À mon frère, le paysan*, (Paris: Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, 1925), 2.
[56] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid,* 247.
[57] Grave, "Autorité et Organisation," 2.

Figure 3. Paul Signac, *In the Time of Harmony: The Golden Age Has Not Passed, It Is Still to Come (Reprise),* 1896, oil on canvas. Montclair, The Kasser Mochary Foundation.

Signac's *In the Time of Harmony: The Golden Age Has Not Passed, It Is Still to Come (Reprise),* seen in Figure 3, also includes a number of references to utopian anarcho-communist ideals. The first allusion to anarchism lies in the title itself: originally, Signac had planned to name the painting "In the Time of Anarchism: The Golden Age Has Not Passed, It Is Still to Come." He replaced the word "anarchism" with "harmony" before the painting's release in 1896, due to rising social fury caused by several violent acts attributed to anarchists.[58] However, the knowledge of Signac's initial plans for the title, and the imagery within the painting itself, demonstrate the piece's connections to idealistic revolutionary ideology. The painting depicts a paradise, complete with fields of shining green grass, majestic trees, and calm blue water. In the foreground, a group of people lounge and enjoy this bountiful paradise, free from any worries – a pair of men play a game, while a woman feeds a child and a couple strolls down the path. The image's association of anarchism with this perfect "golden age" reflects anarchists' hopes for an eventual "harmonic social state, where individuals will live without quarrels, without struggle, in the most perfect intelligence" after the collapse of society.[59] Signac also included more specific

---

[58] The Museum of Modern Art, "Félix Fénéon: Live Q&A with Glenn Lowry and Starr Figura," filmed April 2020, New York, NY, video, https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5075.
[59] Grave, "Autorité et Organisation," 1.

references to the presence of anarchist principles, revealing that the crowing rooster in the

bottom right serves as a symbol of France itself, celebrating its rebirth into a new, better society.

Just as in his *Demolition Worker,* Signac's *In the Time of Harmony…* depicts more optimistic

anarchist ideals, which focus on the establishment of an autonomous yet cooperative paradise.

Figure 4. Camille Pissarro, *Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte 1888*, 1888, oil on canvas. Dallas, The Dallas Museum of Art.

Pissarro's work, *Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte 1888*, which appears in Figure 4, is

implicitly revolutionary, although the subject matter still reflects anarchic values. *Apple Picking*

depicts a group of farm laborers working together to harvest an apple tree, as a wide, flat field

stretches back behind them. Pissarro emphasizes the communal nature of the land by depicting

the fieldworkers toiling together to care for it, with a man and a woman bent at the waist picking

fallen apples and another man and woman staring up at the tree. Just as in Signac's *Demolition*

Worker, Pissarro valorizes the peasant lifestyle, though this time he focuses his admiration on the

workers' communal farmland and fields. A rising dawn illuminates the field in a soft, glowing

light, bringing out brilliant shades of gold, red, and green. Although the men and women

working the land are at the foreground, they remain in the shadow of the apple tree, ensuring that

the land itself remains the most dazzling and attractive aspect of the painting.

The symbolic imagery, of a new day breaking and brightening the workers' land, reflects

anarchist ideology which celebrates the coming of a new age, in which land will be shared and

cared for by all. Both Reclus and Kropotkin heaped praise on the shared land-tending system developed by peasants, and pushed for it to be adopted by all after the rise of an anarchist utopia, writing that "there is only one way… which satisfies our instincts of justice and is at the same time practical… the system already adopted by the agrarian communes of Europe."[60] Pissarro's *Apple Picking* reflects this anarchist dream, depicting a better future in which a bright, new age will bring the "communal possession" already utilized by peasants as a more equal, more generous land sharing system.[61] Through Pissaro's focus on the beauty of communal land, he conveys anarchism's increasingly constructive, forward-looking tone.

Neo-Impressionist Technique and Anarchism

Neo-Impressionist painters reflected turn-of-the-century anarchism's hopeful character in far more than the subject matter of their paintings. The artists' own description and analysis of their unique pointillist and divisionist techniques echoes certain idealistic principles promoted by anarchist thinkers. In the late 1880s, as the neo-Impressionists began to develop their own art form in earnest, famous anarchists like Piotr Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus and Jean Grave began to write about their dreams of an approaching anarchist utopia based on the principles of both autonomy and mutual aid, and about their attraction to the world of order and science. Extremely similar systematic, forward-looking concepts appear in the new painting techniques developed and employed by neo-Impressionist artists like Luce, Seurat, and more, most likely evolving out of the painters' close relationships with anarchist thinkers. The four pieces of art by Signac and Pissarro, as seen in Section 2, exemplify the exact brushstrokes and contrasting color theory

---

[60] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, 76.
[61] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid,* 254.

exclusive to neo-Impressionism, while also demonstrating these techniques' ties to constructive anarcho-communist thought.

The definitive characteristics of neo-Impressionist art, visible within any and all paintings that claim to belong to the movement, are the "tiny and systematic dabs of paint" that make up the work. [62] Signac's *The Demolition Worker* provides a clear example of these tiny dots, "isolated on the canvas"; the sky, the clouds, the ruins, even the worker's bare chest are noticeably composed of small points of color.[63] Despite the visible lack of fluidity between each brushstroke, the separated marks still interact closely to create one united image, skillfully shaping both the angular skeletons of damaged buildings in the foreground, and the three-dimensional, fleshy chest of the laborer. Signac's *Opus 217...* similarly demonstrates the wide range of complex shapes that can be created from the cooperation of these individual dots. Despite the lack of integration or blending of the brushstrokes, each of the distinct marks are able to collaborate to create beautiful, unique designs, ranging from floral patterns, to stars, to color gradients. Signac's paintings exemplify this quintessential neo-Impressionist technique of pointillism, which emphasizes both the autonomy of each brushstroke, and the "benefits of luminosity, coloring and harmony" made possible by the cooperation of these individual marks.[64] The artist even describes this unique creative practice in his own writings, stating that neo-Impressionism is centered around the fact that "Division… guarantees maximum radiance and complete harmony."[65]

Neo-Impressionism's celebration of the combination of "free[dom] and the solidarity of all" closely reflects Kropotkin's hopeful anarcho-communist ideology, which celebrates a future

---

[62] Robert L. Herbert, *Neo-Impressionism* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1968), 15.
[63] Félix Fénéon. *Les Impressionnistes en 1886* (Paris, 1886), 21.
[64] Paul Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme,* (Paris, 1911), 4.
[65] Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix,* 59.

built upon "the principles of individual liberty" as well as "mutual aid and mutual support." [66]

Anarchism is primarily focused upon protecting the autonomy of each person from any form of

external control, a belief echoed by neo-Impressionism's strict adherence to maintaining the

individuality of each brushstroke. However, the anarchist ideals exhibited by neo-Impressionist

painting methods extend beyond this focus on independence that defines the political movement

as a whole; rather, the artists also celebrate the beauty of cooperation and assistance between

individuals. The representation of this constructive, peaceful ideology can be seen in the way that

each distinct brushstroke works alongside the others to form one beautiful, unified picture, "and

ensure harmony and beautiful order."[67] This more unified perspective can be found in both

Reclus' and Kropotkin's anarchist writings, as they both discussed how "mutual aid is a better

leader to progress" and dreamed of an anarchist future defined by "peace and cordial union…

[and] mutual respect of interests."[68] Neo-Impressionism's divisionist technique reflected the

hopeful nature of anarchist thinking at this time, underlining the individuality essential to the

anarcho-communism's core while still emphasizing the importance of cooperation and support,

as Kropotkin described.

Neo-Impressionist technique was also defined by its use of color theory and its adoption

of a more scientific and "mathematical" approach, in the place of the instinct or emotion,

echoing anarchist theory which encouraged "scientific observation of natural laws."[69] This strict,

calculated application of contrasting dashes of color to create more vivid hues and dazzling

imagery can be found in Pissarro's *Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte*. Pissarro adds dashes of

vibrant reds and greens to the fields of grain, altering the background from what would have

---

[66] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread,* 36; Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid,* 74.
[67] Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix*, 5.
[68] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, 255; Elisée Reclus. *L'anarchie* (Paris, 1896), 7.
[69] Herbert, *Neo-Impressionism*, 50; Reclus*, L'anarchie*, 7.

been a simple, dull brown into a bright gold. This illusion, which completely enhances the landscape by transforming it into an ethereal paradise, would have been impossible without his precise attention to detail and his adhesion to the scientific rule of color theory, which placed "color opposites… in juxtaposed areas, to exalt one another by contrast."[70] Similarly, in Signac's *In the Time of Harmony…*, Signac utilizes blues, yellows, greens and reds to design the skin tone of the men and the women in the foreground. Signac's specific positioning of each of these vivid colors creates an optical illusion which transforms the men and women into a lighter peach-colored skin tone. This more scientific approach can also be seen in Signac's depiction of shadow on human skin, as he utilizes meticulous dashes of darker shades of blue and red to create a darker tone of flesh. In doing so, the painting's subjects gain a newfound depth and vibrancy, unlike the "flat and simple" art from earlier periods.[71] Both Pissarro and Signac's uses of color theory demonstrate neo-Impressionism's devotion to creating more beautiful, vibrant work with an "[a]esthetic based on… physics… [and] a scientific conception of the world."[72]

The neo-Impressionists reliance upon their "precise and scientific method," as well as color theory, to create their most vivid, intricate artwork, closely reflects the anarchists' practice of applying scientific thought to build their own constructive ideology.[73] Anarcho-communists like Kropotkin, Reclus and Grave often turned to science as their primary means of determining humanity's most basic, natural needs, which then served as the radicals' inspiration for building a better, more just world. Grave analyzed the inner workings of molecules and determined that they demonstrated the innate human desire for freedom and independence, claiming that "when

---

[70] Herbert, *Neo-Impressionism*, 19.
[71] Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix*, 48.
[72] Herbert, *Neo-Impressionism*, 25.
[73] Signac, D*'Eugène Delacroix*, 55.

the autonomy of the different molecules was violated – then it results in a monster."[74] This scientific analysis establishes "the absolute liberty of the individual" as an inherent need, thereby reinforcing the anarchists' hope for a society built on this ideology.[75] A similar technique can be seen in Kropotkin's examination of mutual aid, which he claims to have determined "as the chief factor of progressive evolution" through his research of man's history, thereby implying that adhering to such principles would grant humanity a far more promising fate.[76] Kropotkin, Reclus and Grave all used scientific theories to define their ideas for an eventual anarchist utopia - one based on a blend of independence and cooperation. This same reliance upon science as an essential instrument in the development of a stronger society can also be seen in neo-Impressionist technique, as the artists turned towards scientific color theories and practices to make their own art appear more vivid and more beautiful. The intense connections between painters and activists allowed anarchism's most popular theory at the turn of the century – anarcho-communism's utopian ideology – to bleed through into the works of the neo-Impressionists.

---

[74] Jean Grave, "L'Autonomie selon la Science," *Le Révolté* 3, no. 25 (1882): 2.
[75] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, 176.
[76] Piotr Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism," The Anarchist Library, accessed November 25, 2021, https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-modern-science-and-anarchism.

CHAPTER THREE

Dadaism and Anarchist Nihilism and Violence

Three decades after the rise of the neo-Impressionists, a small group of men steps out onto a poorly lit stage before a sizeable crowd of well-dressed, murmuring men and women. On their faces hang shockingly grotesque masks, complete with long, twisted noses and unnaturally wide mouths. With fluid motion they rotate left and then rotate right, before suddenly collapsing to the floor.[77] After a few more reprisals of their freakish dance, the men scurry off-stage to the sounds of applause, their performance complete. These men, the Dadaists of Zurich and later Paris, had created an entirely new artistic ideology, which was typically presented in a wide array of different formats: spoken word poetry, dance, and music. One of the most enduring and enlightening presentations of Dadaism and its ideals continues to be their paintings. Their work was formed around one primary goal: "the ruthless violation of traditional conventions of art."[78]

The Dadaists' revolutionary, subversive ideals were at least partially inspired by the anarchist ideologies of Max Stirner and Mikhail Bakunin, who advocated for the destruction of all traditional social structures and cultural systems. Although both men had lived and died long before Dadaism emerged, their nihilistic and violent ideology greatly influenced anarchists in the 1920s, as the group struggled with the devastating aftermath of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. The Dadaist painters maintained strong connections to anarchist thought, leading them to reflect the political movement's growing emphasis on destruction and immediate revolution within the content and technique of their own work.

---

[77] Annabelle Henkin Melzer, "Dada Performance at the Cabaret Voltaire", *Artforum*, November 1973, https://www.artforum.com/print/197309/dada-performance-at-the-cabaret-voltaire-37407.
[78] Renwick, "Dadaism: Semantic Anarchy," 201.

Dadaist Artists and Anarchists

Unlike the neo-Impressionist painters - many of whom managed to maintain deep personal and professional ties to anarchist thinkers - most Dadaists did not directly communicate with or actively support their anarchist contemporaries. Despite the group's limited personal interactions with modern activists, many leaders of the Dadaist movement still expressed serious dedication to the radical ideology, as well as a belief that art "is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times," demonstrating the strong connections that lay between their art and their political beliefs.[79] The powerful links between the Dadaism and anarchism can best be seen in the devotion of many of Dada's most famous artists to the fanatical political theory.

Hugo Ball, one of Dada's founders, was dedicated to anarchist theory, and more specifically to the philosophy of nihilistic anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Ball was an immensely significant figure in the creation and development of Dadaism. He not only drafted the first Dada Manifesto in 1916, which helped define the purpose and spirit of the movement, but he is also credited with naming the group "Dada," after selecting the French word for "rocking horse" at random.[80] Ball had expressed interest in Bakunin's work since at least 1914, with his enthusiasm growing to the point that he even "started to work on a *Brevier*, a handbook, on Bakunin."[81] His fierce dedication to this anarchist ideology is emphasized by his desire to memorialize and perhaps even contribute to Bakunin's subversive works. Ball's ongoing commitment to Bakunin's violent revolutionary thought, combined with his influential position in Dadaism,

---

[79] "Dada," MoMA Learning, accessed March 20, 2022, https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/dada/.
[80] Paul Trachtman, "A Brief History of Dada," *Smithsonian Magazine,* May 2006, https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/dada-115169154/.
[81] Daniela Padularosa, "Chapter 4 Anti-Art? Dada and Anarchy," in *Anarchism and the Avant Garde* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Rodopi, 2019), 105. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004410428_006.

demonstrates a powerful tie between the destructive political movement and the artistic

movement.

Other prominent avant-garde artists exhibited their dedication to more extremist political

thought, further establishing the relationship between Dadaism and anarchism. Dadaist painter

and photographer Man Ray, for example, created two political cartoons for Emma Goldman's

anarchist magazine *Mother Earth*.[82] His willingness to create and publish explicitly political

work for an anarchist publication reveals his deep involvement in the radical ideology,

strengthening the connections between both movements. Similarly, Dada poet André Bréton

subscribed to a number of inflammatory journals, including the "revolutionary anarchist *Le

Libertaire* and the anarcho-individualist *L'Anarchie*," indicating his close ties to more

destructive political ideals.[83] Although most Dadaist artists did not personally engage with

radical thinkers, their steadfast interest in and dedication to anarchist thought reveals a strong

relationship between both movements. Still, to better understand the connections between

Dadaism and anarchism, this paper will concentrate on the anarchist ideologies of two painters in

particular: Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp. Their consequential roles in the Dadaist movement,

paired with their dedication to fierce revolutionary thought, demonstrate the strong association

between the two groups.

Like many of their peers, both Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp were extremely

interested in inflammatory anarchist theories, which shone through in their work and even

occasionally in their personal lives. Ernst was especially drawn to the ideology of anarcho-

individualist Max Stirner, who preached the supremacy of the individual over any form of

---

[82] Man Ray, *Capitalism, Humanity, Government,* 1914. Chicago, Newberry Collection.
https://www.newberry.org/file/j-2617-617-mother-earth-magazine-cover-1914o2jpg.
[83] Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent*, 106.

organization or authority. Ernst's professional dedication to this anarchist theory is exemplified in one of his own pieces of art, a frottage which features a small, abstract, star-shaped object, entitled *L'Unique et sa Propriété* or "The Ego and Its Own." The name of this artwork comes directly from the title of Stirner's seminal anarcho-individualist book, also called *The Ego and Its Own*. In explicitly dedicating one of his pieces of art to Stirner's ideology, Ernst demonstrates the significant impact of anarcho-individualism on his Dadaist creative process and his work. Even today, discourse on the impact of Stirner's work includes Ernst as one of Stirner's fiercest disciples. In fact, Max Ernst's name is featured on the back description of most current copies of *The Ego and Its Own*, as part of a short list of famous thinkers and activists - including Friedrich Nietzsche and Victor Serge – who were most deeply influenced by Stirner's anarchist ideals.[84] The author or publisher's choice of Ernst as a key devotee of Stirner's work, especially amongst these other prolific radicals, demonstrates the unique depth of Ernst's conviction in anarchist thought. Ernst's immense devotion to Stirner's aggressive and subversive anarcho-individualism, as seen both in his work and in later analysis of his professional activity, provides a clear illustration of the powerful ties between anarchism and Dadaism.

Beyond Stirner's considerable influence on Max Ernst's work, Mikhail Bakunin's nihilistic anarchist ideologies also played a significant role in shaping Ernst's personal life. Specifically, Ernst directly embodied Bakunin's theories on free love when he engaged in a ménage à trois with his friend and fellow Dadaist, Paul Éluard, and with Éluard's wife, Gala, for three years.[85] With this unusual domestic situation, Ernst echoed Bakunin's rejection of traditional social roles or values, as he eschewed the early twentieth century's sexual and

---

[84] "The Ego And His Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority," Penguin Random House, accessed February 2, 2022, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/228867/the-ego-and-his-own-by-max-stirner/.
[85] Annette Grant, "The Marriage à Trois That Cradled Surrealism," *New York Times*, April 3, 2005, https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/arts/design/the-marriage-a-trois-that-cradled-surrealism.html.

romantic norms, which primarily frowned upon infidelity and homosexuality. Ernst's ménage à trois adheres precisely to Mikhail Bakunin's ideals of marriage in an anarchic world, which call for "religious and civil marriage to be replaced by *free* marriage, [in which] Adult men and women have the right to unite and separate as they please."[86] By adopting this uniquely anarchist ideology in his private life, Ernst solidifies his deep devotion to anarchism's principles of individualism and the destruction of social institutions. Max Ernst's firm commitment to anarchist ideologies in both his professional and personal lives, as well as his significant contributions to Dadaist art, demonstrates the connection between Dadaism and anarchism.

Although Marcel Duchamp, another well-known Dada painter, was not as personally and professionally intertwined in anarchist theory as Max Ernst, his life and work were also tightly linked to the radical ideology. Even before Duchamp arrived in Paris and became involved in the Dadaist artistic movement, he had been a devoted admirer of the anarcho-individualist thinking set forth by Max Stirner. While in Munich, Duchamp spent a considerable amount of time studying Stirner's work and theory, generating an immense "enthusiasm for *The Ego and His Own* and its promise of a world liberated from guiding principle" within the young artist.[87] Duchamp's devotion to Stirner's violent, anti-establishment views significantly impacted not only his political ideology, but also his worldview, with the painter eventually listing Stirner and his anarchist theories as one of the two most significant philosophical traditions in his life.[88] Some contemporaries of Duchamp even identified a connection between his anarchic values and his attitude towards his artwork, writing that since he is "anti-artisan and anti-artist, he is

---

[86] Bakunin, *Selected Works,* 93.
[87] Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent,* 8.
[88] Rabaté, "Duchamp's Ego," 221.

anarchic in the true sense."[89] Though Duchamp's professional work and personal life were not as clearly linked to his anarchic values as Ernst's, his fierce admiration for Stirner's anarcho-individualist principles, coupled with his substantial role in Dadaism, demonstrates a strong link between the artistic movement and the extremist political movement.

Dadaist Content and Anarchism

The profound connection between Dada and the destructive ideology of radical anarchists Mikhail Bakunin and Max Stirner can also be found within the content of the artists' works, reflecting anarchism's more violent ideals at the time. Many Dadaists were tied to these inflammatory viewpoints, and the content of their compositions reflects a desire to completely dismantle modern society, as well as the established conventions that define it. However, unlike the neo-Impressionists' slightly more open representation of their revolutionary political ideals, nearly all members of Dadaism refused to include references to their anarchic beliefs. There were a few exceptions to this rule – including Max Ernst's choice of title for "*L'Unique et sa Propriété* – but for the most part, recognition of the Dadaists' allusions to their violently revolutionary ideology requires close analysis. Therefore, to gain a deeper understanding of the anarchist values included in the Dadaists' art, this section will examine the content of three different paintings by Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp.

---

[89] Robert Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz Inc., 1981), 307.

Figure 5. Max Ernst, *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Éluard, and the Painter*, 1926, oil on canvas. Cologne, Museum Ludwig.

The subject matter of Max Ernst's 1926 oil painting, *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Éluard, and the Painter,* is directly connected to Bakunin and Stirner's more subversive, revolutionary anarchist ideals surrounding religion. The painting depicts the Virgin Mary seated on box, as she holds the Christ Child face down on her lap. One of her hands is fully reared back above her head, demonstrating that she is – as the title suggests – in the midst of physically punishing her son by spanking him. Mary is sprawled ungracefully across her seat, with her legs spread wide open and her skirt stretched tightly across her thighs. Christ also appears to be twisted into an uncomfortable position, as his small hands seem to twist in the air, while his legs kick against his mother and his face is flattened against her thigh.

With this particular representation of the Madonna and Child, Ernst appears to debase the holiest mother and son in the history of Christianity, echoing the anti-religious, anti-organization principles of Bakunin and Stirner's anarchism. Typically, Mary and Christ appear as symbols of peace or holiness, with the baby being cradled lovingly by his mother or honored as the son of God. Instead, Ernst chooses to depict both in an act of disgraceful familial violence, erasing any

connections between his subjects and the divinity and saintliness that they are usually associated with. This degradation of the Virgin Mary and Baby Jesus from sacred beings to ordinary, distasteful people is only emphasized by their exaggerated motions; the extreme height of Mary's hand, and well as her forceful grip on the child implies that she is actually causing her son immense pain, a message only amplified by Christ's theatrical struggle to get away from his mother.

In featuring a humiliating, derogatory version of two of Christianity's most iconic figures, Ernst reflects Max Stirner's and Mikhail Bakunin's destructive, anti-religious ideologies. Both radicals advocated for the dismantling of any and all traditional power structures, which they believed served as a means of oppressing the individual. Much of their enmity was focused on the Church and God, as they believed that "as long as we have a master in heaven, we will be slaves on earth."[90] Their nihilistic anarchist viewpoints are visible in Ernst's disrespectful depiction of Christianity, as they called for the "[men to] turn to [themselves] rather than to [their] gods," due to religion's role as "the most decisive negation of human liberty."[91] Through his derisive painting, Ernst reflects Bakunin's and Stirner's efforts to destroy organized religion, a key feature of the movement's increasingly violent, revolutionary anarchist ideology.

---

[90] Bakunin, *Selected Works*, 238.
[91] Mikhail Bakunin, *God and State,* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1916), 15; Max Stirner, *The Ego & Its Own*, trans. Steven Byington (Rebel Press, 1982), 211.

Figure 6. Max Ernst, *Woman, Old Man, and Flower (Weib, Greis und Blume),* 1923, oil on canvas. New York, Museum of Modern Art.

The content of another of Ernst's paintings, his 1923 work *Woman, Old Man, and Flower (Weib, Greis und Blume)*, similarly reflected the extreme anarchist views put forth by Bakunin and Stirner. In this piece, nearly all of Ernst's subject matter is abstracted and unrecognizable, although a humanoid figure in the center foreground is distinguishable, rising majestically before an oddly warped version of a beach. Although it is facing away from the viewer, the being is identifiable as female, due to Ernst's depiction of her delicate, well-formed figure and her arms, as well as the large headdress and the earring-like objects which adorn her head. To her left stands a more masculine being, who is in the midst of bowing, or submitting himself in some way, to the woman. His figure remains in the midground and far to the side of the work, making his shape distinctively smaller than the primary female subject.

Ernst's representation and positioning of both models appears to depict the more violent revolutionary anarchist ideals, which call for the destruction of traditional, misogynistic gender roles. The female figure stands in a position of power, widely extending her arms outwards towards the sea while confidently staring straight ahead. Although the painting's layout ensures that she will constantly have viewers and observers standing directly behind her back, leaving her exposed and vulnerable, she does not express any sense of anxiety or weakness. Her strength

and prominence are only amplified by her large, fan-like headdress, which resembles a crown. Ernst ensures that his representation of the woman's immense greatness and power stands in direct contrast to the male figure's submissive nature. He portrays the man as far smaller and more demure; while the woman stands firmly in the center of the work and takes up a significant amount of space, the man is shunted to the side and pushed further away from the audience. His relative insignificance is emphasized by his position of deference towards the woman, as he kneels and removes his helmet in a gesture of respect. The male even turns his head away from the woman's face, as though it would be dangerous or improper to face her directly.

Ernst's depiction of a strong, dominating female figure alongside a subservient male creature reflects anarchist ideology regarding gender equality, and more specifically the dismantling of the conventional social hierarchy. Radical anarchists like Bakunin fiercely believed that women deserved the same respect and liberty typically granted to men alone, as they despised any sort of oppression by traditional systems, considering it a threat to individual freedom. The anarchists' dedication to "shattering social constraints" ensured that they remained supportive of "the freedom of adults of both sexes [to] be absolute and complete."[92] With the reversed power dynamic evident between his subjects and the subsequent elimination of conventional social roles, Ernst's content exhibits Bakunin's more destructive, subversive anarchist theories regarding gender equality.

---

[92] Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent,* 6; Bakunin, *Selected Works*, 79.

Figure 7. Marcel Duchamp, *L.H.O.O.Q.,* 1919, colored reproduction, pencil, white gouache. Pasadena, Norton Simon Museum.

Marcel Duchamp's famed 1919 piece, entitled *L.H.O.O.Q.,* also reflects the anarchists' more antagonistic, hostile theory, as it ridiculed and dismissed traditional values of beauty. In this strikingly familiar portrait, Duchamp acquired a print of one of the best known, most admired masterpieces in the world – Leonard da Vinci's the *Mona Lisa* – and painted a mustache and goatee directly on top of the model's face. Directly below the painting, in large letters, he added the title of the piece: *L.H.O.O.Q.,* a vulgar French pun which is meant to audibly resemble the phrase "Elle a chaud au cul," or "She has a hot ass."

Duchamp's decision to deface the *Mona Lisa*, specifically, and associate her with obscenity, demonstrates the destructive anarchist ideals which vow to eradicate all forms of social and political convention. The *Mona Lisa* is possibly the best-known piece of artwork in the world and holds an incredibly important place in the long history of painting and general artistry. Duchamp's casual vandalism of such iconic work directly scorns and derides the *Mona Lisa's* esteemed representation of artistic tradition. Similarly, his addition of such masculine, simplistic features onto the intricately crafted face of Da Vinci's model mocks the classical,

conventional beauty standards that she has come to universally symbolize and even help to define, as evidenced by a cultural fascination around the ideal of the "Mona Lisa smile". Duchamp's inclusion of the crass title, *L.H.O.O.Q.,* directly below the portrait also expresses his contempt for the piece's social and traditional significance. With this action, he emphasizes the fact that Da Vinci's muse - the primary subject of his painting - is the subject of his sexual taunting, thereby demeaning both the artwork and its subject with his crude, offensive analysis. Every addition that Duchamp makes to the *Mona Lisa*, as well as his deliberate decision to edit it in the first place, demonstrates his disgust for artistic and aesthetic traditions, echoing anarchist principles.

Duchamp's derisive attitude towards convention reflects the perspective of the more extremist anarchists, like Bakunin and Stirner. These philosophers despised the long-lasting, traditional "customs… [and] mores" that upheld contemporary society, as they feared that such ideals would come to "dominate" men and prevent them from achieving their individual autonomy.[93] The radicals' dedication to freedom led them to call for the absolute violation and destruction of any long-lasting institutions that belonged to the "[rotten] old order," a practice which Duchamp exemplified in his work.[94] Duchamp's contemptuous treatment of his subject, the iconic *Mona Lisa,* in his own *L.H.O.O.Q.* reflects the more violent ideology of 1920s anarchists, who longed for the immediate destruction of all forms of tradition.

Dadaist Technique and Anarchism

Dadaism's representation of anarchism was not limited to the contents of the artists' work; oftentimes, the Dadaist painters' techniques also reflected the hostile theories that

---

[93] Bakunin, *Selected Works*, 239.
[94] Bakunin, *Selected Works*, xix.

dominated post-war anarchism. For all Dadaist artists, the extremely independent nature of their movement ensured that their artistic methods reflected the individualistic, anti-organizational anarchic principles to some degree, as their group lacked a singular united technique that typically defined an art movement. Still, for many Dadaists, their own personalized artistic methods also maintained strong, yet implicit, references to the radical political ideology.

Figure 8. Man Ray, *Optical Hopes and Illusions,* 1928, oil on canvas. New York, Bruce Silverstein Gallery.

Figure 9. Francis Picabia, *M'Amenez-y,* 1920, oil on canvas. New York, Museum of Modern Art.

Dadaism was extremely unique in its lack of an overarching technique. Typically, all of the members of an art movement would be at least partially unified by the use of a similar artistic procedure. For the neo-Impressionists, their underlying method was pointillism; decades before them, the Impressionists relied upon impasto, or brief, thick strokes of paint. Still, the Dadaists refused to define themselves by one singular technique or approach, arguing that "the most acceptable system is on principle to have none," reflecting radical anarchist ideology which calls for people to "[recognize] no duty."[95] Instead, as a result of their "distrust towards unity" and their insistence upon "recogniz[ing] no theory," the Dadaist movement was defined by a large number of unique, individualized techniques, developed and interpreted independently by the artists.[96] The wide, extremely diverse array of techniques attributed to Dadaism can be seen in

---

[95] Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent,* 96; Stirner, *Ego & Its Own,* 257.
[96] Tristan Tzara, *Dada Manifesto 1918,* 2.

the different paintings identified as part of the art movement: from Man Ray's detailed black and white depiction of a bike race in *Optical Hopes and Illusions*, to Francis Picabia's simple and word-filled *M'Amenez-y*. In the Dada Manifesto of 1918, one of the primary explanations of the group's ideology, Tristan Tzara even demonstrates the movement's reliance on autonomous artists creating their own varied approaches, writing that, for Dadaists, "art is a private affair, the artist produces it for himself."[97]

Dadaism's refusal to align itself with one specific technique, as well as its emphasis on the individual artist's right to utilize their own unique methods, reflects more anarchism's increased attraction to more subversive theories. These radical ideals, as expressed by Bakunin and Stirner, similarly express an animosity towards any singular, wide-reaching systemization, calling for the "[destruction of], above all, all the institutions and all the organizations."[98] Both men's interpretation of anarchist theory also celebrated the "pursuit of complete individual freedom" from domineering social structures, ideals which were echoed in Dada's emphasis on independent artists' creation of their own unique painting techniques.[99] Dadaism's refusal to adhere to one overarching artistic technique, as well as their reliance upon individual painters to decide upon their own personal styles, echoes Bakunin and Stirner's nihilistic anarchist ideals.

To gain a deeper understanding of how Dadaist artistic methods – or the lack thereof – reflect anarchism's shift towards more individualistic values, this chapter will next examine the artists' unique, more personalized techniques, through the works of Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp. Many of Max Ernst's paintings feature a distinctive, unnatural surrealistic painting method, which also exhibits radical anarchist ideals. This unusual technique is distinguished by

---

[97] Tzara, *Dada Manifesto*, 3.
[98] Bakunin, *Selected Works*, 100.
[99] Papanikolas, *Anarchism and the Advent*, 5.

its distortions of reality, as can be seen in his work *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Éluard, and the Painter*. The strangeness of this painting method is most immediately visible in the way Ernst paints the distorted background of the painting; the far back, oddly angled walls on the right provide a strong contrast to the uncomfortably close, seemingly one-dimensional structure on the left, imbuing the painting with a sense of distortion and artificiality. At the same time, the Madonna's unnatural proportions - including, most remarkably, her extremely long bent elbow – and the male figures' apparent one-dimensionality further contribute to the work's spirit of unease and abnormality.

Ernst's surrealist painting technique, as demonstrated in his portrayal of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child, primarily appears to violate the "set of rules that had been arbitrarily thrown over 'nature'," which govern proportion and perspective.[100] By disobeying these laws with his unnatural, contorted painting method, Ernst reflects Bakunin and Stirner's anarchist ideals, which call for the "leveling of all existing values and institutions."[101] At the same time, this technique's portrayal of Ernst's own unique interpretation of the world, affirms that his own "personal grasp of nature… [is] the most important thing," echoing radical anarchist ideology about the supremacy of the individual.[102] Ernst's unique painting technique, a surrealist style which defied traditional rules regarding dimension and positioning, reflected the extremist anarchic values of destruction and egoism.

Marcel Duchamp's personal artistic processes are remarkably different from Max Ernst's, emphasizing the absence of a singular, united technique within Dadaism. Duchamp's primary technique was the creation of "ready-mades", which were exact copies of items that already

---

[100] Motherwell, *Dada Painters and Poets*, 36.
[101] Bakunin, *Selected Works*, xx.
[102] Motherwell, *Dada Painters and Poets*, 59.

existed in the world, with a few small tweaks and Duchamp's signature added. This unique

process of producing art also reflected anarchist ideology which called for the destruction of all

forms of tradition or convention. This specialized technique can best be seen in the creation of

his ready-made painting *L.H.O.O.Q.,* an adaptation of the *Mona Lisa*. A quick glimpse at

L.H.O.O.Q. reveals just how simple the creative process was for Duchamp, as he merely painted

on a goatee and mustache onto a print of the portrait, before scrawling the work's new title, and

his name, below the image.

The extremely straightforward, easily replicable process with which Duchamp managed

to create his own famed, valuable piece of art just from the print of another "radically questions

the very principle of art… [and whether] the individual is considered the creator of the work of

art."[103] His unique artistic methods proves that the way in which any item is deemed a piece of

art is completely arbitrary and subjective, thereby invalidating the very value system upon which

art is based, in an attempt to "destroy art as an institution," just as anarchism longs to "do away

with [institutions of the past] altogether."[104] Duchamp's personalized creative techniques

affirmed the meaningless nature of art as a value system or an establishment, reflecting

anarchism's growing emphasis on destructive, nihilistic principles, which call for the end of all

such organizations.

---

[103] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 52.
[104] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 109; Bakunin, *Selected Works*, 357.

Conclusion

The anarchists' extremist, nihilistic perspective in the 1920s marked a sudden, drastic shift from the movement's ideology at the turn of the century. While many within the radical political group had previously embraced the utopian, future-focused beliefs promoted by Piotr Kropotkin, the Russian Revolution and World War I created such a deep-seated sense of betrayal and anger at the world's corruption that many anarchists began to concentrate instead on the immediate destruction of their current society. This abrupt ideological transition is visible not only in the commentary and writings of well-known anarchists, but can also be found also in the work of their dedicated adherents.

The neo-Impressionists' deep personal and professional ties to prominent anarcho-communists Kropotkin and Jean Grave in the late nineteenth century ensured that their art reflected the hopeful anarchist theory that dominated before the shift. The work of Camille Pissarro and Paul Signac provided more detailed insight into the manner in which their movement's paintings incorporated utopian anarchist ideals; the artworks' subject matter often reflected anarcho-communism's emphasis on an independent and harmonious future. Even their unique painting technique, pointillism, further echoed the importance of the blend between autonomy and cooperation through the placement of each dot of paint in relation to the next. Dadaists' work in the 1920s manifested a similar dedication to anarchist thought, although the group expressed an interest in the more destructive ideology of Max Stirner and Mikhail Bakunin. An examination of Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp's paintings emphasized the stark difference in the anarchist leanings represented by this movement; the content celebrated the collapse of current social and religious traditions, while their lack of a singular, unified technique echoed anarchism's anti-systematic ideals. This transition from the neo-Impressionists' reflection

of constructive, hopeful anarchist ideals, to the Dadaists' expression of cynical, radical theory also echoes the shift in the general anarchist ideology during this period.

Despite the close relationship between anarchist thinkers and radical artists, as seen in neo-Impressionist and Dadaist representations of revolutionary ideals, some conflict did exist between the political and artistic movements. This tension developed out of a disagreement over the amount of ideological representation within each painting, or how overtly political the content of each piece should be. Some anarchists, like Jean Grave, were strong proponents of "social art," which was extremely propagandistic, while neo-Impressionist painters, including Signac, argued that their "focus on pure aesthetics" and artistic technique would "automatically involve political sympathies," allowing them to exclude such explicit references to their political leanings.[105] Although Dadaists were slightly more vocal about their revolutionary ideology, both their paintings and the neo-Impressionists' works "relate to social content… [but] are not clear-cut anarchist" demonstrating a compromise between these two opposing ideals.[106] Both art movements' more relaxed combination of political theory and aesthetic values can be seen in the art examined earlier in this paper: Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* expresses contempt towards artistic traditions, although it never explicitly calls for their overthrow, while Signac's *Le Demolisseur* expresses hope for a new dawn, but only through the symbolic interpretation of laborers working under the rising sun.

This disregard for explicit anarchist representations demonstrated a strong break between artists and activists, as anarchists fiercely believed that art could serve as a "didactic tool for [their] working-class audience," increasing their popularity and bolstering their movement.[107]

---

[105] Prins, "L'Art pour L'Art," 103.
[106] Prins, "L'Art pour L'Art," 115.
[107] Prins, "L'Art pour L'Art," 94.

However, the artists' refusal to adhere to anarchist thinking in an orthodox fashion allowed their paintings – and the implicitly revolutionary theory present within it – to survive far longer than any one-dimensional anarchist art. Their more multi-faceted content ensured that the works remained popular among the more conventional public, whose appreciation for "art for art's sake" and distaste for "dated social issues" led to the loss of many openly anarchist lithographs.[108] While it is impossible to state for certain that explicitly anarchist work would have been erased from the public memory, it is apparent that the neo-Impressionists' and Dadaists' refusal to totally abandon their own aesthetic ideals gave their radical political content significant staying power, allowing anarchist ideology to remain an integral part of our cultural narrative for centuries.

---

[108] Prins, "L'Art pour L'Art," 118.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Abbott, Leonard D., Alexander Berkman, L. Bertoni, L. Bersani, G. Bernard, G. Barrett, A. Bernardo, et al. *Anti-War Manifesto.* 1915. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/various-authors-the-anarchist-international-and-war.

Bakunin, Mikhail. *Bakunin on Anarchy: Selected Works of the Activist-Founder of World Anarchism.* Edited by Sam Dolgoff. Allen & Unwin, 1973.

Bakunin, Mikhail. *God and State.* New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1916.

Berkman, Alexander. *The Russian Tragedy: A Review and an Outlook.* 1922. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/alexander-berkman-the-russian-tragedy-a-review-and-an-outlook.

Cornelissen, Christian, Henri Fuss, Jean Grave, Jacques Guérin, Pierre Kropotkin, A. Laisant. F. Le Lève, et. All. *The Manifesto of the Sixteen* 1916. https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/kropotkin-peter/1916/sixteen.htm.

Duchamp, Marcel. *L.H.O.O.Q.* 1919, Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena California.

Duchamp, Marcel. *The Essential Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. Edited by Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Peterson. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1973.

Ernst, Max. *The Virgin Spanking the Christ Child before Three Witnesses: Andre Breton, Paul Eluard, and the Painter*. 1926, Museum Ludwig, Cologne Germany.

Ernst, Max. *Woman, Old Man, and Flower (Weib, Greis und Blume).* 1923, the Museum of Modern Art, New York NY.

Ernst, Max. *Beyond Painting: And Other Writings by the Artist and his Friends*. New York: Witternborn, Schultz, Inc., 1948.

Fénéon, Félix. *Novels in Three Lines.* Translated by Luc Sante. New York: New York Review Books, 2007. Kindle.

Fénéon, Félix. *Les Impressionnistes en 1886.* Paris, 1886.

Fénéon, Félix. "Signac." *Les Hommes d'Aujourd'hui,* no. 373 (1890): 253-255. https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k1192407s/f253.item.

Goldman, Emma. *My Disillusionment in Russia*. New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1923.

Grave, Jean. "Autorité et Organisation." *Le Révolté* 6, no. 6 (1884).

Grave, Jean. "L'Autonomie selon la Science." *Le Révolté* 3, no. 25 (1882).

Kropotkin, Piotr. *Anarchist Communism*. United Kingdom: Penguin Books Limited, 2020.

Kropotkin, Piotr. "Letter to Steffen." *Freedom* (1914).
        http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/kropotkin/steffenletter.html.

Kropotkin, Piotr. *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1899.

Kropotkin, Piotr. "Modern Science and Anarchism." The Anarchist Library. Accessed November
        25, 2021. https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-modern-science-and-
        anarchism.

Kropotkin, Piotr. *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution.* United Kingdom: McClure, Philips &
        Company, 1902.

Kropotkin, Piotr. *The Conquest of Bread*. United States: Putnam, 1907.

Picabia, Francis. *M'Amenez-y*. 1920, Museum of Modern Art, New York NY.

Pissarro, Camille. *Apple Picking at Eragny-sur-Epte 1888.* 1888, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas
        Texas.

Ray, Man. *Optical Hopes and Illusions.* 1928, Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York NY.

Ray, Man. *Capitalism, Humanity, Government.* 1914, Newberry Collection, Chicago IL.
        https://www.newberry.org/file/j-2617-617-mother-earth-magazine-cover-1914o2jpg.

Reclus, Elisée. *À mon frère, le paysan*. Paris: Conflans-Sainte-Honorine, 1925.

Reclus, Elisée. *L'anarchie*. Paris, 1896.

Signac, Paul. *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme.* Paris, 1911.

Signac, Paul. 'Impressionistes et Revolutionnaires, *La Révolté* 4, no. 40 (June 1891).
https://www.retronews.fr/journal/la-revolte/13-juin-1891/1241/4212449/7.

Signac, Paul. *In the Time of Harmony: The Golden Age Has Not Passed, It Is Still to Come
        (Reprise).* 1896, The Kasser Mochary Foundation, Montclair NJ.

Signac, Paul. *Opus 217. Against the Enamel of a Background Rhythmic with Beats and Angles,
        Tones, and Tints, Portrait of M. Félix Fénéon in 1890.* 1890, The Museum of Modern
        Art, New York NY.

Signac, Paul. *Le Démolisseur*. 1897-99, Musée d'Orsay, Paris France.

Stirner, Max. *The Ego & Its Own*. Translated by Steven Byington. Rebel Press, 1982.

Stirner, Max. *Art and Religion*. Pattern Books, 2020.

Tzara, Tristan. *Dada Manifesto 1918.* 1-5.

Wilson, Charlotte. "The Coming Revolution." *Freedom* (1886): 1-3.

Secondary Sources

Bantman, Constance and Berry, David. "The French anarchist movement and the First World War." In *Anarchism, 1914-18: Internationalism, Anti-Militarism and War*, (Manchester Scholarship Online, 2018), 155 – 170.

Brooklyn Museum. "SILENCE = DEATH." Accessed March 16, 2022. https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/159258.

Bürger, Peter. *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

Grant, Annette. "The Marriage à Trois That Cradled Surrealism." *New York Times*, April 3, 2005. https://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/03/arts/design/the-marriage-a-trois-that-cradled-surrealism.html.

Hemmings, F.W.J. Culture and society in France, 1848-1898; dissidents and philistines. New York: Scribner, 1972.

Herbert, Robert L. *Neo-Impressionism*. New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1968.

Herbert, Robert L., and Eugenia W. Herbert. "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others - I." *The Burlington Magazine* 102, no. 692 (1960): 473–82. http://www.jstor.org/stable/873246.

Herbert, Robert L., and Eugenia W. Herbert. "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others - II." *The Burlington Magazine* 102, no. 693 (1960): 517–22. http://www.jstor.org/stable/873160.

Impressionist Arts. "Eighth & Final Impressionist Exhibition." Accessed March 20, 2022. https://impressionistarts.com/eighth-impressionist-exhibition#4a.

Marshall, Peter. *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism.* London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2012.

Marxists International Archive. "Timeline of The Civil War in France." Accessed March 16, 2022. https://www.marxists.org/history/france/paris-commune/timeline.htm.

Melzer, Annabelle Henkin. "Dada Performance at the Cabaret Voltaire." *Artforum*, November 1973. https://www.artforum.com/print/197309/dada-performance-at-the-cabaret-voltaire-37407.

MoMA Learning. "Dada." Accessed March 20, 2022. https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/dada/.

Motherwell, Robert. *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*. New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1981.

Padularosa, Daniela. "Chapter 4 Anti-Art? Dada and Anarchy." In *Anarchism and the Avant Garde,* 99-122. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill Rodopi, 2019. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004410428_006.

Papanikolas, Theresa. *Anarchism and the Advent of Paris Dada: Art and Criticism, 1914-1924.* New York: Routledge, 2016.

Penguin Random House. "The Ego And His Own: The Case of the Individual Against Authority." Accessed February 2, 2022, https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/228867/the-ego-and-his-own-by-max-stirner/.

Pruitt, Sarah. "How Flappers of the Roaring Twenties Redefined Womanhood." *History*, September 17, 2018. https://www.history.com/news/flappers-roaring-20s-women-empowerment.

Prins, Laura. "L'Art pour L'Art or L'Art pour Tous?" *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 4, no. 1 (2016): 92-126.

Rabaté, Jean-Michel. "Duchamp's Ego." *Textual Practice* 18, no. 2 (November 2010): 221-231.

Renwick, Ralph. "Dadaism: Semantic Anarchy." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 15, no. 3 (1958): 201–9. http://www.jstor.org/stable/42581745.

Roslak, Robyn S. "Organicism and the Construction of a Utopian Geography: The Role of the Landscape in Anarcho-Communism and Neo-Impressionism." *Utopian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 96–114. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20719003.

Roslak, Robyn S. "The Politics of Aesthetic Harmony: Neo-Impressionism, Science, and Anarchism." *The Art Bulletin* 73, no. 3 (1991): 381–90. https://doi.org/10.2307/3045811.

Sheppard, Richard. "Dada and Politics." *Journal of European Studies* 9, no. 33-34 (March 1979): 39-74. https://doi.org/10.1177/004724417900903304

Swartz, Mark. "The Disasters of War." *MoMA* 4, no. 1 (2001): 10–13.
http://www.jstor.org/stable/4420545.

The Museum of Modern Art. "Félix Fénéon: Live Q&A with Glenn Lowry and Starr Figura."
Filmed April 2020, New York, NY, video,
https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5075.

Trachtman, Paul. "A Brief History of Dada." *Smithsonian Magazine,* May 2006.
https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/dada-115169154/.

Varengo, Selva. "Kropotkin and Freedom." *Freedom,* February 28, 2021.
https://freedomnews.org.uk/2021/02/28/kropotkin-and-freedom/.

Viveros-Fauné, Christian. *Social Forms: A Short History of Political Art.* Norway: David
Zwirner Books, 2018.

Wheeldon, Tom. "The Paris Commune, 150 years on – from the siege of the capital to 'Bloody
Week'." *France 24,* March 18, 2021. https://www.france24.com/en/france/20210318-
from-the-siege-of-paris-to-the-bloody-week-the-commune-150-years-on.