An art exhibit, albeit a small one, is always housed in the bathroom of a coffeehouse in my town. A recent display featured cardboard and paper haphazardly glued together, and adorned with the stenciled or hand-lettered words of classical anarchists such as Mikhail Bakunin and Errico Malatesta. The artist’s statement proclaimed, “I am not an artist.” The show offered only “cheap art,” with pieces priced at a few dollars. Undoubtedly the materials came from recycling bins or trash cans, and perhaps this artist— who is not an artist—choose to look the quotes up in “low-tech” zones.

There is something heartwarming about finding anarchist slogans in the most unexpected of places. So much of the time, the principles that we anarchists hold dear are contradicted at every turn, never discussed, or just plain invisible. And thus seeing some antiquated anarchist writings scribbled on makeshift canvases in a public place, even in a rest room, raised a smile of recognition.

But only for a moment—then despair set in. Why is anarchist art so often a parody of itself, predictable and uninteresting? Sure, everyone is capable of doing art, but that doesn’t mean that everyone is an artist. And yet it is generally perceived as wrong in anarchist circles that some people are or want to be artists, and others of us aren’t or don’t want to be. Beyond the issue of who makes works of art, why can’t art made by anti-authoritarians be provocative, thoughtful, innovative—and even composed of materials that can’t be found in a dumpster? More to the point, why do or should anarchists make art at all?

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Art at its best, then, should maintain the character of social critique and social vision. For the role of the critic is to judge, to distill the complexities of beauty, for example, from petty to sublime, so that you, youth can become—and hope—youth’s tomorrow’s formula for human culture.

Contrary to the proposition of the new systems paradigm, which is so essential to many other styles of thought, what we are imaginatively, qualitatively being marked by our capacity for knowledge and transformed societies, and instead “return” to possess the tools for consciousness itself, we are forever stung by the form of knowledge which seems to me exactly what capitalism and statecraft as forms of societal organization reduces to us: Not aggression, when we deny our very ability to think symbolically, or notice as the nation of doom disappears, not to mention as humans along it.

Since the 1970s, a series of interconnected phenomena drawn together by the term “globalization,” which has transformed the way we see changes is the rise of “global cities” as nodes of control, and over time, this has become embodied in the designed-built aesthetic environments. Art and Revolution logo. Courtesy of Art and Revolution. The ityype phto
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The Temporary and the Trashed

The art of Value

To some degree, whether self-consciously or not, anarchists/ artistic impulses get to the heart of the matter. Making capitalism is deplorable. “Value” is determined by how much one has and can continually exchange as well as accumulate, whether in form of money, property, or especially control over others. We anarchists, and billions of non-anarchists, know that value can never be measured by piling quantity on top of more quantity; that how we live more than what we own and that we should treat each other and the nonhuman world, is what matters. As a political philosophy, anarchism is a project of balancing individual subjectivity and social freedom—the value of an individual life knowing that both are essential to the potentiality of the other. Thus, we engage in prefigurative politics, in forms of cooperation to create a direct democracy. This is what makes and keeps us human, in the most meaningful sense. It is the only way we will be forever necessary, whether within, against, or beyond capitalism. One way that anarchists attempt to reclaim form as well as content into the everyday-made-extraordinary by creative cultural expressions. On the other hand, when we've actually expropriated or “free’d” spaces we can recreate an aesthetic of deterioration in those places already deprived of state and capital, racism and fear, almost always with the rubble. The deg

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value is by carving out a cultural realm that allows everyone to participate, to be valued for what they can envision and/or create, and by redistributing the possibility of producing works of art through D-I-Y culture. This 1999 ad featured protest songs, petitions and letters that we use at hand, often lend a hand to whoever wants to make art, and attempt to do this in ways that manipulate, and make more repressive the social system we oppose.

Examples abound here, sad to say: Puppets are among the easiest of targets, primarily because they became the poster kids for anticapitalist mobilizations. Devising a cheap and collective manner to produce artistic expressions of resistance isn’t as problematic per se; such creativity everywhere avoids giving up the illusion that one Isn’t the only conundrum we face. It is as hard for us, “even” as anarchists, as it is for “ordinary” people to resist the hegemonic forces at work; those same forces of domination are used to both create the appearance of grassroots protest and turn radical notions into the most liberal of demand—4. So even when the production is fun or done in an edgy workspace, the profound potential of self and society) that comes from the creative act is lost. Art and the artists become co-opting rip-offs of the latest political art trend.

The distribution and consumption of such works can become equally debased. At a con- vention in Vermont, Barre, to challenge free trade agreements several years ago, a prominent puppetista angrily insisted that thousands of anti-capitalists should pause their direct actions to watch her collective’s street theater. “We’re here to entertain you, and you need to stop and be entertained!”

It certainly isn’t enough to make sure that more and more people are cultural producers (or consumers of free art) and that thinking into its practice will alienate version D-I-Y quantity piled on top of more D-I-Y quanti- tity, some sort of self-sufficient society. Indeed, “the people” making art might mean that there is no art at all, for quantity can actually destroy quality. And without the qualitative dimension, there can be no appreciation of beauty or craft, or the self who crafted that beauty.

This Wall-Martization of resistance art—cheap, easy to produce everywhere—is the very thing that gives us the ability to visualize new possibilities. But let’s face it: the system isn’t the only conundrum we face. It is as hard for us, “even” as anarchists, as it is for “ordinary” people to resist the hegemonic forces at work; those same forces of organization and ways of thinking that become naturalized, and hence almost unquestioned in a post-ecotopian, and the only bulwark against internalizing and thereby reproducing the current hegemonies we rebel against is our ability to imagine and participate critically and imaginatively.

Such recognition is the first step toward valuing our world, toward knowing we can self-manage the whole of our lives. But it can only come when our artisanal efforts are part of crafting a social beauty. This, in turn, can only be defined in the process of doing-it-ourselves (D-I-O), where we don’t necessarily all produce art but we do all substan- tially participate in engaging with, debating, judging, and determining the place(s) of creative expression. The qualitative would be that realm of social critique that comes in the full recognition of free selves within a free society.

Working at cross-purposes

The creative act—the arduous task of seeing some- thing other than the space of capitalism, statism, the gender binary, racism, and other rooms without a view—is the hope we can offer to the world. Such aesthetic expressions must also aim to denaturalize the present, though. And this dual “gesturing at and beyond” will only be possible if we continually interrogate this historical moment, and ask whether our artworks are working against the grain within that context.

For the pull of the culture industry is strong. No matter how surrealistic and cutting-edge we might remain in our creative works, global capitalism is always ready to recuperate our every innovation. Our rebellious ad-busting has become indistinguishable from advertisements employing rebellion-as-sales-pitch. For instance, just after Seattle 1999, ad posters were run in their Nike sneakers from tear gas and police, with the familiar “just do it” tagline. Yet it was unclear whether this image was an ad or an act—a choice—and either way, it didn’t matter. It sold a lifestyle; it mocked a movement.

Creative work involves processes of collec- tive art-making without an explicit politics that integrate and forever vigilantly incorporates criti- cal thinking into its practice will alienate even the most committed, and especially under the current conditions, become part of the problem. Some of this will be clear, as when our freely traded handmade patches become the inspiration for prefabricated “made-in-China” cloth- ing in pricey boutiques. The less-obvious manifesta- tions are more troubling: when the D-I-Y sensibility
itself, so key to anarchist artistic creations, slowly but surely ingrates itself into multiple mainstream commodities, from Home Depot’s “You Can Do It” to the new Oreos that allow the consumer to “make” its own, with chocolate and cream separated.

The flow of course, doesn’t simply go one way in production. As “products” of the dominant culture, the consumer—also the artist—looks like a self-initiated activist protest, but keep the theme in line with its own political point. The artists were, in essence, “self-sufficient” and required by society’s constant awareness, not for themselves but for their own political concerns.

7. Erik Boelndal noted in editing this chapter, “Many people also say that the whole definition of art should be exploded, and many traditions taken out of the idea that certain things can be used or seen.” Such a debate is complex, but at the risk of overgeneralizing for the purposes of this section, anarcho-ecology’s art should encompass much more, and many more people could then consider themselves artists, seems to often see water down what we mean by art and artists and make both univer-

sally applicable.


One theme picked up and challenged by radical artists over a century ago was fragmen-

tation, an emergent concern in their day. Now, socially oriented art and anxiety-as-control; how explainable examples become paranoia fantasies of hate-as-control (the Muslim, the Jew, or the Mexican “is responsible”); and how paranoia functions to control the “other” (one’s very personhood) become far more serious than the “real world” can handle. An increasingly uneven balance of power is held in place today by nation-states inciting a particular use of violence, to name one thing. An even more frightening is the “improved” forms of torture as a last resort. Anarchist art, as we have already seen, is a self-reflexive art. The artwork is to do more than just please the wearer or reader. With this new wave comes a future in which social anxiety and the potential to destroy whole societies are not imagined as a reaction to an artificial past—say, the experience of past torture, or the threat of future torture. Yet there is no place for terror or torture in a better world, where people can be free to act out of their own desires and not out of fear of an artificial past.

This dovetail with the dilemma raised by high technology and our aesthetic consumption/waste products. For instance, during the industrial era, artists such as film- maker Charlie Chaplin showed the “little guy” being driven through the gears of Modern Times, yet even in fiction, things are breaking apart, just as the cog is emblematic, and the “programmer guy” is folded into the system. Whether it is the desire to successfully produce something of use and the way digital technologies have filled houses with kitch, dumpsters with food, and big-box stores with clerks. One anarchist artist I know of wanted to teach people how dogs frequently been used as garbage work—art as material—a decades-old artistic choice that has lost any bite (especially since most commodities are now junk to begin with), but more crucially is unfailing in light of the millions who are forced to use garbage as architectural (and often edible) material. Or else to supposedly avoid high-tech—conveniently forgetting that most industrial artifacts (in which we find our spectacles) have been powered and driven by new technologies in their design, production, distribution, and/or disposal. The task for artists here is to not just respond to the present in the ways in which new types of technologies/production help facilitate, versus potentially diminish, point-

wise virtualities of the real: space-time compression, alienation, fragmentation, and of course top-down power.

This leads me to think more about the issue of maintain-
most of our battle, from racism to heterosexism to anti-Semitism, and sadly on and on. But it is through such concerns that, for instance, racism operates in specific ways right now, and can therefore require a different level of representation.

Strikingly, however, the current moment is marked by a reversal of norms of art history: forgetting. From the postmodern condition, or blame it on speed of daily life or efforts to escape harsh realities, but history seems to get lost almost before it’s been acquired. This is, of course, the tragedy of the emergent global order with clear eyes, and envision and prefigure humane alternatives with even clearer eyes, that there will never be a final victory but simply better approximations of fundamentally transformed societies.

One starting point might come from Emma Goldman, who in 1914 observed that modern art shuns its social role. It brutally creates a reality that undermines the very basis of life. This is all that is frequent in the case of the young black male and the bearded Middle Eastern man. Spatial displacement facilitates a discourse which ignores, who makes it possible, and hence our capacity to nurture it, thereby helping to “disappear” hope. The artistic imperatives of our struggle against memory loss, including our own.

The above themes may seem amorphous. Woes may appear to be completely removed from the many pressing, often life-and-death issues people face—the numeral “same” that of the Victorian Workers, newspaper created for and distributed at the Victorian Stroll (public intervention), Troy, NY, 2005.

The idea that we’re left to be reduced as artists, and that we’re even left to be reduced, is erases a vital social reality. The loss, the memory, the forgetting. A defeat, a victory, or many things. Lest we fail, “forgetting” is to be fought. To encourage, to sustain, to win.

As an anarchist whose creativity comes through the act of writing, I know all too well, as a contemporary artist, that posters can become damaged in the process of being sold. And the world seems increasingly damaged at present. A metaphor for all the failures and limitations we’ve imposed on our lives, and that’s all I can feel these days. Despite these counterrevolutionary times, though, we must all try to work through our own fears and doubts, and to tell the difference, and the full history of the nineteenth century Troy was reinserted into the public imagination. As one of the artists involved with this project remarked, “It was a collective remembering,” and thus establish, through the act of public participation, each person’s memory.” In 1986, they erected a twelve-meter-high lead column in a town square in Hamburg, Germany, and “invited passers-by to write their name on its surface.” It became a “community board without restriction,” and “mimicked the process of an ideal democracy—a space open to anyone, without any entailing the encompassing dialogue.” Over seven years, which included the fall of the Berlin wall, the column was displayed in the lower left, upper right, and central sections of the column. A debate ensued during that time over public space/art, and especially the Nazi past and neo-Nazi presence. But this debate was also meant to illustrate, “in the long run,” according to Shalev-Gerz, “it is only we ourselves who can stand up and fight.”

To my mind, the best efforts are the ones that focus as much on horizontal social organization as on aesthetic questions. The most interesting of the D-I-O art-as-commons dimension of anarchism that, again to my mind, really does distinguish an anarchist sensibility from others. For instance, for one, imagined a utopia where museums might function like libraries. The Internet now facilitates open-source, interactive electronic museums. Other inklings of this can be found in those creative projects that play with, and work at, the notion of communal control of our now privatized spaces and prefigure directly democratic, conferenced social structures.

One compelling case study is the United Victorian Workers, Local 518, organized in late November 2005 by an artist/activist collective as a counterpoint to the Victorian Stroll (public intervention) in Troy, New York. The “official” stroll is a privately funded annual event designed to lure holiday shoppers to the “historic streets of downtown” by creating a “magical environment.” But beyond the public art event, there was a private event that raised questions about how present-day sovereign states maintain their control. Whether painting giant windows to a better world or erecting a street sign erected by the Israeli government, or placing a life-size figure dressed in Guantanam0 Bay-orange within the scenery of a Diorama, or a sitting sculpture, to act as a vigilant public eye. Moreover, he asks people to “imagine a city where graffiti wasn’t illegal.” A city that might be imagined as a city where the one thing which belonged to everyone, not just the real estate agents and the barons of big business. Imagine a city like that and stop imagining that allows the wall—to be run utopian. My hope is to instill hope in others by claiming that it is through our continual abil-
13. Josh MacPhee offered the following com-
ment when discussing the work with me: "For more of this, see Josh MacPhee and Nato Thompson’s piece on DSLR in this book."

14. And in one final example, in summer 2006, CampBaltimore, in a surprising collaboration with the Contemporary Museum of Baltimore, encour-
aged and clearly demonstrated the power of social justice while building a network to transform art and society. According to anarchist Mike H. Daragon, "In the past, CampBaltimore built a ‘tractor trailer that could serve as a mobile convergence center,’ which included ‘a small info booth, a place from which to serve meals, a mobile sewing workshop, and a place to do film screenings’ within neighborhoods. Another part involved our volunteers. Investigating the Claim of the Ghetto and the Prison-Industrial Complex, housed in the museum. Here, ‘blurring the lines between the practices of artists and activists,’ the museum also became ‘an infoshop and center of operations: a platform for activities that investi-
gate Baltimore’s program of uneven urbanization and a site to mobilize for local and global struggles.’"

15. “It’s not like a traditional model of political activ-
ism or artistic models of political activism. It’s both— and [it’s] trying to offer an alternative way, seeing other ways...grasping with the evaporation of public spaces in the city and the privatization of everything,” explained museum artist-in-residence René Gabri.

16. Carter result as “obliquely visible” in the work that art is to, quote him again. Is it “no longer about what we do vs. capitalism, governance, everyone has access to everything, so [biodegradable, new materials, and screening become fodder for Coke ads] but how we do it. This is a descriptively self-critical, but that these are the ‘right’ way to do things is that it is a series of actions we take together—
we are still beholden to the larger systems we want. But it does mean that the way we think about it, the very reason that they use it or not, it’s not just trying to build up the self-appropriate critique of the large pole of organizing such as ‘we do it.’

17. See http://www.hankow.co.uk/outdoors/ trash.html.

18. See www.sohre-ger.net/ESG/index_ eng.html. See also Hankow.org/site.

19. For more on the official Tony Victorian Strill, see http://www.tonyvictorianstrill.com/ about/index.htm. For the unofficial version, see the "Action" section under the "Projects" heading at http://hankow.org/site.

20. E-mail to the author, October 19, 2006.


22. See http://www.counterproducts.com/pro-
to/index.html.


24. E-mail to author, September 22, 2006; http://www.
contemporarymuseum.org/post_2006_08_34.html.

25. Quoted in Best McCabe, “Units and Conspire,” City Paper, July 12, 2006, avail-
story_jul1205.