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book review of

The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris by Patricia Leighton

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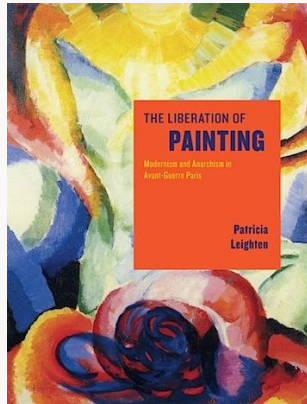
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Patricia Leighton,
The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.
248 pp.; 99 b&w illustrations, 32 color illustrations; bibliography; index.
\$50.00 (cloth); \$7.00-40.00 (e-book)
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Modernism's relation to politics is uncontested. The debate that endures surrounds the nature of the relationship (direct, indirect, or inverse?) and the artist's role in shaping it, as a deliberate political actor or a medium of social-historical forces. Patricia Leighton's new book, *The Liberation of Painting: Modernism and Anarchism in Avant-Guerre Paris*, is an absorbing and scholarly study that shows all of these possibilities in play, sometimes in the case of one artist's oeuvre. Leighton zealously argues for a more politicized, historicized account of modernist painting by focusing on a group of artists with documented ties to the anarchist movement. Pitched as a corrective to the "resolutely apolitical formalist art criticism" that still serves as the foundation of histories of abstraction in both the academy and the museum, Leighton's book demands that we attend more closely to the political passions of key modernists on a case-by-case basis, not only (or even especially) as manifest in painting, but also as conveyed in the less hallowed production of satirical prints, as well as in these artists' personal relationships, statements, and writings (2). The result is a rich and multifaceted argument for a "politics of form" as a driving force behind the pre-war production of Kees Van Dongen, Maurice de Vlaminck, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris, and František Kupka.

Leighton has been working on this topic for most of her career. Her first book, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897–1914* (1989), placed Picasso's early work against the backdrop of anarchist culture in Barcelona and Paris. *Cubism and Culture* (2001), co-authored with Mark Antliff, also contains substantial sections on how radical leftism informed the ideology and aesthetics of Cubism.^[1] In *The Liberation of Painting*, Leighton expands this project to a wider range of artists and artistic media—adding academic painting as well as Fauvism and Orphism to her expertise on Cubism, and addressing political cartoons and book

illustrations along with painting. Yet she retains her focus on Paris and on the years leading up to World War I, as well as her polemic against formalism as historically and politically blind.

The book is too historically sensitive to make “general analogies between anarchism and art”, and indeed there are none to be had, beyond a simplistic correlation of radical style to radical thought (8). (However weak, this was a correlation that conservative critics of the *avant-guerre* period made all the time, and Leighten is helpful in placing this knee-jerk impulse in its discursive and political context.) Indeed, it is one of the strengths of this study that anarchism, both as a political movement and as a source of inspiration for art, comes across as highly complex, even cacophonous and contradictory in its many voices. The reader comes away from the book with a clearer view of how variously key artists of this period understood “abstraction” and “nonobjectivity” as political pursuits, that is, as both aesthetic and anti-authoritarian in their charge. What is often less clear is how their social critique—whether anti-academic, anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist, or anti-militarist—is materially visible in the “liberated” forms of their painting. More on this soon.

Throughout, Leighten draws on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of language as culturally embedded and therefore inescapably political. Bakhtin’s signature concept of “heteroglossia” complicated the idea of authorial intention, asserting that an author’s intentions can only ever be read as “refracted” through the many intersecting languages of a novel’s narrator and characters.^[2] Also entangled in this hybridized speech are questions of medium and audience, and Leighten locates much of her artists’ political agency there.

Chapter one uses the concept of “heteroglossia” to look at a range of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century salon paintings and satirical graphics, exploring the varied and intersecting “languages” of these works’ subject matter, medium, style, and venue of display, as well as the audience at whom these languages were aimed. The choice to exhibit paintings in the traditional salons or make prints for popular journals was, according to Leighten, a political choice, hinging on what kind of audience—in particular, what social class—one wanted to address. It was also a matter of expressive freedom, a turn to venues and media that could accommodate more experimental and politically radical work. One of Leighten’s key aims in this chapter, and indeed throughout much of the book, is to bring to light the graphic work of modernists known primarily for their painting, arguing for these works’ importance—both political and aesthetic—not only to these artists’ more well-known work on canvas, but also to the history of modernism at large. It is true that “the satirical graphics of [avant-garde artists] in the development of modernism have too often been viewed as irrelevant to their painting and dismissed”, and Leighten’s book makes serious progress in correcting this imbalance (112). As such, it constitutes a significant contribution to the literature on the period, one that I hope generates further interest in, and scholarship on, modern print culture. It is remarkable how little known and exhibited much of this graphic work remains. Leighten’s evidence persuasively counters the claim that such graphics were motivated merely by profit, and that their political charge did not originate with the artists but rather with editors who attached incendiary captions.

How Leighten marshals this print production in the service of her larger argument about painting is less persuasive. In her account, political cartoons gave artists “the formal means with which to transform painting into a weapon of avant-gardism” (48). This transformation,

along with the avant-garde's much theorized subversion of academic convention, is the "liberation of painting" to which her title refers. But what does this weaponry look like, and how is it transferred from cartoons to canvas? There is little concrete evidence on either score. Although Leighten is right to assert the overlooked importance of graphics to these artists' careers and to a fuller picture of modernism at large, at the same time, by positing them as tools for the transformation of painting, or as evidence for the artists' politics which we are to believe must have infused their painting, she makes them once again subservient to the canon of fine art, rather than objects deserving analysis in their own right. This is unfortunate since her evidence for the paintings' political radicalism—compared to the evident radicalism of the prints—is often weak.

For example, the case for Van Dongen's and Vlaminck's painting as "transgressive" in the political sense lacks specifics. One wonders how their stylistic transgressions differ from those of a decidedly non-anarchist avant-garde painter like Henri Matisse. (Matisse crops up throughout the book, but this question is never addressed.) In contrast, Leighten's analysis of André Derain's *Soldier's Ball in Suresnes* (1903, St. Louis Art Museum) as anti-militarist is compelling, clinched by a remarkable little-known photograph of the artist in his studio standing next to another painting (unfortunately lost) of a cartoonish crucified soldier. Even in this grainy photograph, the painting's anti-militarist punch and its debt to similar images in the satirical press are clear. But this pre-Fauvist painting is not especially radical in style, and unlike Vlaminck, Derain was far from a full-blown anarchist, begging the question as to how helpful artists' personal politics are, ultimately, in determining the political valence of their work. So although Leighten acknowledges the failure of modernist art as an effective political weapon, she does not really address the problem of determining a "politics of form" *in form*, that is, without recourse to external evidence (58). Granted, this is not easy to do, and perhaps an intractable methodological problem for the social historian, but some further reflection and evident struggle with this issue would have been welcome, because without it we have external context driving interpretation, rather than bolstering it and fleshing it out.

The remaining four chapters are more tightly focused on specific case studies. Chapter two places the primitivist art of Picasso and his circle in the context of the colonial exploitation that introduced African art into French culture, arguing that works like Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907, Museum of Modern Art, New York) were anarchist acts of social criticism as much as innovative works of proto-cubist abstraction. Critics of the time saw Picasso and his circle as "anarchists in art" and Leighten means to convince her audience that this perceived aesthetic anarchism was both intentional and politically heartfelt (80). This chapter largely revisits material from *Re-Ordering the Universe*, re-casting the same argument made there—with more nuance and different contextual support—that Picasso's radical politics fundamentally matter to the meaning of this picture.^[3] Leighten does not flinch in her approach to *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and in her hands, "the ambivalent character of Picasso's primitivism" does take on a new layer of political meaning (83). Like the recent work of Debora Silverman on the politics of violence, exploitation, and conquest shaping the sinewy forms of Belgian art nouveau during King Leopold's colonization of the Congo, this chapter makes it impossible to forget the political circumstances of these "radically modern" nudes that have accumulated so many formalist and psychoanalytic readings.^[4] However, Leighten's case that these circumstances fundamentally matter to the forms of Picasso's painting, that *Les*

Demoiselles is an anti-colonial picture, lacks the strong historical and visual evidence of Silverman's account.

Chapter three extends this re-framing of Picasso's early abstraction by focusing on early Cubism's critical reception, arguing that the movement's radical formal innovations were first (and must still be) understood in terms of politicized understandings of the "primitive" in pre-war Parisian culture. This chapter includes an especially illuminating discussion of certain critics who lambasted Cubism not for its rejection of academic tradition (as the story usually goes), but rather for its regression to basic geometric drawing principles taught in the academy. The discussion is brief, but effectively shows the complexity of Cubism's critical reception as both radically avant-garde and naively academic. There is other important material here, too, and Leighten's case for Cubism's politicized reception is convincing. But because the chapter focuses on reception, with minimal analysis of artists' statements, much less works, the closing claim that the cubists attempted "to act as historical agents in their environment" begs further proof, since historical agency cannot be transferred from critic to artist (110).

Chapter four compares the pre-war collages of Picasso to the wartime collages of his cubist colleague Juan Gris, arguing for the importance of historical context to each: while Picasso's newsprint fragments deliberately invoked anarchist debates around war, pacifism, labor strikes, and armament profiteering, Gris's use of newsprint was deliberately depoliticized or "muffled" to the point of illegibility, shrinking from the dangers of artistic activism in the more perilous political climate of the war years. Gris, who began his career as a political cartoonist with loose links to the anarchist movement, serves as a foil to the other artists in the book who, Leighten argues, carried their leftist politics into the realm of avant-garde painting. The case she makes for Gris's apolitical turn is persuasive. The case for Picasso's collages as anarchist statements is revised and updated from that presented in *Re-Ordering the Universe*, this time drawing on recent scholarship on Stéphane Mallarmé and the formal and cultural politics of the newspaper.^[5] Although her contextual evidence is fascinating, Leighten's reading of these collages will remain controversial in Picasso studies.

Chapter five is a fascinating analysis of the prints and paintings of František Kupka, a Czech painter active in Paris and deeply committed to anarchist principles. Leighten is smart to make Kupka her final example since his anarchism is particularly explicit, in his early satirical cartoons for the anarchist weekly *L'assiette au beurre*, in his illustrations for Élisée Reclus's *L'homme et la terre* (1905–08), an important work of anarchist theory, and in his theoretical treatise, *La Création dans les arts plastiques* (1912). With this material Leighten builds a strong scaffold for her reading of Kupka's abstract paintings as anarchist manifestos. Of course, the radicalism she draws out of the treatise and the paintings is of a sublimated kind, much less politically *engagé* than the work Kupka did for Reclus or *L'assiette au beurre*, but Leighten acknowledges this, and the transformation of Kupka's "politics of form" from the mordant, coarse imagery of his caricatures to the vibrant intersecting shapes of his Orphism is gripping.

A key point of continuity throughout this transformation is Kupka's interest in the female body, and here I was surprised by Leighten's refusal to put pressure on what she terms Kupka's "gendered vision." This was an artist with a highly sexualized notion of creativity who liked to call artists he disliked "courtesan-parasites" (150). More to the point, the centrality of the

female body both to Kupka's critique of bourgeois capitalist culture (in his satirical prints) and to his own anarchist utopia (in his paintings) suggests a gender politics much more ambivalent than Leighten allows. Instead, she argues that Kupka's work was "emblematic" of "contemporary anarchist feminism," without adequately explaining what this was, and states that one of the artist's anarchist goals was "sexual equality" (171, 175). Even if his stated goals were feminist, there is much in his oeuvre, including the specific works Leighten examines, to contradict or at least undercut such claims. To give one example, Leighten asserts that a painting of a prostitute titled *L'Archaïque* (1910, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) uses its aesthetic references to archaic Greek art to honor "the venerable character of the prostitute's profession" [?] rather than to essentialize her as an exotic and primitive archetype (168–70). Similar problems bedevil her discussion of Van Dongen's prostitutes and, some might argue, *Les Demoiselles*.[\[6\]](#)

The willfulness of these readings stems from the deep sympathy Leighten has for the anarchist movement and artists associated with it. This sympathy also fuels the vigor of her research, and is not in itself a fault, but it does at times lead her to overreach. As her introduction and conclusion make clear, part of Leighten's polemic in *The Liberation of Painting* is against "absurdly stereotyped conceptions of anarchists" in both historical scholarship and popular culture, particularly the characterization of anarchists as terrorists (8, 178). This stereotype is not without basis, as Leighten well knows, and she does acknowledge the bomb-throwers as well as their defense by anarchist leaders; but she also quickly bats them away by designating such violent anarchists as outliers and asserting (without sufficient evidence) that their defenders were "deeply troubled" by the violence they felt "obliged" to defend (8). Perhaps, but this defensive position signals one of the missed opportunities in *The Liberation of Painting*: by writing as an apologist for anarchism, quick to defend or gloss over its darker moments, Leighten misses some of the movement's complexity and its significance to the practice and politics of art. It is important to make a place for anarchist modernism in the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century art, but not uncritically. For example, further mining Picasso's imagery in *Les Demoiselles* for the political problems it exposes in anarchist intellectual circles (e.g., violence and sexism), rather than tipping a hat, might lead to a more convincing reading of this monstrously complicated picture as, in part, a product of anarchist culture.

In sum, *The Liberation of Painting* digs into the historical record to sketch the manifold links between pre-war Parisian painting and anarchist thought. In doing so it offers a fuller picture of modernism's cultural politics in a period of art history that has often been glossed over as a retreat to the "autonomy" of "pure form." The book is particularly valuable in illuminating and contextualizing the art and careers of underrated modernists like Kupka and Gris, and in the wealth of research it offers on the satirical graphics that they and other avant-garde painters of this period produced. But the links drawn between radical (i.e., anarchist) politics and radical (i.e., avant-garde) aesthetics lack methodological reflection. There are some reflective moments: for example, late in the book Leighten states "we cannot assume even from an extreme radicalism of form a political posture" (143); but likewise, we cannot assume from external evidence of radicalism that an artist's paintings display "a politics of form." Political beliefs, however well documented, do not constitute political painting. At the end of her introduction, Leighten writes: "How style of any sort is invested with concurrent ideological meaning . . . is only made visible if we are prepared to examine carefully the larger concerns of French political, social, and artistic culture in which and against which such modernism

defined itself” (15). Leighton’s book effectively illuminates these larger concerns, but more is needed to make the case for their relevance to the transformation of painting in pre-war Paris *visible*.

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Notes

[1] Patricia Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989), and Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, *Cubism and Culture* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2001), 130–34, 172–85, 197–214.

[2] Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel” (1934–35), in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422.

[3] See Leighton, *Re-Ordering the Universe*, 63–69 on Alfred Jarry, 80–91 on *Les Demoiselles*.

[4] See Debora Silverman, “Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part I,” *West 86th* 18:2 (Fall–Winter 2011): 3–45; “Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part II,” *West 86th* 19:2 (Fall–Winter 2012): 175–95; “Art Nouveau, Art of Darkness: African Lineages of Belgian Modernism, Part III,” *West 86th* 20:1 (Spring–Summer 2013): 3–61. Most if not all of this material was likely published too late to impact Leighton’s argument.

[5] These sources include Dean de la Motte and Jeannene M. Przyblyski, eds., *Making the News: Modernity and the Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); Linda Goddard, “Mallarmé, Picasso, and the Aesthetic of the Newspaper,” *Word & Image* (Oct.–Dec. 2006): 293–303; and Anna Sigridur Arnar, *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist’s Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Goddard published a book-length study in 2012 titled *Aesthetic Rivalries: Word and Image in France, 1880–1926* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang, 2012).

[6] In contrast, Leighton and Antliff’s chapter on “Gender Codes” in *Cubism and Culture*, 2001, is sensitive to these issues.