

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Caterina Y. Pierre

book review of

Sculptors Against the State: Anarchism and the Anglo-European Avant-Garde

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 21, no. 3 (Autumn 2022)

Citation: Caterina Y. Pierre, book review of *Sculptors Against the State: Anarchism and the Anglo-European Avant-Garde* by Mark Antliff, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 21, no. 3 (Autumn 2022), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2022.21.3.24>.

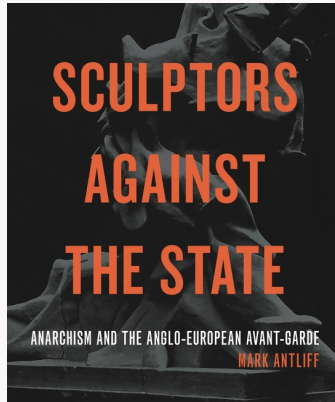
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



Mark Antliff,

Sculptors Against the State: Anarchism and the Anglo-European Avant-Garde.

University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2021.

Series: Refiguring Modernism: Arts, Literature, Sciences.

284 pp.; 10 color and 70 b&w illus., bibliography; index.

\$99.95

ISBN: 9780271089454

If we are to face facts, let's face them front and center: the best modern artists, or, the ones who are best remembered, tend to be artists who make artworks and statements that are purposely contrary to authority. My favorite, and arguably the father of them all, Gustave Courbet (1819–77), famously hoped that people would remember him as an artist who “never belonged to any school, to any church, to any institution, to any academy, and, above all, to any regime except the regime of freedom.”^[1] Mark Antliff, in his book *Sculptors Against the State: Anarchism and the Anglo-European Avant-Garde*, is concerned not just with artists who resist the typical societal institutions of church and state, but with those who go one step further: the anarchist artist. Antliff defines anarchy as “a rejection of the centralization of power in the guise of institutions or other forms of organization, whether economic or political,” and the anarchist as someone who calls for “the creation of nonhierarchical relationships and modes of socioeconomic organization that would maximize individual freedom for the self as well as others” (6). There have never been enough anarchist artists, in my opinion. Antliff has chosen to remind us of three of them.

Antliff has focused here on three sculptors whose processes, materials, and subject matters were, according to the author, “shaped by anarchist ideology and were calculated to generate certain affective responses—states of mind—in hopes of fostering a radical community” (12). These artists were Jacob Epstein (1880–1959); Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916); and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915). Each artist is the subject of a chapter in this four-chapter text: Epstein's *Tomb of Oscar Wilde* (1909–12) is the focus of chapter 1; Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) comprises chapter 2; and Gaudier-Brzeska receives the attention of chapters 3 and 4, clearly because there is a lot to say about his relationship with anarchist journals such as *La Guerre Sociale* (in publication, 1906–15), his phallic masterwork *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* (1914), and, in Antliff's estimation, Gaudier-Brzeska was “the most committed anarchist among these avant-garde sculptors” (194).

After a brief introduction wherein Antliff presents an overview of the texts to follow, he begins chapter 1, entitled “‘Life’s Joy’: Censorship, Homosexuality, and Jacob Epstein’s *Tomb of Oscar Wilde*.” We open in the spring of 1913, when a public petition was circulated to protest the Paris municipal government’s official censorship of Epstein’s *Tomb of Oscar Wilde* at Père Lachaise Cemetery. To those who do not already know the story of this censorship, it comes as a bit of a surprise: this beloved sculpture, which, for most of my lifetime, was covered with so many lipstick stains that one could almost use it to calculate the millions of dollars made by L’Oréal, was formerly the bane of the official *canards*, in particular Louis Lépine, the then Paris Prefect of Police. Anarchist journals such as *L’Action d’Art* and *New Freewoman* defended the sculpture in print. This was no small matter: *L’Action d’Art* reflected the theory of anarchist individualism embraced by its founder André Colomer (1886–1931), who employed correspondents in Europe as well as North America. To the anarchists, Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) was a contemporary hero, not only because of his writings such as *The Soul of Man under Socialism* (1891) but for his famous trial in 1895 (which Antliff pinpoints as the “critical turning point in anarchist views on same-sex relations” [25]) and his sentence of two years of hard labor. Antliff reminds us that Wilde famously stated “Je suis artiste et anarchiste,” in 1893, some two years before his trial (18). There was, clearly, no better subject for an anarchist monument. The sculpture was commissioned in 1908 by Robert “Robbie” Ross (1869–1918), Wilde’s literary executor and former lover. Epstein combines many influences in the sculpture, including Wilde’s *De Profundis* (1905), a masterwork of epistolary writing; Assyrian carvings at the British Museum; and the winged Egyptian god Ammon from Wilde’s 1894 poem *The Sphinx* (21). However, feigning propriety, as if the French had never seen a nude figure in an artwork before, and as if they did not invent the *cinq à sept* (quickie), in September 1912 the *Tomb of Oscar Wilde* was first covered by a tarp, and then later Ammon’s offending member was covered with plaster, on the orders of Lépine (23). While some sculptors, such as Henri Laurens (1885–1954), Antonin Mercié (1845–1916), and Denys Puech (1854–1942), who had all received government commissions, endorsed the censorship of the sculpture, Epstein found supporters in people like the writer Emma Goldman (1869–1940), who helped him gain exposure to the anarchist community while he was in Paris (29).

Here the chapter turns to a discussion of the theories of the French Philosopher Henri-Louis Bergson (1859–1941) and how his work influenced anarchist thought. Though this portion of the chapter is of a high intellectual character, I found it a bit heavy; it moves away from the fine art historical analysis of the *Tomb of Oscar Wilde* earlier in the chapter. Bergson also becomes the true master of the entire text; Antliff goes to great lengths and depths to connect each of the three main sculptors to Bergsonist thought throughout the book. Antliff then turns to a long discussion of anarchist painters such as Gino Severini (1883–1966) and Paul Signac (1863–1935), an analysis that seems misplaced in a book about sculptures and sculptors. At the end of the chapter, however, Antliff ties together Bergsonism, Oscar Wilde, the *L’Action d’Art* group, and the individualism expressed in Epstein’s *Tomb of Oscar Wilde*, noting that in drawing on Bergsonism, “Colomer claims that individuals would spontaneously form communities by virtue of their intuitive sympathies with one another, which results in a celebration of difference and contagious joie de vivre that would guide their interaction” (52). This culminated, in Antliff’s view, with the *Tomb of Oscar Wilde*, where it became “a communitarian shrine to love itself, covered with lipstick

and festooned with flowers by those inspired by Wilde's joyous spirit and, perhaps, even his anarchism" (53).

In chapter 2, "Sculpting an Antidemocratic Insurrection: Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*," Antliff opens with Boccioni's *Futurist Painting Sculpture (Plastic Dynamism)*, published in 1914. In it, Boccioni attacks retrograde aesthetics, and in particular the recently completed *Monument to Victor Emmanuel II* (1911) in Rome. Boccioni also describes the style of Futurism as synonymous with anarchy, because, as Antliff explains, the Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944) was informed by Bergsonism, class war, and military imperialism when he was developing the style's agenda in 1909 (57). The centrality of violence in Futurism was different than the theories of benign joy and empathy that were promoted by Colomer and the *L'Action d'Art* collective. We return to the discussion of Bergsonism full throttle here, and we find ourselves drifting out towards the deep end of the pool, with discussions that focus on Bergson's theories on intuition and on space, the latter as both part of a measured intellect as well as intuitive as it is physically experienced (64). The sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* gets lost for a good long while, around twelve pages, though by the end of the chapter Antliff returns us to the sculpture, relating it to "the fusion of mind and matter, flexing muscles with hardened steel, and the willed violence of intuition with the Sorelian 'metallic discipline' of the male combatant," here referring to the political theories of Georges Sorel (1847–1922) (78). One might find chapter 2 to be a bit heavy-going, as it really focuses much more on Colomer, Bergson, and Sorel than on Boccioni or any of Boccioni's sculptures. At times, the reader might get the sense that the artists at issue here were only included to have some concrete reason to discuss the philosophers and theorists who seem much more central to the book's overall program. However, Antliff does make a good case for Boccioni as an anarchist. Epstein's *Tomb of Oscar Wilde*, in and of itself, was not a convincingly anarchist sculpture; there are clear references to Wilde as an anarchist subject, but Epstein's connection personally to anarchism is somewhat invisible, though the artist did call upon his anarchist colleagues and connections to get him out of a controversial jam. But, as Antliff makes clear, Boccioni's works do have a deep and obvious connection with anarchist writing and the Bergsonist theories of intuition and free, fluid thought. He sums it up by noting that *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* was "in keeping with Marinetti's Sorelian identification of the heroic male warrior as the primary force for social transformation and imperial conquest" (93).

The problem with Marinetti's (and Boccioni's) brand of anarchism was that it bordered on fascism; *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* seemed to embody Marinetti's image of the revolutionary, "youthful, brimming with health, dynamic, and hyper masculine" (90), a description which retains the odor of Nazi-inspired artworks. The Futurists were allied with Mussolini's *Fasci di Combattimento* by 1919, which Boccioni did not live long enough to witness, but of which, Antliff asserts, Boccioni would have likely approved (194).

The artist who seems to have the strongest anarchist connections in the book is Gaudier-Brzeska. He was exposed to journals such as *La Guerre Sociale* and *Hommes du Jour* (founded in 1908). In the latter, Gaudier-Brzeska was profiled as a revolutionary artist (103). Antliff also makes the interesting connection here between direct-action politics of anarchism and the direct carving methods of the artist (99). There is more evidence presented in chapters 3 and 4 for Gaudier-Brzeska's anarchist activity than for the other visual artists in the book.

As discussed in chapter 3, “Henri Gaudier-Brzeska’s *La Guerre Sociale*: Satire, Apaches, and Antimilitarism,” Gaudier-Brzeska’s participation in a demonstration in 1910 against the execution of the “Apache” Jean Liabeuf (1886–1910), and his *Notes sur Liabeuf et sur Tolstoï* (the manuscript for which is held at the Musée National d’Art Modern in Paris), reveal the sculptor’s personal feelings on capital punishment, military conscription, and striking workers (104–8). Much is made about Gaudier-Brzeska’s defaulting on his military service in 1912, his reason for the desertion (the army was the “slaughterers of the Arabs” [124]), and his eventual (and strange) enlistment at the outbreak of World War I, to reform the army from within (130). Chapter 3 does not focus heavily on major works by Gaudier-Brzeska, other than a 1911 drawing of Keir Hardie (1856–1916), founder of the British Labour Party; a 1912 portrait of Major R.H. Raymond Smythies, an army officer whom Gaudier-Brzeska met through a mutual acquaintance, Haldane Macfall; sketches of a homeless family from 1910; an object entitled *Knuckle-duster* from 1914; and a work entitled *Man Fallen from a Scaffold* (1911). This is to say that chapter 3 is presented to establish Gaudier-Brzeska’s anarchist connections and concerns some years prior to his relationship with Pound, and before delving into the artist’s masterpiece, the *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*, that will concern the reader in chapter 4.

This fourth and final chapter, “Into the Vortex: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Ezra Pound, and Sculptural Nominalism,” links Gaudier-Brzeska with the American expatriate poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972), and both to anarchism. Gaudier-Brzeska and Pound met in July of 1913; by June of 1915, Gaudier-Brzeska died in the trenches at Neuville-St.-Vaast, France. In that short period, Gaudier-Brzeska influenced Pound’s anarchist poetry and published in anarchist journals such as *New Freewoman* and *Egoist*. (These two journals combined in January 1914, retaining the *Egoist* title). Pound also introduced Gaudier-Brzeska to the writings of Dora Marsden (1882–1960), a proponent of egoism and individualist anarchism and the editor of *New Freewoman* and *Egoist*. In February 1914, Pound published his first piece of significant art criticism, entitled “The New Sculpture,” in *Egoist*; the essay focused on Gaudier-Brzeska and Epstein, positioning them as being at the forefront of a new order of avant-garde artists.^[2] Pound and Gaudier-Brzeska published a series of articles in *Egoist* as an attack on the classicism of sculptors at the Royal Academy. Pound continued to promote Gaudier-Brzeska after the sculptor’s death in his writings and through exhibitions (138). Antliff returns us once more to the true subject of this book, Bergson, and his *Philosophy of Ideas*, according to which language is a poor substitute for our felt emotions and our sensory experience. This is then related to Gaudier-Brzeska’s use of ideograms, or “language images” (145), and his enthusiasm for Pound’s imagist (clarity of expression through precise images) poetry (146). The Vorticist movement (1912–15), developed by Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), which promoted autonomy and heterogeneity, is tackled in this chapter, and one will find its comparison with Futurism (which was heavily burdened by Marinetti’s influence and authoritarian values) to be instructive (156).

Finally, by page 171, we are offered the main course, an examination of the Vorticist sculpture *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound*. Commissioned by Pound, and really a joint conceptual effort, it was made from Pentelic marble, famously used by the ancient Greeks, and was modelled after the moai of Rapa Nui. This use of an ancient material for an ultramodern sculpture has its irony, as does the influence of the moai at Rapa Nui, an island which suffered the effects of British imperialism. Like many other artworks from outside of the

Western tradition used as sources by European artists at this time, the moai were seen as an artistic affront to classical humanism, and therefore a great motivator for an anarchist sculptor. Direct carving as a method also gets its due: “direct carving, like direct action in politics or imagism in the literary field, stood for an anarchist rebellion against particular forms of representation, a critique integral to their attack on the New Sculpture” (175). The last ten pages of chapter 4 are an art historian’s delight: a discussion of direct influences, artist’s process, and drawings and related works which aims to satisfy, and does.

There are moments when other deep philosophical concepts such as imagism and nominalism (the denial of the existence and the reality of universals or general ideas) seem to make the text heavy and overburdened. I have simplified much here to try to unearth the most salient points of the book for readers who are more interested in the artists and the sculptures than the philosophers. Overall, though, the material presented in *Sculptors Against the State: Anarchism and the Anglo-European Avant-Garde* is exceptional and valuable. Except in writings on Paul Signac, Georges Seurat (1859–91), and Camille Pissarro (1830–1903), it is somewhat rare to see anarchist ideology applied to art, and certainly even more rare to read it in discussions of sculpture and sculptors of this period. Antliff establishes that anarchism and its proponents greatly affected art and artists from the late nineteenth century through the end of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). It will be impossible, for example, to discuss Gaudier-Brzeska going forward without giving some attention to his connections with anarchism. We never did achieve a Bergsonian society in which “individuals would spontaneously form communities by virtue of their intuitive sympathies with one another, which [would result] in a celebration of difference and contagious joie de vivre that would guide their interaction” (52). But it is a nice thing to aspire to, and the author shows us artists (Epstein and Gaudier-Brzeska in particular) who had hoped to achieve it through sculpture. Antliff’s text will ensure that their contributions, and the anarchist leanings of all the artists herein discussed, are not forgotten, and the book will inspire artists, art historians, creators, educators, and writers who are engaged with the intersection between art and politics in their own work.

Caterina Y. Pierre, Ph.D.

Professor, City University of New York, Kingsborough Community College
Visiting Associate Professor, The Pratt Institute

Email the author: caterina.pierre@kbcc.cuny.edu, cpierre@pratt.edu

Notes

[1] This famous quotation is found in a letter from Courbet to Maurice Richard, dated June 23 [1870]. See Petra ten-Doesschate Chu, *Letters of Gustave Courbet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 378–79.

[2] An article not listed in Antliff’s bibliography on this topic is by Sarah Turner, “Ezra Pound’s new order of artists: ‘The New Sculpture’ and the critical formation of a sculptural avant-garde in early twentieth-century Britain,” *Sculpture Journal* 21, no. 2 (2012): 9–22.