

Mark Antliff, *Sculptors Against the State: Anarchism and the Anglo-European Avant-Garde*

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In the opening lines of *Sculptors Against the State*, Mark Antliff states his aim as being to establish how ‘sculpture was treated as integral to a radical movement whose participants saw the arts as a catalyst for a new set of social relations and psychological dispositions deemed antithetical to those propagated by the state’. What follows is a gripping and exhaustive account of the history surrounding four exemplary avant garde artists (or group, in the case of the final chapter) whose work not only encapsulates the anarchist ideas of the moment but also played a critical and revolutionary role in their proliferation.

Moving deftly from discussions of anarchism and its connection to sexual liberation, antimilitarism, insurrection and anti-imperialism (to name a small few), Antliff’s great strength is revealed as his keen ability to so lucidly flesh out the historical backdrops and tumultuous political moments which these artists inhabited and expose how their work engaged with interrelated critical dialogue, debate and wider ideas. The opening chapter is a rich and engaging case and point, which spotlights the work of Jacob Epstein, providing an expansive summary of his personal connection to anarchist politics and focusing on his iconic and highly controversial tour de force, *The Tomb of Oscar Wilde* (1909-1912). This work – which becomes Antliff’s centerpiece – was ‘inspired in part by Wilde’s anarchist-inflected indictment of the penal system, *De Profundis*’ and a work emblematic of how ‘Epstein repeatedly turned to Wilde’s poetry throughout the generative process’ (pp19-21). From here the author expertly guides us through Epstein’s assimilatory symbolism and the critical ideological influences which form the swirling vortex of ideas, figures and source material that played a part in the conception of the piece.

That literature and philosophy reflected the anarchist ideas of the time and were in many ways critical to the progression of sexual rights and relinquishing the shackles of ‘a state eager to police sexuality’, is another compelling substrate of discussion to this chapter (and others) which Antliff eagerly uproots. He points out that, ‘by folding such issues as colonialism and homosexuality into their critique of the state’, artists and philosophers ‘partially anticipated contemporary anarchists’ conceptual approach to domination’ (p11).

The illumination of sculpture’s close relation to the work of the great writers, poets and philosophers of the time (such as Oscar Wilde, Ezra Pound and Henri Bergson) is clearly of great significance to Antliff, and the book emphasises the necessity for studies which bridge the far too often divided study of art and literature as individual, isolated subjects. The second chapter follows a familiar thread, this time focusing on the work of seminal Italian Futurist Umberto Boccioni, who ‘had described Futurism as “synonymous with individualism, with anarchy”’ (p57), whilst the third turns attention to the French Primitivist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, whose ‘ongoing interest in anarchism led him to endorse aestheticised violence as a form of resistance to the punitive force of the state’ (p100).

The final chapter brings the artist-poet relationship once again into the foreground, examining the fascinating relationship between Gaudier-Brzeska and Ezra Pound and their crucial involvement with the Vorticist movement (and its anarchist underpinnings). Antliff outlines how Gaudier-Brzeska ‘played a seminal role in Pound’s conversion to the anarchist cause’ in late 1913 (p138), in the months running up to the epochal release of *Blast* in June 1914. Soon enough, Pound was developing his own ‘anarchist-inflected

vocabulary designed to foreground heterogeneity and celebrate individualism ... [even expressing] that “if I were more interested in form than in anything else I should be a sculptor and not a writer” (pp155-156).

Antliff 's dizzying breadth of material and energy is impressive infectious, and perhaps the only shortfall of the study specifically relates to the sheer amount of historical context and framing, which often leaves the discussion of sculpture itself feeling like background noise. This is particularly true of the early parts of the Gaudier-Brzeska chapter and there is also a lack of engagement with Epstein's remarkable artistic output beyond Wilde's tomb in the first. That being said, the study would certainly not be so effective if not for its expansive scope and engagement with swathes of material which illuminate the ideological environment shaping the artists' output. All in all, this is an exuberant illustrated volume which will enliven the shelves of many a scholar of sculpture and anarchism.

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