

**“There must be a salon of realists...”: Action and Collaboration in  
Edgar Degas’ Avant-gardism**

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In art-historical literature, French nineteenth-century painters Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas are often portrayed as high-bourgeois artists, close in class allegiance and urbanity.<sup>1</sup> However, they were two very different kinds of bourgeois and they went about their art in very different ways. Manet wanted and could afford to remain alone in his heroic struggle for success, promoting himself as a solitary genius, or “temperament,” as Zola called it.<sup>2</sup> Degas, instead, was a bohemian almost all his life, working within the rebellious Parisian culture of solidarity among artists. During the 1860s Degas had to paint friends for free to build up a reputation as a painter. In the post-Commune years up to 1886 Degas was one of the chief organisers of the independent exhibitions held since 1874 by the Impressionists on the boulevard des Italiens. In this paper I will explore the implications of Degas’ engagement in the Impressionist societies and in the collaborative printmaking practised by Degas, Camille Pissarro, Ludovic Lepic, Félix Bracquemond and Mary Cassatt as a tool for their self-fashioning as Northern painters-printmakers in the seditious Montmartre of the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

A familiar image of Degas, “the reactionary of genius” in Benedict Nicolson’s words, suggests either the snobbery of a supposedly aristocratic origin or a grand bourgeois pedigree combined with misogyny, racism and

a general unpleasantness of character.<sup>3</sup> Degas' art, especially his representations of naked and working women, his misogyny, anti-Semitism and cruel *dicta* are made into a consistent story of right-wing conservatism. My intention is not to propose that we should dissociate Degas' art from considerations of his mean spirit and political ideas. I want instead to present the facts of Degas' rather left-wing engagement in collaborative art-making in a specific environment and time in French history, and to propose a view different to the canonical art-historical perspective on Degas the painter and the man. Throughout this paper I will be using terms such as "socialist" and "anarchist-socialist," when referring to Degas' politico-artistic stance in matters of collaborative undertakings. In doing so, I rely on Emmanuel Todd's writing, in which the use of these terms is justified in France since around the mid-nineteenth century. In this context, "socialist" and "anarchist-socialist" do not indicate the consistent doctrine of organised political parties such as we find in the twentieth century. In the second half of the nineteenth century in France the terms "socialist" and "anarchist-socialist" are interchangeable and relate to socialism as a left-wing ideology which was in the process of differentiating itself from nationalism and right-wing ideology along the lines of a sharp polarisation. Around 1848 socialism was an inconsistent and undifferentiated ideology, broadly expressive of Parisian working-class identity. In the years 1880-1914, socialism was still an early, unstructured assemblage of small groups with different tendencies, Marxism and anarcho-syndicalism being the more evident ones. Socialism, however, was quite distinctively characterised by a rejection of bourgeois authority and by a "visceral anarchism," in Todd's words, which place it within the French revolutionary tradition.<sup>4</sup> It is within this political tradition, and not within a right-wing tradition, that I locate Degas' embrace of action and collaboration in his artistic practice.

Unlike Henri Fantin-Latour, who belonged to various associations such as the *Société des Trois*, the *Société du Jing-Lar* and the *Vilains Bonhommes* and painted group portraits of artists and writers linked by affinities, Degas always resisted joining brotherhoods or artists' societies of the romantic type.<sup>5</sup> In 1873 he was instead among the founders of a cooperative of artists, the *Société Anonyme de Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs, etc.*, known as Impressionists. Degas was among the more engaged organisers of their independent exhibitions, which stood for *intransigence* and artistic resistance to the official Parisian art world.<sup>6</sup> Between 1874 and 1886 Degas' modernity and avant-gardism are defined by his collaboration in an artistic and ideological group project of appropriation and re-invention of Parisian space. In this project, Degas' specific task was to round up new members and exhibitors, lead group meetings, and find suitable exhibition ve-

nues. In his notebooks Degas jotted down plans for a rather new sort of group exhibition where each artist would take responsibility for the display of his or her works.

The charter of the *Société Anonyme de Peintres, Sculpteurs, Graveurs, etc.* was drafted by Camille Pissarro on the model of the union charter of the bakers of Pontoise where he lived.<sup>7</sup> Published on 17 January 1874 in *La Chronique des Arts et de la Curiosité*, the charter of the Co-operative Joint Stock Company declared to “have as its object: (1) the organisation of free exhibitions, without a jury or honorary remuneration, where each member can exhibit his work; (2) the sale of the aforesaid works; (3) the publication, as soon as possible, of a journal, exclusively devoted to art.”<sup>8</sup> There was a subversive side to this programme. Firstly, the idea of artists’ self-government was inspired by the 1871 Commune *Fédération des Artistes*. The federation grouped the delegates elected by Parisian artists as spokesmen in the five branches of the arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, lithography and engraving, decorative or industrial arts). Secondly, the charter of the Impressionists, as Gonzalo Sánchez has written, was drawn up with the “crucial assistance” of four former Communards who lived under police watch because of their past in the *Fédération des Artistes*: Alfred Meyer, Edmé Chabert, and the two Léon Ottins, father and son.<sup>9</sup> Ottin père was a sculptor who lived off occasional work on the façade of the Paris Opéra. He was a fighter on the barricades in 1848, and during the Commune of 1871 was a representative of Parisian sculptors in the *Fédération des Artistes*. He was treasurer of the *Société Anonyme*, which also brought the Impressionists to the attention of the police. The other Communards involved with the Impressionists were Meyer, chief artist at the Sèvres porcelain factory, and Chabert, the head of the 149<sup>th</sup> battalion of the National Guards, which had been famously arrested *en masse* during a fighting on the Parisian barricades. A member of the Communist International, Chabert was under police surveillance for involvement in artists’ unionism. When the *Société Anonyme* was dissolved in December 1874 and discussions began over the future of the independent exhibitors, these Communards insisted that the venture should not be considered only as a convenient one-off group show or market outlet, but the expression of a more politically engaged corporation. Meyer, Chabert and Pissarro all supported the creation of a *société coopérative*. The resulting Union Artistique, which organised the 1876 Impressionist show, evoked “a syndicalist rather than a commercial or even aesthetic standpoint.”<sup>10</sup> There was a struggle for survival among Parisian artists, but the Commune spirit lived through the Impressionists’ effort to get rid of “the old tutelage of the state over artists” so they could “associate in groups that would better represent

individuals in view of exhibitions and sales.”<sup>11</sup> In the assignment of the tasks among the organisers of the 1874 independent exhibition, Edmond Renoir, Auguste's brother, was appointed to prepare the catalogue and Degas was appointed to take care of the recruitment of the exhibitors, ensuring that even more conservative artists be admitted to join and exhibit.<sup>12</sup> This is a critical point: artists of different backgrounds were invited to exhibit and accepted into the group (provided they were Realists, that is).

In March 1874 Degas wrote to Félix Bracquemond congratulating him on joining the society. He invited him to submit works and to go and see the premises on the boulevard des Capucines. In the same letter Degas commented on Fantin-Latour and Manet's choice to stay out of the society: “We are getting an excellent recruit in you. Be assured of the pleasure you give and the good you are doing us. (Manet, egged on by Fantin and crazy himself continues to refuse, but nothing seems definite yet from this side).”<sup>13</sup> With the language of combat, Degas addresses Bracquemond as a “recruit.” We also have Degas' letters to Berthe Morisot advising her to send pictures to the show and personally supervise the hanging of them.<sup>14</sup> One of Degas' letters to James Tissot, written just prior to the exhibition of 1874, is worth extensive quotation. Here, Degas begged Tissot, who had fled to London after the Commune, to join the society:

Look here, my dear Tissot, no hesitations, no escape. You positively must exhibit at the Boulevard. It will do you good, you (for it is a means of showing yourself in Paris from which people said you were running away) and us too. Manet seems determined to keep aloof, he may well regret it. Yesterday I saw the arrangement of the premises, the hangings and the effect in daylight. It is as good as anywhere. And now Henner (elected to the second rank of the jury) wants to exhibit with us. I am getting really worked up and am running the thing with energy and, I think, a certain success. The newspapers are beginning to allow more than just the bare advertisement and though not yet daring to devote a whole column to it, seem anxious to be a little more expansive.

The realist movement no longer needs to fight with the others, it already *is*, it *exists*, it must show itself as *something distinct*, there must be a *salon of realists*. Manet does not understand that. I definitely think he is more vain than intelligent.

So exhibit anything you like. [...] So forget the money side for a moment. Exhibit. Be of your country and with your friends. The affair, I promise you, is progressing better and has a bigger reception than I ever thought possible.

Asking Tissot to try to convince Alphonse Legros, also in London, to join in, Degas closed with the following: "The general feeling is that it is a good, fair thing, done simply, almost boldly."<sup>15</sup> It is hard to reconcile the image of Degas as a conservative bourgeois with his actual social contacts and his politically suspect comradely artistic activities in the 1870s. These activities were part and parcel of the turmoil following the Franco-Prussian war and the birth of the Third Republic, diabolical times that the construction of the Sacré-Coeur attempted to exorcise. The basilica on the hill of Montmartre fulfilled a counter-revolutionary national vow.<sup>16</sup>

The point of the Impressionist exhibitions of 1874-1886 was to create unsupervised self-regulated spaces for group shows in which artists could choose what to exhibit and how. These venues have been described by Martha Ward as private spaces and as studied installations: total works of art re-creating the conditions of a modern home interior, or small salon or artist's studio. These were intended as intimate environments that could both lead to a deeper understanding of each artist and "cultivate conditions appropriate to the appreciation of small easel paintings." Ward emphasises the private aspect of the Impressionist initiatives, but I believe the Impressionist exhibitions on Haussmann's boulevards were a group retreat, a withdrawal from hidebound practices. In the most theatrical of all urban settings, the materialisation of French official visual culture, the Impressionists' group retreats aimed to create not so much private spaces as alternative spaces for the expression of a group identity without sacrificing artistic individuality. These were environments in which the artists sought to achieve a political ideal of many parts contributing to effect a total harmony. The first exhibition of the *Société Anonyme* in 1874 took place in the former atelier of the photographer Nadar at 35 boulevard des Capucines. A large staircase led to a series of large rooms where 165 works were displayed, hung in two rows, with the largest works at the upper level. The walls of the venue were as Nadar had left them, covered with brown linen, which, as Ward writes, "marked a departure from the red of the official walls of the Salon and Universal Exhibitions."<sup>17</sup> Draperies were hung, as we know from the critic Philippe Burty, who also noted that the venue had the appearance of a private gallery or of an apartment. In a later review, Burty wrote that the artists' intention had been "to present their paintings almost under the same conditions as in a studio, that is in good light, isolated from one another, in smaller numbers than in official exhibitions, which are like docks of painting and sculpture, without the neighbourhood of other works either too bright or too dull."<sup>18</sup> For their second exhibition, in the spring of 1876, the Impressionists used Durand Ruel's gallery in the rue Le Peletier.<sup>19</sup> Between 1879 and 1881 the Independents' shows were all held in apart-

ments. In 1881, it was the first floor of an unfinished building on the boulevard des Capucines, five small rooms connected by corridors. They were furnished with Algerian settees and rocking chairs. But they had low ceilings and were so poorly lit that gaslight was necessary even for day viewing. Spectators had to stoop to view the works, a way of forcing the critics, in Jules Claretie's words, "to go on their knees in front of the artworks."<sup>20</sup> In reviewing the show, Claretie used an appropriate military metaphor, describing the *Indépendants* as a "small battalion of scouts loudly blowing their trumpets" who had to "lodge themselves as they could."<sup>21</sup> In 1877 the *Indépendants* rented a first-floor apartment of five rooms overlooking the boulevard des Italiens. In their self-regulated spaces for group shows, various artistic devices were introduced by the Impressionists to signify modernity. In 1877 Pissarro was the first to use flat white frames, because they did not cast shadows on the painted surface and they enhanced colours without disturbing the inner harmony of the pieces.<sup>22</sup> By integrating frame and canvas into a single object, which in turn harmonised with the exhibition room itself, an installation was created. This installation was a total work of art as well as the vision of a better world. Monet, Sisley, Pissarro and Degas began to design their own frames and to collaborate with picture-framers to create original frames. This had been done already in the 1860s by William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites, for whom creative labour expressed in interior design the integrality of art and beauty to life itself.<sup>23</sup> It is often forgotten that Degas also pursued this socialist craftsman ideal. Whistler, who in the 1870s painted both canvas and frame to signal the unity of the art object, claimed to have introduced these English ideas about committed handiwork and the integrality of art and life to the French painters of the avant-garde. The latter held that they were cultivating the same tendencies around the same time.<sup>24</sup> Manet, however, always favoured golden frames, as did art dealers such as Durand-Ruel and Georges Petit, who wanted to recreate in their galleries and impose on exhibiting artists showing there the Salon look. Meanwhile, Degas was designing his own frames, sketches of which are in his notebooks, and working with picture-framers such as Cluzel to fashion them to his own aesthetic standards.<sup>25</sup> These standards were clearly pursued by Degas in line with certain social and political values.

Another novel practice adopted by the Impressionists was the use of matt-ness. Preference was accorded to such techniques as gouache, pastel, distemper or *peinture à l'essence* and to such materials as absorbent canvas priming or un-primed coloured paper. To this was added the use of glass plates over the artworks, preferred over the academically prescribed glossy varnish. In an article of 1994, Anthea Callen examined what she

aply calls the “politics of varnishing” in painting in 1870-1907.<sup>26</sup> To varnish or not to varnish was an aesthetic choice that carried ideological messages. It was academic practice to varnish artworks to confer a glossy and artificial aspect and build relief through the opposition of light and shade. The avant-garde painters adopted instead the “strong light, brilliant, opaque colour and matt finishes” which were cultural metaphors for originality, modernity and above all for a primitivism associated with early Italian art.<sup>27</sup> This primitivism, Callen writes, can be explicitly linked to urban modernity while being “a reaction to the city” and to “to civilisation’s decadent oversophistication and inauthenticity.”<sup>28</sup> At the eighth and last exhibition of the *Indépendants*, which took place in May-June 1886, Degas exhibited 15 works, all pastels.<sup>29</sup> According to Martha Ward the Impressionist shows “went further than any other ventures of the Impressionist group in subordinating the autonomy of the work and the individuality of the artist to the harmonies of a private environment.”<sup>30</sup> For Ward, however, the Impressionist shows remain “tentative,” “awkward and strange assemblages” pervaded by internal tensions. This was due to the reluctance on the part of some of the artists to define their paintings “in the terms of the decorative and non-discursive modes of the domestic interior.”<sup>31</sup> But I believe the Impressionist endeavour was successful, insofar as, for Degas and his fellow artists, the challenge of the Impressionist installations was twofold: firstly, one of striking a balance, through cooperation, between individualism and common concerns of the artists involved; and secondly, one of defining and asserting an identity as non-conformist and independent artists determined to create new exhibition spaces in the city.

As we have seen, the Impressionists’ embrace of the Commune legacy is a key element in the political ideas behind Degas’ engagement in the collective shows of 1874-1886. Likewise art historians justly make much of the way Pissarro’s politico-artistic reputation was influenced by unionism radicalising into anarchism. And in 1870-71 Manet shared Degas’ republican views and support for the Communards, but the two parted ways when the Impressionist ventures surfaced. Manet took the solitary way, Degas the collective one, both with the Impressionists and in the printmaking initiatives pursued in the late 1870s with Pissarro, Mary Cassatt, Ludovic Lepic and others. And yet, the social and socialist side of Degas is little noted in the literature, some of which thrives on misinterpretations of such psycho-biographical commonplaces as the meanness of Degas, who remains for most writers a stale bourgeois, shy and reserved in opposition to Manet, these days hailed as the glamorous father of modernity.

After the end of the Commune, Degas became very close to Ludovic

Lepic. We see him in many of Degas' paintings of the 1870s, posing at times with his children and dogs and in racecourse canvases. Lepic also figures in the second version of *The Ballet of 'Robert le Diable'* of 1876, where he is sitting in the stalls. An etcher and painter in the Dutch and Flemish seventeenth-century tradition, Lepic specialised in landscape and sea painting as well as dog portraiture. He sought to portray in his art the atmospheric effects of flat landscapes dotted with such motifs as ice-skaters, or seascapes with canals, windmills, fishing craft and sailboats.<sup>32</sup> Although not generally remembered today as an avant-garde artist, to Lepic belongs the critical role of introducing Degas to the monotype in their collaborative and experimental printmaking. In a double portrait by Degas (Fig. 1), Lepic and Marcellin Desboutin are shown etching together. Desboutin is holding a metal plate and a burin, watched by Lepic with a dog sitting at his feet. On a table we see a rag, one of the weapons, Lepic wrote, that modern artists could use to renew the art of etching.



Fig. 1 Edgar Degas, Portrait of the engravers Lepic and Desboutin, 1876, oil on canvas, cm 71 x 81, Musée d'Orsay, Paris (© Musée d'Orsay, Dist. RMN/Patrice Schmidt). Printed with permission.

Around 1874 Degas and Lepic produced in partnership a monotype, signed by both artists.<sup>33</sup> In *The Ballet Master* (Fig. 2) a dancer on tiptoes is

watched over by her ballet master, leaning on his cane, the subject matter suggestive and meaningful in the collaborative context of learning and sharing of techniques in which Degas and Lepic worked around 1874-75: Degas' ballerina is the modern artist who works and learns under the eye of the master. *The Ballet Master* was Degas' first monotype, a variation on the "eau-forte mobile," a technique which Lepic claimed to have invented in *Comment je devins graveur à l'eau forte. Petite lettre à un ami*. The essay was in the form of a letter to a friend and was included in Raoul de Saint Arroman's *La Gravure à l'eau-forte*, published by Cadart in 1876. In it Lepic declared that he tried by means of experiment to attain the supreme painterly quality of the prints by Rembrandt, the master of printmaking for the modern *peintres-graveurs*.<sup>34</sup> In his book, Saint-Arroman introduced Lepic as the author of the "eau-forte mobile," a technique praised for its spontaneity and immediacy. As described by Saint-Arroman, Lepic's method in the eau-forte mobile was first to obtain a print, and then take the metal plate again, beginning "the work of mobilization," that is, the artist would play freely with his "weapons," the ink and the rag, in order to pull a new, different impression, this also a unique print.<sup>35</sup> Experiment was the rule for Lepic and etching the freest and most independent of all the arts, insofar as the painter-engravers executed and pulled their own unique prints, as Rembrandt did.<sup>36</sup> In the variation of monotype that Degas learnt from Lepic, a smooth plate was inked and the artist used a cloth to draw or vary the quantity and distribution of the greasy ink. The artist could play freely with the desired subtle tones or the stark contrasts of black and white, the "night and day," an allusion to *Le Jour et la Nuit*, the name for a magazine which Degas was planning to publish with, among others, Camille Pissarro and Mary Cassatt. In the monotype, the artist could obtain a print that had the quality of drawing and whose creation or production could be controlled at will by the artist, unlike drawing with a pencil.<sup>37</sup> The artist did not want to produce mechanically a series of prints. With the monotype, the printing process was applied to the production of a single, original print, a unique work of art, which could sometimes be followed by a weaker second or third print on which the artist could work with other media, such as pastel, in the case of Degas. The aim of the artist was to differentiate the art of printing "from the anonymity of industry." As Antonia Lant has written, "it became necessary for artists entirely to dissociate their hand-produced etchings from reproductive engravings and mechanically produced prints."<sup>38</sup> Unconventional media and practices were adopted and justified by the artists' priority: to produce a unique print with painterly qualities.



Fig. 2 Edgar Degas and Ludovic Lepic, *The Ballet Master*, 1874 ca, monotype heightened with white chalk or wash, plate: 56.5 x 70 cm; sheet: 62 x 85 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection 1964.8.1782 (© National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC). Printed with permission.

In this crossing of the boundaries between painting, drawing and printmaking, Degas, Lepic, Pissarro and Cassatt felt free to break accepted rules and practices in a purely “exploratory” and “experimental activity.”<sup>39</sup> In their printmaking, they were also self-fashioning as painter-printmakers through their revival of a collaborative practice that had been common in the Netherlands during the Golden Age.<sup>40</sup> More specifically, they were entering the tradition of the painter-etcher. Michael Cole describes this tradition as the historical phenomenon signalling “the move of painters into one specific variety of print-making,” etching, that is.<sup>41</sup> In 1803, Adam von Bartsch had defined the painter-etchers as those painters who, among the *peintres-graveurs*, conceived and executed their own etchings. They were accorded a special status both for the immediacy and the rarity of their works. The tradition was not accepted uncritically by artists in different historical ages. Bartsch accorded painter-etchers a special status among painter-printmakers. Rembrandt, a life-long etcher, was for Bartsch the ideal *peintre-graveur*, for the rarity and individuality of his etchings. But as Cole and Snyder clarify, most painters who took up etching, from Parmigianino and Dürer to Goya, did so only experimentally and for limited periods, led by a desire to emulate other artists who had done the same. Collaboration is inherent in printmaking, but it does not necessarily characterise painter-etching. Painter-etchers made a point of expressing stylistic originality in

their etchings and also chose their own subject matter.<sup>42</sup>

What drew Degas, Pissarro, Lepic, Cassatt and Desboutin to collaborative art? It was the freedom that allowed each of them to pursue artistic individuality within the group framework. Collaboration strengthened their endurance in a Paris overflowing with artists. Edgar Degas advocated working with other artists in search of new techniques. He was close to Félix Bracquemond, a *peintre-graveur* who had been at the forefront of engravers' enterprises of the 1860s such as the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* and the *Société des Aquafortistes* (1862).<sup>43</sup> But Degas also admired and praised the work of Marie Bracquemond, Félix's wife, who painted on tiles. In 1872 Bracquemond was appointed artistic director of Haviland & Co., producers of Limoges porcelain and ceramics. Haviland & Co. had just opened a workshop at Auteuil. In the mid-1870s, through Bracquemond, Degas and Pissarro were able to use the workshop where they experimented with painting on ceramics and fan mounting. Combining experimental implements and media with Parisian themes, Degas produced fans and a painting on tile showing a café-concert singer, as well as a small dinner set, featuring dancers and horses. According to Richard Thomson, who has studied Degas' painting on tile, the artist's interest in applied arts, printmaking and illustration were attempts at "moneymaking initiatives."<sup>44</sup> Degas' worsened financial situation after 1874 resulted in the artist's "new willingness to operate lower down the artistic hierarchy," consistently with what Pissarro was doing at the same time. For Thomson, Degas and Pissarro's experiments with ceramics and illustration were "attempts to reach a wider market," and Degas quickly dropped this "amateurish dabbling in media to which he was unaccustomed" because this "was only a passing fad for the ever-experimental Degas."<sup>45</sup> But while artists struggling to survive would try to reach wider markets, I would argue that Degas did not drop his dabbling in new media because they were a passing fad for him, but because such was required of the ever-experimental painter-etcher. For the modern French painter-etchers, "etching was again and again an invitation to try something new."<sup>46</sup> The rule of experimentalism also underlines the fact that Degas worked within the Communard/revolutionary state of mind, which claimed for the industrial or applied arts a status equivalent to that of the fine arts. Moreover, just as Pissarro was "preoccupied with eliminating pictorial hierarchies," as Michel Melot has written, so was Degas.<sup>47</sup>

Around 1879-80, as we know from one of his notebooks, Degas conceived with Pissarro, Bracquemond and Mary Cassatt the idea of a print magazine called *Le Jour et la Nuit*.<sup>48</sup> The project responded to one of the missions that the artists had given to themselves as a group, that of issuing

a periodical.<sup>49</sup> Degas now owned a press and let his friends use it, or he would print their engraved plates himself, as with Pissarro's. This latter fact, in Joachim Pissarro's words, "certainly constitutes a climactic example of pictorial exchange and close collaborative research." With the prints for *Le Jour et la Nuit*, Degas and Pissarro aimed at breaking with the traditional conception of printmaking. They aimed at subverting "the conventional procedure in which each state of print was conceived as a step toward the fabrication of a properly finished and static last state." Working on a series of prints, they regarded and presented "each separate state of a print as interesting in its own right and, at the same time, mutually enriching to the other states." This involved the numbering and signing of each state of the print.<sup>50</sup> Recalling the dynamic relationship between the identity of each artist and cohesive group action, the prints belonged in a series, but were also originals in themselves. For the themes, Degas had in mind subjects such as dancers and "all kinds of common objects, so arranged and contextualised that they have the life of men and women—corsets just taken off, for example, which retain the form of the body etc. etc." Degas also thought of executing a series "on instruments and instrumentalists, their forms, the contortion of the violinist's hands and arms and neck, for example. Puffing and contracting of the cheeks of the bassoons, oboes etc." He thought of a series "on mourning in aquatint (different blacks, black veils of deep mourning floating over the face, black gloves, funeral carriages, undertakers' outfits, carriages like Venetian gondolas)," on smoke, evening subjects, on bread and bakers. As he noted in his notebook, he was also inspired by "monuments or houses seen from low down, from beneath, close to as one sees them in passing on the streets."<sup>51</sup>

Nothing came of the project for *Le Jour et la Nuit*, but it remains relevant in two respects. First, the project points to the proliferation of periodicals denoting the Parisian modernity that we identify as the political and cultural space of *fin-de-siècle* anarchy. This was that extraordinary cultural space in which "all freedoms are accorded," the "crucible of all audacity," as Christophe Charle defined it.<sup>52</sup> The second relevant aspect of the project for *Le Jour et la Nuit* is that it reveals Degas' socialism through the artist's notebooks and letters to Pissarro and Bracquemond of 1879-1880. Socialism here is intended not so much as a consistent political faith but as Degas' deep personal concern with bringing to life a collective project, as well as with sharing his press with Pissarro and searching for advertisement strategies and "capitalists," as Degas defined them, who would sponsor the magazine—such as Gustave Caillebotte and Ernest May.<sup>53</sup> Degas, Caillebotte and Manet have often been grouped together as the high bourgeois among the Parisian artists of the avant-garde—by Robert Herbert, for in-

stance.<sup>54</sup> But it is worth recalling that, despite Degas' conventional reputation as a high bourgeois like Manet and Caillebotte, in fact Degas differentiated himself from both of them. Degas described Caillebotte as a "capitalist" and called Manet a "bourgeois." An echo of Degas' populism reaches us in Caillebotte's complaint, in a letter to Pissarro of January 1881, that Degas spent too much time "holding forth at the Nouvelle Athènes" and not enough working in his studio.<sup>55</sup>

The issues of collective work and experiment are woven together with Degas' art in the choice of his techniques and themes. Degas practised such print techniques as monotypes, etching and lithography, which were discussed as *intransigent* practice by Henri Béraudi in 1886.<sup>56</sup> Degas also used his prints as a support for pastel, gouache and distemper. In the matteness of these media, which he often combined, Degas sought the primitivism that in avant-garde artistic discourse meant originality. It was not just a matter of representing life, or even modern life, but a certain type of modern life. In times of Moral Order such as those of the Third Republic until 1878, Degas' cabaret scenes, nudes, brothels, bathers and dancers were all constituents of a subversive idea of ninth-arrondissement Parisian-ness which combined pleasure and crime, to paraphrase Louis Chevalier's history of *Montmartre du plaisir et du crime* (1980). The association of certain printing techniques, themes and compositional devices in Degas' artworks of the late 1870s-80s cannot be separated from a consideration of how they were encouraged by Degas' *Japonisme*. The monotypes were for Degas, in Lant's words, "a research tool with which he could experiment with the new language from Japan."<sup>57</sup> The adoption of such formats as the frieze-like, and of such compositional devices as the diagonal views, the asymmetric and the grid-like layout, provided Degas with a "primitive" artistic language for what Gustave Geffroy defined as "the conquest of the universe."<sup>58</sup> At the same time, the subjects of the Ukiyo-e prints (scenes of ordinary life, feminine occupations such as toilette and laundering, of theatre and of horses, characteristic of the art of Japan of the Edo period) offered a connection with the depiction of Degas' own floating world, Montmartre.<sup>59</sup> This "taking refuge," as Jean-Paul Bouillon has defined it, in other artistic styles to depict Parisian modernity and convey subversive meanings should be approached, as Bouillon suggests, through a "political ethnography" which would unveil the *détournements* to which subversive meanings are subjected.<sup>60</sup> For Degas' Montmartre themes, it was not just *Japonisme* that provided effective *détournements* in subject matter, but also the realism of Northern European tradition as seen, for example, in Dürer's bathhouses, or in Dutch genre scenes. As Françoise Nora has noted, Degas' scenes of naked women waking up or going to bed and wearing only their

bonnet are truly Dutch examples of genre.<sup>61</sup>

The café-concert was one of Degas' favoured amusements. According to his brother René, visiting Paris from New Orleans in 1872, the painter, now living in the rue Blanche, took him to see the "memorable" places of the siege of Paris and the *café-chantants* on the Champs Elysées, to listen to "idiotic songs, like the song of the bricklayer's mate and other absurd nonsense."<sup>62</sup>

Around 1877 Degas executed a series of monotypes featuring brothel scenes. As Henri Loyrette has written, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Parisian brothel was "a kind of club," whose attendance did not necessarily imply the search for sexual services. It could be an unpretentious place where habitual customers would meet, have a drink and chat with the girls or with the *Madame*, whom everybody respected. For Loyrette, in his brothel monotypes, Degas described the brothel he frequented himself, with images of a carefree and "good-hearted prostitution." Degas' brothel scenes are neither an attack on this kind of establishment nor a pamphlet on the misery and exploitation of women. They are a "masculine fantasy," the dream of a private and warm feminine universe, full of naked and vulgar but good-hearted girls.<sup>63</sup> Lant has read the brothel scenes mainly from a technical point of view. For her, the brothel is linked by affinity with the "ambiguous shifting monotype medium," an affinity in which the medium is "a direct equivalent for the parts of nature selected for depiction—the equal sign in the equation between reality and representation, unobtrusive."<sup>64</sup>

Degas' café-concerts, brothels, bathers and dancers were all, like Pissarro's rural workers and marginal types, the proto-anarchist constituents of a mythography of subversive Parisian-ness, a unique ninth-arrondissement combination of pleasure and crime, the *monde artiste* and peculiar backdrop of the *fin-de-siècle* sociability and low life so well defined by Louis Chevalier.<sup>65</sup> In this environment, one to which the Third Republic was quite hostile, I see Degas' endorsement of action and collaboration in the 1870-80s as the painter's belief in social force paired with individualism. Degas and Pissarro shared the same political ideals beneath their common practices, and Degas' aesthetics was as sociopolitical and proto-anarchist as Pissarro's, a stance which goes quite against Manet's straightforwardly liberal way.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See for instance, from a recent study of the friendship between Manet and Degas: "The two young painters soon discovered they were kindred spirits. Both were Paris-born and educated, well-off, cultured and sophisticated"; and "Manet inspired Degas to abandon his early historical paintings and paint scenes of contemporary life. Like Manet, Degas painted figures in the studio rather than outdoors." Jeffrey Meyers, "Degas and Manet. A Study in Friendship," *Apollo* (February 2005), 56-63. For Roy McMullen, Degas and Manet, both studio painters, "were also united by their upper-class backgrounds, their respect for the old masters, their indulgence in irony, their delight in the passing Second Empire show, and their love of flânerie." However, while they admired each other's work, Degas was envious of Manet's "natural charisma" while Manet was irritated by Degas' "brilliant artificiality": Roy McMullen, *Degas. His Life, Times and Works* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1984), 156.
- <sup>2</sup> Emile Zola, "Mon Salon: le moment artistique," *Le Bon Combat. De Courbet aux Impressionnistes* (Paris: Hermann, 1974), 60-4.
- <sup>3</sup> See: Benedict Nicolson, "The Anarchism of Camille Pissarro," *The Arts* 2 (1946), 43-51 and "Degas as a Human Being," *The Burlington Magazine* 723 (June 1963), 239-41; or Roy McMullen's description of Degas as "a banker's son" and "man-about-town he would be throughout his life," "an opera enthusiast, a first-nighter at the theatre," and "a little angel of proper social adjustment and cultural conformism": McMullen, *Degas*, 41 and 47.
- <sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Todd, *L'Invention de l'Europe* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1990), 218-9.
- <sup>5</sup> See for Henri Fantin-Latour: Douglas Druick and Michel Hoog, *Fantin-Latour* (Paris: RMN and Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1983); Jean-Paul Bouillon, "«A Gauche » : Notes sur la Société du Jing-Lar et sa signification", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (March 1978), 107-18. On nineteenth-century models of bourgeois sociability and especially on the *cercle* as the self-managed form of social interaction and liberal practice reflecting the modern "collectivization of life": Maurice Agulhon, *Le cercle dans la France bourgeoise 1818-1848* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1977). Also see Laura Morowitz and William Vaughan, eds., *Artistic Brotherhoods in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot, Hants, UK and Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate, 2000).
- <sup>6</sup> For a general history of Impressionism see: Lionello Venturi, *La via dell'Impressionismo* (Torino: Einaudi, 1970); John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1961); Robert L. Herbert, *Impressionism. Art Leisure and Parisian Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988); Ruth Berson, ed., *The New Painting: Impressionism, 1874-1886. Documentation* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1996).
- <sup>7</sup> See for Camille Pissarro: John Rewald, ed., *Letters to Lucien* (New York: Pantheon Books Inc., 1943); Janine Bailly-Herzberg, ed., *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980; Adolphe Tabarant, *Pis-*

sarro (Paris: Rieder, 1924); Christopher Lloyd, ed., *Studies on Camille Pissarro* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986); Richard Thomson, *Camille Pissarro. Impressionism, Landscape and Rural Labour* (London: Herbert Press, 1990); Joachim Pissarro, *Camille Pissarro* (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1993); John G. Hutton, *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground. Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana and London: University of Louisiana Press, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Translated in English in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger, *Art in Theory, 1815-1900. An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 570-1.

<sup>9</sup> Gonzalo J. Sánchez, *Organizing Independence. The Artists' Federation of the Paris Commune and its Legacy* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 106.

<sup>10</sup> Sánchez, *Organizing Independence*, 139-41.

<sup>11</sup> Sánchez, *Organizing Independence*, 141-7.

<sup>12</sup> See Georges Rivière, *Renoir et ses amis* (Paris: H Floury Editeur, 1921), 43-4.

<sup>13</sup> When it became clear that Manet would not join the Société, preferring to exhibit at the Salon, Degas did no longer think that Manet's presence was necessary to the cause of the Société: see his letter to Tissot, written just prior to the exhibition of 1874, in Edgar Degas, *Letters*, trans Marguerite Kay (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer Publishers Ltd., 1947), 38-9.

<sup>14</sup> Berthe Morisot, *The Correspondence of Berthe Morisot* (London: Camden Press, 1986), 110.

<sup>15</sup> Degas, *Letters*, 38-9.

<sup>16</sup> See on the Sacré- Coeur: André Roussard, *Dictionnaire des lieux à Montmartre* (Paris: Roussard Editeur, 2001), 303-5.

<sup>17</sup> Martha Ward, "Impressionist Installations and Private Exhibitions," *The Art Bulletin* 4 (December 1991), 599-622.

<sup>18</sup> See Philippe Burty's article "Exposition de la Société Anonyme des Artistes" from *La République Française* of 25 April 1874 and Castagnary's article, "L'exposition du boulevard des Capucines," from *Le Siècle* of 29 April 1874, reprinted in *Centenaire de l'Impressionnisme* (Paris : RMN and New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974), 261-2 and 264-65. Also see Charles Moffett, ed., *The New Painting. Impressionism 1874-1886* (Geneva: Richard Burton SA, Publishers, 1986), 118-23.

<sup>19</sup> The nineteen exhibitors included Caillebotte, Lepic, Levert, de Nittis, Béliard, Lerros, Cals, Millet, Sisley, Monet, Tillot, Morisot, Ottin, Desboutin, Pissarro, Bureau, Renoir, Morisot, François, Rouart. The 22 or 24 works by Edgar Degas hung at the end of the show, in the third room. Also see Degas' Notebook 26, in Theodore Reff, ed., *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas. A Catalogue of the Thirty-Eight Notebooks in the Bibliothèque Nationale and Other Collections* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) I, 123-6.

- <sup>20</sup> Quoted in Oscar Reutersvärd, "1881: la Sixième Exposition des Impressionnistes dite des Artistes Indépendants vue par la presse et l'opinion", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (November 1979), 183-92. All translations from the French are mine.
- <sup>21</sup> Quoted in Oscar Reutersvärd, "1881: la Sixième Exposition des Impressionnistes dite des Artistes Indépendants vue par la presse et l'opinion", *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (November 1979), 183-92. All translations from the French are mine.
- <sup>22</sup> See Felix Fénéon, "Les cadres", and "L'impressionnisme aux Tuileries", in *Œuvres plus que Complètes* (Paris : Gallimard, 1970) I, 411 and 56.
- <sup>23</sup> See on this: Christopher Menz, *Morris & Company: Pre-Raphaelites and the Arts & Crafts Movement*, (Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 1994); Diane Waggoner, ed., *'The Beauty of Life': William Morris and the Art of Design* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003).
- <sup>24</sup> See Alastair Grieve, "The Applied Art of D.G. Rossetti. I: his Picture Frames," *The Burlington Magazine* 839 (1973) 79-84; Horowitz, "Whistler's Frames," *Art Journal* 2 (1979-1980) 130 and Isabelle Cahn, *Cadres de peintres* (Paris: RMN, 1989), 63-4.
- <sup>25</sup> Cahn, *Cadres*, 10-13 and 25-31. On Degas' attitude towards framing his own artworks also see: Ambroise Vollard, *En écoutant Cézanne, Degas, Renoir* (Paris: Grasset, 1995), 118-21
- <sup>26</sup> Anthea Callen, "The Unvarnished Truth: Mattness, 'Primitivism' and Modernity in French Painting, c. 1870-1907," *The Burlington Magazine* 1100 (1994), 738-46.
- <sup>27</sup> Anthea Callen, "The Unvarnished Truth: Mattness, 'Primitivism' and Modernity in French Painting, c. 1870-1907," 738-46.
- <sup>28</sup> Anthea Callen, "The Unvarnished Truth: Mattness, 'Primitivism' and Modernity in French Painting, c. 1870-1907," 738-46.
- <sup>29</sup> Held at a five-room apartment on the second floor at 1 rue Laffitte. Prior to the exhibition there was much internal debate over the presence in the show of Pissarro's son Lucien and friends Paul Signac and Georges Seurat. Degas was in favour of their presence in the show. They were finally admitted to participate in the show and exhibit together in the last room. Other artists showing were Odilon Redon, Gauguin and his friend Schuffenecker. Alfred Stevens made fun of the neo-impressionist horrors that Degas had admitted to be exhibited: Paul Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix aux néo-impressionnisme* (Paris: Hermann, 1964), 148.
- <sup>30</sup> Ward, "Impressionist Installations."
- <sup>31</sup> Ward, "Impressionist Installations."
- <sup>32</sup> See Jacques Lethève and Françoise Gardey, *Inventaire du Fonds Français* (Paris : Bibliothèque Nationale, 1967), tome XIV, 59-67. For seventeenth-century landscape painting in the Low Countries see: John Walsh, Jr and Cynthia P. Schneider, *A Mirror of Nature. Dutch Paintings from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Edward William Carter* (Los Angeles and New York: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1981). For sea painting: F. B. Cockett, *Early Sea Painters, 1660-1730* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 1995).
- <sup>33</sup> See on Degas' monotypes and on the collaboration between Lepic and Degas:

- Eugenia Parry Janis, "The Role of the Monotype in the Working Method of Degas—" *The Burlington Magazine* 766 (1967), 20-9.
- <sup>34</sup> Raoul de Saint-Arroman, *La Gravure à l'eau-forte* (Paris: Veuve Cadart Editeur-Imprimeur, 1876), 48.
- <sup>35</sup> Saint-Arroman, *Gravure*, 79-80. All translations from the French are mine.
- <sup>36</sup> Comte Lepic, *Comment je devins graveur à l'eau forte. Petite lettre à un ami*, in Saint-Arroman, *Gravure*, 113-4. All translations from the French are mine.
- <sup>37</sup> As Eugenia Parry Janis has written, Degas found that the monotype was "an essential, liberating, initial procedure" in which he could draw without a pencil. Having "rid himself of line" but not abandoned it, the artist could concentrate on composing. According to Janis, Degas took up the monotype because it prolonged "the flexible unfinished stage of the sketch" and "retained the suggestiveness of sketches that Degas' own preparatory drawings lacked." Janis, "Role of Monotype."
- <sup>38</sup> Antonia Lant, "Purpose and Practice in French Avant-garde Printmaking of the 1880s," *Oxford Art Journal* 6 (1983) 18-29. Also see Michel Melot, "Camille Pissarro in 1880," *Marxist Perspectives* 2 (1979-1980), 22-54.
- <sup>39</sup> Antonia Lant, "Purpose and Practice in French Avant-garde Printmaking of the 1880s," *Oxford Art Journal* 6 (1983) 18-29. Also see Michel Melot, "Camille Pissarro in 1880," *Marxist Perspectives* 2 (1979-1980), 22-54.
- <sup>40</sup> Collaboration between artists, each contributing according to his specialisation, with the aim to produce a single artwork "is virtually synonymous with painting in the Low Countries in the years before 1700," as Anne Woollett writes in the catalogue to a recent exhibition of the works executed in collaboration by Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder between 1598 and 1625: Anne T. Woollett and Ariane van Suchtelen, *Rubens & Bruegel. A Working Friendship* (Zwolle: Waanders Publications, 2006), 3.
- <sup>41</sup> Michael Cole, ed., *The Early Modern Painter-Etcher* (University Park, Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 2
- <sup>42</sup> Michael Cole and Larry Silver, "Fluid Boundaries: Formations of the Painter-Etcher," Cole, ed., *Painter-Etcher*, 5-36. For the status of Rembrandt in the nineteenth century and particularly in France, see: Alison McQueen, *The Rise of the Cult of Rembrandt. Reinventing an Old Master in Nineteenth-Century France* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003).
- <sup>43</sup> See Jean-Paul Bouillon, "«A gauche»: Notes sur la Société du Jing-Lar et sa signification," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (March 1978) 107-18 and "Bracquemond : Le Jour et la Nuit," in *Degas inédit* (Paris : La Documentation Française, 1989), 251-9
- <sup>44</sup> Richard Thomson, "Degas' Only Known Painting on Tile," *The Burlington Magazine* (March 1988), 222-5.
- <sup>45</sup> Also see Sue Welsh Reed and Barbara Stern Shapiro, *Degas: the Painter as Printmaker* (Boston: Little, Broen and Co., 1984) xliii and Richard Thomson, "Degas' Only Known Painting on Tile," *The Burlington Magazine* (March 1988), 222-5.

- <sup>46</sup> Cole and Silver, "Fluid Boundaries," 5-36.
- <sup>47</sup> Melot, "Pissarro in 1880." Also see Michel Melot, "A rebel's Role: Concerning the Prints of Camille Pissarro," in Lloyd, *Pissarro*, 117-22.
- <sup>48</sup> See Notebook 30 in Reff, *Notebooks*.
- <sup>49</sup> For a detailed discussion of *Le Jour et la Nuit* see Douglas Druick and Peter Zegers, "Degas and the Printed Image, 1856-1914," in Reed and Shapiro, *Painter as Printmaker*, xxxix-li.
- <sup>50</sup> Joachim Pissarro, *Camille Pissarro*, 107-9.
- <sup>51</sup> See Notebook 30 in Reff, *Notebooks* I, 196.
- <sup>52</sup> Christophe Charle, *Paris Fin-de-Siècle. Culture et politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1998) 12-13. All translations from the French are mine.
- <sup>53</sup> Degas, *Letters* 50-9.
- <sup>54</sup> Robert L. Herbert, *Impressionism. Art Leisure and Parisian Society* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).
- <sup>55</sup> Marie Berhaut, *Caillebotte, l'Impressionniste* (Lausanne: International Art Book, 1968) 245.
- <sup>56</sup> Quoted in Reed and Shapiro, *Painter as Printmaker*, xxxix-li.
- <sup>57</sup> Lant, "Purpose and Practice" 18-39.
- <sup>58</sup> As Geffroy wrote, "the fragments of Japanese art, which arrived here in printed loose sheets, were precious indications. Everywhere, for those who can see there are at crossroads signs, arrows, pointed fingers that show the way. The limpid aspect, the luminous clarity of Japanese prints, the composition of landscapes, the representation of humanity were a significant achievement for those who sought to enlarge spaces and a new and truer vision of things. It is a stage in the conquest of the universe, a link-up not only with the Japanese, but with the whole of the Far East—as Duranty remarked—with the Hindus, the Persians, the Chinese." Gustave Geffroy, *Claude Monet. Sa vie, son temps, son œuvre* (Paris: Crès et Cie, 1922) 81. The translation is mine.
- <sup>59</sup> For the topic of Japonisme in nineteenth-century France see Gabriel Weisberg et al, *Japonisme. Japanese Influence on French Art 1854-1910* (Cleveland: The Cleveland Museum of Art, The Rutgers University Art Gallery and the Walters Art Gallery, 1975) and Siegfried Wichmann, *Japonisme. The Japanese Influence on Western Art since 1858* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1999). Degas collected Japanese prints through Tadamas Hayashi, a business-man and collector whom he met through Philippe Burty. In 1878 Burty arranged an after-dinner demonstration of Japanese painting for the guests at his house. Degas was among those who watched the painter Watanabe Seitei in action. Seitei, accompanied by Hayashi, also gave a demonstration of fan painting. On this occasion, Degas learnt the staining, dripping and blurring techniques that he would apply in the painting of his fans: Jules and Edmond de Goncourt, *Journal* (Monaco: Robert Ricatte, 1956); Michael Schapiro, "Degas and the Siamese Twins of the Café-Concert L'Alcazar," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 28 (April 1980), 161-4; Britta Martensen-Larsen, "Degas'

*The Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer. An Element of Japonisme,* *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* (September 1988) 107-14; Jill DeVonyar and Richard Kendall, *Degas and the Art of Japan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> Bouillon, "«A Gauche », " 107-18.

<sup>61</sup> See Françoise Nora, "Degas et les maisons closes," *L'Oeil* 219 (1973), 26-31.

<sup>62</sup> Letter quoted in Marilyn R. Brown, "The Degas-Musson Papers at Tulane University," *The Art Bulletin* (March 1990), 118-30. The translation from the French is mine.

<sup>63</sup> Henri Loyrette, *Degas* (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 353-7. All translations from the French are mine.

<sup>64</sup> Lant, "Purpose and Practice," 18-29. Françoise Nora had made the same association between the monotype medium, a technique which she defines "by definition ambiguous, indirect and unique at once" in its being a print and a drawing at the same time, and the subject matter, which for her accounts for the peculiar and secret relationship between Degas and the feminine world. Degas, Nora writes, had the private life of a "misanthropist bourgeois" and "confirmed bachelor" but she does not see in the brothel scenes the cruelty and refusal in Degas' look that other critics had attributed to the artist: Nora, "Maisons Closes," 26-31.

<sup>65</sup> See Louis Chevalier, *Montmartre du plaisir et du crime* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1980) 73-4 and 75-9, as well as *Les ruines de Subure. Montmartre de 1939 aux années 80* (Paris: Editions Robert Laffont, 1985), 105. On Pissarro's proto-anarchism see Melot, "Pissarro in 1880."