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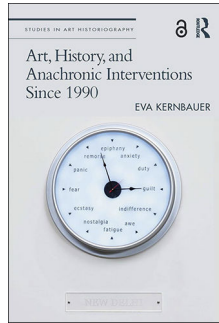
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# EVA KERNBAUER, *ART, HISTORY, AND ANACHRONIC INTERVENTIONS SINCE 1990*

Studies in Art Historiography, New York: Routledge 2022, 260 pages with 53 color ill., eISBN 978-1-003-16641-2 ([open access](#)).



Reviewed by  
Mehmet Berkay Sülek

Eva Kernbauer's book *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since the 1990s* is not the first study that identified contemporary artists' growing interest in intervening in the past and creating counter-narratives in the present. As she also acknowledges, Mark Godfrey and Dieter Roelstraete touched upon this growing tendency among contemporary artists in the 2000s.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the promise of Kernbauer's book is not to put forward a new turn in artistic practices but rather to dissect a supposedly homogeneous turn among contemporary artists and demonstrate how different artistic approaches and distinct understandings of the past and present coexist in contemporary practices, highlighting the heterogeneous nature of them. In other words, Kernbauer's book aims to explore the multiplicity of artists' interests and the kinds of relationships these artworks establish with history. In this regard, she raises several important issues that emerge from what she calls artistic historiography, such as counterfactual history, the juridification of

<sup>1</sup> See Mark Godfrey, The Artist as a Historian, in: *October* 120, 2007, 140–172; Dieter Roelstraete, Field Notes, in: id. (ed.), *The Way of the Shovel. On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art*, Chicago 2014, 14–48.

history, and anachronic and anachronistic concepts of time. She demonstrates what kinds of relationships are formed between art and history. To do so, she analyses the works of a large number of artists: Andrei Ujica and Harun Farocki (Chapter 2), Tacita Dean and Erika Tan (Chapter 3), Walid Raad, Matthew Buckingham, and Dierk Schmidt (Chapter 4), Amar Kanwar, Omar Fast, and Zarina Bhimji (Chapter 5), Wendelien van Oldenborgh and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Chapter 6), Michael Blum and Yael Bartana (Chapter 7), Andrea Geyer and Hiwa K (Chapter 8), and Deimantas Narkevičius and Kader Attia (Chapter 9). She states that this growing interest in history arises from a historiographical crisis and the failures of nation-state discourse, building on Dieter Roelstraete's argumentation. This, as we will see, will become a focal point in Kernbauer's argumentation regarding the significance of these artistic practices, which she dubbed as "artistic historiography".

Although the book's title suggests that this is a book that fosters anachronistic ways of thinking about history, that is not the case. The promise of this study is much more significant. In this regard, Kernbauer writes: "Anachronic thought, therefore, is not ahistorical but is a prerequisite of historical thinking, as it enables us to perceive the historical potential of ideas, events, and actions" (p. 8). At this point, Kernbauer turns back to an unexpected name, Johann Gustav Droysen, who was an influential historian in the nineteenth century and, most importantly, a defiant critic of Rankean positivism. She claims that Droysen developed a transhistorical, anachronic, and subjectivist understanding of history, opening the way to the "poetological turn" which accommodates scholars such as Roland Barthes, Arthur Danto, and Hayden White. In this regard, she stresses the importance of Droysen's concept of *apodeixis* (representation) which emerges from Droysen's four-step methodology, the others being heuristics, criticism, and interpretation. According to Kernbauer, Droysen's understanding of *apodeixis* brings the question of research and representation together, in which the question of search turns into an active transformation of the past and its presentation. Thus, the reasoning behind Kernbauer's evocation of Droysen becomes clear in terms of anachrony, since for her, anachrony equates with thinking historically in the present, which comes to life through the subjectivity of the spectator. In this regard, the three main ways in which contemporary practices produce anachrony are quite telling: "formal device (nonlinear narration, including reversals and entanglements of different temporal layers); as a conceptual strategy for positioning the self within history; and as a phenomenon linked to subjective historical experience" (p. 10). However, the ways in which Kernbauer places subjectivity at the centre of artistic historiography raise a question about the absence of a particular concept: memory.

The word "memory" rarely appears in her book, and she lays out the reasoning behind her approach in the introduction. Kernbauer does not directly critique the overemphasis on memory in recent years, but she refers to Peter Osborne's critique and builds

her implicit scepticism about memory from there. She underlines the key points of Osborne's critique of memory studies, but it becomes clear that Osborne was not fully aware of the new directions of memory studies at the time he was penning his critique. One of the main criticisms of Osborne, it seems, is that memory studies foster fixed identities that stem from nation-state discourse. While this was certainly true until the early 2000s, memory studies has shifted in the last two decades. There have been serious attempts to rupture the nation-state discourse in memory studies and foster a transnational or transcultural understanding of collective memory, in which the ideas of "traveling memory" or "multidirectional memory" become prominent new directions for a scholarship to come.<sup>2</sup> More recently, the linear understanding of memory has also come under scrutiny in interdisciplinary memory studies.<sup>3</sup> If I have any reservations about Kernbauer's book, it would be its implicit rejection of the notion of memory.

Even though the book is structured around case studies and the questions that these case studies put forward, there is a grandiose idea that lies beneath this study, and this should be addressed very clearly. As soon as I came across Kernbauer's work, I could not help but wonder: why does this book belong to Routledge's *Studies in Art Historiography* series? The book seems to be largely concerned with case studies, and the book certainly comprises a close analysis of these case studies. Although this approach is necessary for the overall goals of this study, it paradoxically overshadows the main argument as well. Kernbauer's ambition to recall Droysen's *apodeixis* and place it in conversation with artistic practices since the 1990s almost, if not completely, disappears during her meticulous analysis of these works. The firm theoretical grounding of the first two chapters evaporates when the reader moves to the subsequent chapters. This includes her main argument as well: contemporary artistic practices are able to produce historiographical imaginations. But then the question becomes: don't art historians always seek to understand artworks historically and as a symptom of the spirit of the age? This is the twist in Kernbauer's approach; here, artworks rupture and disorient history rather than complementing it and becoming heuristic tools for the recognition of the spirit of the age. She underlines how this will of thinking historically in the present sits at the centre of these artistic practices, which are continuously reshaped by the spectators' encounter with them. In this regard, she states, following in Walter Benjamin's footsteps: "Each meaning is provisional; each present views history differently. History means taking events out of the stream of time, out of respective inter-

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See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory. Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, CA 2009; Astrid Erl, 'Travelling Memory', in: *Parallax* 17/4, 2011, 4–18.

3

Marije Hristova, Francisco Ferrándiz, and Johanna Vollmeyer, 'Memory Worlds. Reframing Time and the Past', in: *Memory Studies* 13/5, 2020, 777–791.

pretations, categories, and disciplines into which they have been incorporated” (p. 43). There is no doubt that this position is one she shares with Georges Didi-Huberman, whose approach can be seen as an important influence on this book. In a similar vein, Didi-Huberman wrote: “The eyes of history, therefore, reveal something of the space and time that they see. This implies re-spatializing and re-temporalizing our way of looking.”<sup>4</sup> For Kernbauer, too, the eyes of history require rethinking the space and time that we encounter through artworks. This equation is undoubtedly fulfilled with the presence of the spectator, which twists the question to the performative and the presentation rather than mere representation.

Kernbauer does not directly refer to the question of spectatorship, but questions regarding the presence of the spectator and their encounter with artworks appear multiple times, as one would expect. One of the most apparent indicators of Kernbauer’s emphasis on the role of the spectator is when she highlights how Andrea Geyer opens her video installation *Criminal Case 40/61: Reverb* (2009) in which Hannah Arendt’s argument on spectatorship is paraphrased as “Nothing and nobody exists in this world without a spectator” (p. 175). For Kernbauer, the artworks that she discusses only become legible and complete with the presence of the spectator.

Kernbauer’s emphasis on the question of presence is quite telling with regard to her scholarly position as well. Matthew Rampley has stated that German *Bildwissenschaft* and Anglo-American visual studies are distinct from each other. The former is concerned with presence and questions such as memory and vision, whereas the latter is more engaged with the question of representation and the entanglements of artworks with socio-political issues.<sup>5</sup> However, this does not mean that *Bildwissenschaft* or visual studies completely disregard either of these issues entirely; rather, it is a question of emphasis. Kernbauer, too, does not dismiss socio-political issues. Her approach to “artistic historiography” is brazenly political, while her scholarly position is inherently tied to *Bildwissenschaft* as she shifts the focus from representation to presentation. In this regard, she cites Juliane Rebentisch, who claimed that contemporary art’s potential lies in its ability to present to us historically.<sup>6</sup> Later, while discussing the Atlas Group’s *Missing Lebanese Wars* (1996–2002), she writes:

<sup>4</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Eye of History. When Images Take Positions*, Cambridge, MA 2018, xxvi.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Rampley, Introduction, in: id., Thierry Lenain, Hubert Locher, Andrea Pinotti, Charlotte Schoell-Glass and C. J. M. (Kitty) Zijlmans (eds.), *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe. Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, Leiden/Boston 2012, 1–13, here 6.

<sup>6</sup> Juliane Rebentisch, The Contemporaneity of Contemporary Art, in: *New German Critique* 124, 2015, 223–237, here 229.

The camera generates the actual (media) event: the winning photo that, in the collages, is presented as evidence of the best bet. This approach to the events “expost” is remarkable. From a psychoanalytic (and cultural-theoretical) point of view, it describes a perspective of “retrospectives” or “afterwardness” (Nachträglichkeit is the Freudian term) that leads to a permanent reassessment of history from the perspective of the present, and thus to a temporal deferral that arises from the distance between events and the processing of them (p. 93).

The term “afterwardness” that Kernbauer uses here is central to understanding how she interprets these artworks. She sees them not as remnants of the past as it was, but rather as reconstructions of the narratives of the past in the present. Thus, she understands artworks as active agents that carry fractured glimpses of the past into the present, rather than intact but passive pieces of the past that art historians could carefully break down to understand each component. Behind this understanding is a strong rejection of the positivistic understanding of history that Leopold von Ranke established in the nineteenth century. According to positivist historians, the past could be retrieved as it was; the past remains fixed and static for Rankean history. In contrast, Kernbauer acknowledges the living presence of the past, which is continuously reshaped by the present. While discussing the works of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Wendelien van Oldenborgh, she emphasizes the underlying will of thinking historically of these practices in the present. This will, for Kernbauer, essentially signals the heterochronic and anachronic nature of history.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, she writes, “Anachronism’ is, as we have seen, the property (or potential) of artworks to unite several contradictory temporalities and thus to disorder (art-) historical categories” (p. 200). This idea takes us back to the introduction of the book, where Kernbauer quotes Hayden White’s extremely influential article, *The Burden of History*, published in 1966. White states, “We require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot.”<sup>8</sup> While the purpose of the epigraph is clear regarding Kernbauer’s interest in anachrony and heterochrony, its true purpose and how it is vital to Kernbauer’s objectives need a little explanation.

While White’s text addresses historians and their crises and struggles, the way in which he builds his arguments makes it relevant for Kernbauer and “artistic historiography” as well. White ded-

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In this regard, Kernbauer’s study is certainly aligned with studies by Jacob Lund and Christine Ross. See Christine Ross, *The Past Is the Present; It’s the Future Too. The Temporal Turn in Contemporary Art*, London/New York 2012; Jacob Lund, *The Changing Constitution of the Present. Essays on the Work of Art in Times of Contemporaneity*, London 2022.

8

Hayden White, *The Burden of History*, in: *History and Theory* 5/2, 1966, 111–134, here 134.

icates a significant portion of his text to a discussion of the growing dislike of history among writers at the turn of the twentieth century, providing a wide array of examples, and underlining their dismay of history. Concurrently, historians struggled to establish themselves in an academia surrounded by the ideals of objectivity and science. White argued that historians attempted to navigate between science and art, claiming to incorporate aspects of both, but in reality, they failed to do so. For White, the solution to the burden of history was adopting a new conception of the world in which the established dynamics between past and present are transgressed. Such form of historical thinking, White argued, would abandon the idea of a single correct view and understand that there are multiple correct views which require unique styles of representation.<sup>9</sup>

This is precisely what Kernbauer stands for as well. What she calls “artistic historiography” brings together ways of looking at the world from both artistic practices and history, in which many different meanings are constructed and reconstructed in the present through the encounters produced by practices of artistic historiography. Most importantly, she discusses series of questions that emerge from producing alternative ways of thinking about history through artistic practices. In this endeavour, Kernbauer is not the only one putting forward the two key ideas that drive her study. First, there seems to be a growing number of historians who fundamentally question their discipline and seek solutions elsewhere. White’s last work was concerned with the potential of art to evoke the narratives of the past.<sup>10</sup> Second, Kernbauer could be seen as one of a growing number of scholars such as Hans Belting, Horst Bredekamp and Caroline van Eck who raised the question of the agency of images and their power.<sup>11</sup> Seen together, Kernbauer’s work puts forward an important historiographical claim: there is no end to history in the spaces that these practices create, and the anachrony that they foster is a prerequisite for such spaces, but only if the living presence of these artworks, their power to move us, are acknowledged. This requires a defiant re-thinking of how scholars interpret artworks which Kernbauer presents with her theorization of “artistic historiography”.

9

Ibid., 111–134.

10

Id., *The Practical Past*, Evanston, IL 2014. In recent years, Australian historians raised the question of creativity in history and the role of creative prose in history. For this, see Kiera Lindsey, Mariko Smith, Anna Clark, Craig Batty, Donna Brien and Rachel Landers, ‘Creative Histories’ and the Australian Context, in: *History Australia* 19/2, 2022, 325–346.

11

Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images. Picture, Medium, Body*, Princeton, NJ 2011; Horst Bredekamp, *Image Acts. A Systematic Approach to Visual Agency*, Berlin 2018; Caroline van Eck, *Art, Agency, and Living Presence. From the Animated Object to Excessive Object*, Berlin 2015.