

Art that explores history

Reconceptualizing contemporary art's historicity in the global framework

Birgit Hopfener

Review of:

Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990*, New York City: Routledge, 2022. 260 pp., 53 colour ills, ISBN 9780367763251, [Open Access](#), hbk £120.00

How to write history and enact political agency in our disjunctive, hetero-temporal global present, after the postmodern end of history and art,¹ in the wake of the ecological catastrophe in which conventional concepts of history, historiography and time are at stake, if not at loss?

Based on thorough analyses of historical and contemporary discourses of how art has been understood as contributing to historiography and philosophies of history, Eva Kernbauer's book *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990* argues that contemporary artistic historiographies can potentially help us to reconceptualize historiography and to rethink contemporary art's historicity. Contemporary historiographic artworks presented in the book engage with the hetero-temporal global present. They offer new conceptual approaches to history writing and art historical methodology, (re-)create historical consciousness and open up new spaces of political agency necessary to re-imagine the future on hopeful terms.²

Kernbauer argues that the works she discusses in her book have social and political impact, because they not only offer counter narratives, but challenge conceptions of history and their related experiences of time.

The author builds on and expands historiographic art discourses.³ The 'historiographic turn' in contemporary art, as it has been proclaimed by art historian

¹ See Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987 and Arthur C. Danto, 'The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense', in *History and Theory*, 37: 4, 1998, 127–43.

² Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990*, Routledge, 2022, 7.

³ Kernbauer's definition of artistic historiography, see Kernbauer, 1.

Dieter Roelstraete in 2009,⁴ has often been explained as a response to shifting geopolitical structures, the acceleration of globalization and the victory of capitalism after the Cold War ended in 1989. Informed by post-colonial thinking and responding to the crisis of historicist national historiography⁵ artists have been deconstructing, intervening and rewriting histories to shed light on forgotten and suppressed histories as a way to counter colonial Eurocentric master narratives and their co-evalness denying governing structures. Artistic historiographies have also been read as strategies to counter global capitalism's interest in a universal and homogenized contemporaneity—the necessary precondition for smooth exchanges and movements of commodities—by offering temporal depth and historical complexity against acceleration, presentism and forgetfulness.⁶ Contemporary historiographical artworks

Publications on contemporary historiographic art are for example, Anthony Gardner, 'Which Histories Matter?', *Third Text*, 23: 5, 2009, 605-615. Anthony Gardner, 'Spectres after Marx: Contemporary Art's Contiguous Histories', *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 10: 1, 2011, 201-212. Julia Gelshorn, 'Autorschaft und Autorität – Schreibt Kunst Geschichte?', in *Legitimationen, Künstlerinnen und Künstler als Autoritäten der Gegenwartskunst* (Volume 5 of *Kunstgeschichten der Gegenwart*), Julia Gelshorn eds, Berlin: Peter Lang, 2004, 9-18. Mark Godfrey, 'The artist as historian', *October*, 120, Spring, 2007, 140-172. Susanne Roelstraete Leeb, 'Flucht nach nicht ganz vorn. Geschichte in der Kunst der Gegenwart', *Texte zur Kunst*, 76, 2009, 29-45. June Yap, *Retrospective: A Historiographic Aesthetic in Contemporary Singapore and Malaysia*, London: Lexington Books, 2016. Birgit Hopfener, 'Mapping Art History, Relational and Ongoing', in *Qiu Zhijie. Geography of Knowledge: Maps 2010-2019*, Milan: Skira Editore, 2020. Birgit Hopfener, "'What is art? What is the future?'" Li Ran's Art-Historiographic Artworks as Case Studies for a Historiographical-Translational Approach to Global Art History', in *History and Art History: Looking Past Disciplines*, edited by Mitchell Frank and Nicholas Chare, Milton: Taylor and Francis, 2020. Birgit Hopfener, 'Tradition and Transmission. Examining and Shifting Epistemological and (Art-)historical Grounds of Contemporary Art's Relation to the Past', in *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 6:2+3, 2019, 187-206. Birgit Hopfener, 'Tradition and Transmission. Examining and Shifting Epistemological and (Art-)historical Grounds of Contemporary Art's Relation to the Past', *Journal of Contemporary Chinese Art*, 6:2+3, 2019, 187-206. Birgit Hopfener, 'Qiu Zhijie as historian. Media critique as a mode of critical historical research', *World Art*, special issue edited by Yuko Kikuchi, 5: 1, Spring 2015, 39-61

⁴ Dieter Roelstraete, 'The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art', in *e-flux Journal*, 4, March 2009. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/>.

⁵ For the crisis of historiography, see David Joselit, *Heritage and Debt: Art in Globalization*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2020 and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

⁶ Dieter Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art*, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art in association with The University of Chicago Press, 2013. According to Shuddhabrata Sengupta (member of RAQS Media Collective) it is precisely because of the neoliberal naiveté of connection/relation making that we need more temporal depth, since it is only by uncovering the plural layers of contemporaneity that global capitalism's universalizing power is exposed and invalidated. See Raqs Media Collective,

have been dominantly perceived as critical tools that have the potential of political activation, yet not always. Artists who engaged in writing micro-histories or adopted outdated technology, such as for example slide projectors, have been criticized as apolitical, as being stuck in nostalgia, and as being co-opted by the neoliberal premise of universal relationality, transforming historical research into cultural and economic capital, furthering the commodification of history, and showing no interest in critically engaging with the present and in imagining the future otherwise.⁷

Eva Kernbauer introduces artistic historiographies from the 1990s to today and offers invaluable new insights into 'art that explores history'⁸ by unpacking the 'complex relationship between art and history'⁹ as negotiated today *and* in historical perspective since the 19th century when (art) history first became a scholarly discipline in Europe/German speaking academe. The author is professor of modern and contemporary art at the University of Applied Arts Vienna. *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990* is the latest publication of her long-term research on history and historicity of contemporary art,¹⁰ artistic conceptions of political agency, historical and contemporary conceptions of the art public, and her work on exhibitions, collections and art criticism in the 18th century.

Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990 weaves together an impressive interdisciplinary array of historical and contemporary discourses, covering art history and theory, culture theory, intellectual history, and philosophy of history, and convincingly grounds theoretical considerations in close analyses of artworks and socio-political contextualizations.

The book, which is available open access through the publishers' website,¹¹ comprises four parts. The introduction offers an impressively complex theoretical conceptualization of critical artistic historiography and contemporary art's historicity in the context of our disjunctive unity of global contemporaneity through a combination of contemporary art theory, art philosophy and post-colonial theory. Arguing that it is necessary to 'historicise the historiographical ethos itself in contemporary art and

Monica Narula, Jeebesh Bagchi, and Shuddhabrata Sengupta, *Raqs Media Collective: Seepage*, New York: Sternberg Press, 2010.

⁷ Roelstraete, *The Way of the Shovel*. Kernbauer also talks about this, Kernbauer, 5-7.

⁸ Kernbauer, 1.

⁹ Kernbauer, 1.

¹⁰ Earlier publications by Eva Kernbauer about the historicity of contemporary are among others in the edited volume *Kunstgeschichtlichkeit: Historizität und Anachronie in der Gegenwartskunst*, Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015 and the essay 'Anachronic Concepts, Art Historical Containers and Historiographical Practices in Contemporary Art', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 16: 16, 2017, 16-EK1.

¹¹ Eva Kernbauer, *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990*, <https://www.routledge.com/Art-History-and-Anachronic-Interventions-Since-1990/Kernbauer/p/book/9780367763251#sup>.

current conceptions of historicity of contemporary art¹² chapter one provides a convincing yet provocative critical historical perspective, that engages in re-reading and by so doing complicating intellectual history of European conceptualizations of history and its relationship to art since the early 19th century when history and art history were first acknowledged as scientific disciplines. It provides fresh insights into different concepts of historical and artistic representations of the past, reality respectively, which help us to better understand historiographical problems that are discussed in contemporary critical artistic historiographies. The third part of the book is comprised of seven thematically arranged chapters which offer in-depth analyses of social and discursive contexts and of artistic forms, media, aesthetic strategies that the over 20 artists¹³ introduced in the book, adopted to represent, narrate and explore history. The publication ends with a reflection on how to write and re-conceptualize history and historiographical agency in the age of the Anthropocene.

Kernbauer's book is an important intervention into (artistic) historiography and global art history methodology. The selected artworks are not only about uncovering previously unknown histories and archives, or analysing conditions and constraints of history writing, but as Kernbauer argues, they offer theoretical reflections on history, history writing and time.¹⁴ The historiographical narratives and imaginations articulated through the artworks she argues, offer 'new concepts of how we experience time—or, more precisely, how past, present, and future relate to one another.'¹⁵ They 'reflect certain historiographical problems and theories; their value as artistic contributions to historiography (their 'historiographical ethos', so to speak); and their potential to address history in a broader global context.'¹⁶ Her rigorous analyses of how historiographic artworks critically engage various pasts, histories, and social contexts, aesthetic forms, media, methods and modes of historical representation are presented as evidence of artistic historiographies' diverse nature¹⁷ and conceived as invitations to rethink historiography as anachronic, as a temporally unstable and multi-referential meaning-making method for our heterogenous present.

Kernbauer's reading and conceptualization of artistic historiographies in this regard continues the post-colonial critique of universalized Eurocentric frameworks of art and history, yet also goes beyond it. As a scholar of contemporary and modern art history, who is well read in European intellectual history since 1800, Kernbauer

¹² Kernbauer, 3.

¹³ 23 artists whose artworks included in the book are Kader Attia, Yael Bartana, Zarina Bhimji, Michael Blum, Matthew Buckingham, Tacita Dean, Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujica, Omer Fast, Andrea Geyer, Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno, Hiwa K, Amar Kanwar, Bouchra Khalili, Deimantas Narkevičius, Wendelien van Oldenborgh, Walid Raad, Dierk Schmidt, Erika Tan, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul.

¹⁴ Kernbauer, 21.

¹⁵ Kernbauer, 1.

¹⁶ Kernbauer, 3.

¹⁷ Kernbauer, 27.

identifies the colonial and racist legacies of European Enlightenment thinking and continues the post-colonial critique of historicist history writing. However, at the same time she asks us to consider how careful 'critical reexaminations of European intellectual history, particularly of Enlightenment discourses on the categories of history and politics—especially concepts of subjectivity, of agency, of time',¹⁸—whose plural complexity are often not attended to when simply referred to as 'the West', provide new insights into contemporary critical historiographic art, its historicity, its claim for criticality and historiographical and political agency, and its interest in anachrony as a historiographical concept.

Kernbauer's conceptualization of artistic historiography as critical and politically activating art is based upon an understanding of contemporary art as entangled with social reality and history. In other words, contemporary art is continuously shaped and re-shaped through specific social realities and the writing and re-writing of history and vice versa. It is in this regard that artistic historiographies in Kernbauer's book are conceived not as containers of history,¹⁹ as static representations or witnesses²⁰ of an assumed objectively true past that can be retrieved but as active agents that explore and rewrite the past continuously.²¹ "Exploring the past means continuously creating it anew. Historical events—when they become the subject of representations—are not 'over'; they are instead situated in a historicised "now.""²² It is in this regard that Kernbauer refers to the philosopher Juliane Rebentisch, who has been contributing to recent theorizations of contemporary art's historicity: 'The full normative sense of the term contemporary art consists in the fact that it is meant to make our historical present to us.'²³ This historical present, that means our historically constituted global contemporaneity is, as Kernbauer lays it out in the introduction, shared yet temporally, spatially and geo-politically disjunctive at the same time. Emphasizing the importance to attend to specific social and political contexts Kernbauer discursively frames this contemporary condition by combining philosophical discourses on contemporaneity with socio-politically grounded post-colonial theory. With regards to the former she refers to philosophers Peter Osborne, who conceptualizes contemporaneity as a 'disjunctive unity of present times',²⁴ and Giorgio Agamben, who argues to understand heterochrony as the foundation of our shared contemporaneity in the global present.²⁵ According to Agamben 'contemporaneity means living in and outside of one's time simultaneously, which

¹⁸ Kernbauer, 203.

¹⁹ Kernbauer refers to Damisch, Kernbauer, 9.

²⁰ Kernbauer, 97.

²¹ Kernbauer on agency of artistic historiography, Kernbauer, 5.

²² Kernbauer, 1.

²³ Rebentisch quoted by Kernbauer, Kernbauer, 13.

²⁴ Kernbauer refers to Osborne, Kernbauer, 14.

²⁵ Kernbauer refers to Agamben, 14.

opens up one's own present to the conjunctive: to the potentialities and contingencies of the present as well as to the limits of fully understanding it.'²⁶

Post-colonial approaches to the disjunctive unity of contemporaneity, in Kernbauer's book represented by Dipesh Chakrabarty's call to provincialize modern Western frameworks, are about shedding light on the multiplicity of conceptions of time in their respective social, political and historical contexts, bringing the question to the fore of how, according to what power structures different conceptions and ideas relate to, and interrelate with each other in a shared present of a post-colonial word order.²⁷

Accordingly, critical artistic historiographies in Kernbauer's view critically enact and productively make use of contemporaneity's heterogeneous historicity creating historical awareness and opening new spaces of historiographical and political agency in the awareness of geo-political power structures.

Artistic and academic historiography in Kernbauer's view should be conceived as entangled and intersecting and not as separated realms, since art, artistic historiography and academic historiography are all part of the same social, political, and media realities²⁸ and also 'share the same the same truth politics.'²⁹ It is against this background that Kernbauer conceives of artistic and academic historiography as equal and complementary approaches that critically comment on each other.³⁰

Kernbauer examines artistic historiographies in their various social and (geo-)political contexts of production and reception. She shows how the adoption of artistic media, forms and strategies has to be understood in specific historical and discursive contexts, and how art history in order to be able to grasp this complexity of contemporary art in the global context has to come up with new multi-layered and relational historiographical, theoretical and aesthetic frameworks.

Emphasizing the importance to productively engage with contemporaneity's temporal and spatial heterogeneity as a way to regain agency in the wake of Anthropocene's dystopian perspectives,³¹ Kernbauer rejects modernist concepts of history, that were conceptualized as unified projects along modern western time

²⁶ Kernbauer refers to Agamben, 13.

²⁷ Kernbauer, 17-18.

²⁸ Kernbauer, 2.

²⁹ Kernbauer, 19.

³⁰ Neither is academic historiography considered higher nor is artistic historiography regarded as naturally more critical or political.

³¹ Anachrony as critique of historicism and capitalist history writing and dystopian, no future. '...catastrophic perspectives of inevitability, and to capitalist discourses of lack of alternatives.', Kernbauer, 12-13.

regime,³² rooted in progress and teleology, as unsuitable and outdated.³³ She also dismisses the temporal regime of capitalism, according to which heterochronies disrupt smooth exchanges of commodities, capitalist progress, expansion and growth respectively.³⁴ Re-thinking and re-activating history and historiography 'as an emancipatory project, a project of hope for the future'³⁵ Kernbauer argues cannot be accomplished through future-oriented teleology or utopias anymore, but through activating experiences of the heterogeneous present: 'Historical experience is an experience in and of the present – an experience of the nonidentical temporality that renders the present open to change.'³⁶ The artistic historiographies in her book Kernbauer argues are evidence of and critical engagements with today's heterotemporal present.

As announced in the title *Art, History, and Anachronic Interventions Since 1990*, the selected works adopt various strategies and forms of anachrony to critique and intervene in conventionalized uni-linear chronological narratives, articulating and inviting experiences of nonidentical temporality in our shared yet heterogeneously situated historical now.³⁷

Referring to philosopher Jacques Rancière,³⁸ Kernbauer conceives of anachrony as a useful historiographical concept that has the potential to create new models of history writing, to enable new experiences of time, and to re-activate historiographical, meaning-making and political agency through destabilizations of naturalized temporal frameworks. Anachrony, in contrast to 'anachronism', a term used pejoratively to describe that something is not positioned correctly within a stable temporal order, a chronological sequence mostly, highlights the activating potential when things or events don't fit and don't abide to time categories and temporal orders that are conventionally ascribed to them.³⁹ Kernbauer writes: 'According to Rancière, describing an event as "anachronistic" aims not only at correcting a wrong chronological dating but at subjecting history to a "regime of probability" that immunises it against that which was not supposed to have been possible. When events are perceived as not appropriate to "their" time, they remain meaningless curiosities or unheard prophecies.

³² Assmann Aleida and Sarah Clift, *Is Time out of Joint?: On the Rise and Fall of the Modern Time Regime*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020.

³³ Kernbauer, 7.

³⁴ Kernbauer, 7.

³⁵ Kernbauer, 6.

³⁶ Kernbauer, 7.

³⁷ Kernbauer makes clear that employing anachronies alone does not necessarily entail a critical or political-emancipatory attitude.

³⁸ Kernbauer, 8.

³⁹ Kernbauer explains how Rancière following Jacques Derrida, conceived of 'anachrony' (the potentiality of events that do not fit into the time categories ascribed to them) in opposition to 'anachronism' (the mispositioning of an event within a stable temporal sequence). See Kernbauer, 7.

This understanding of “anachronism” contrasts with that of “anachrony,” the latter being the productive temporal discrepancy of an action, an event, a thought, or a subject with its assigned position in achronological order. Anachrony makes history (when it is understood as a characteristic of an event) and historiography (when it is understood as a component of historical thought) possible.⁴⁰ Because history is narrated and thus constructed ‘history is figurally anachronistic even if literally chronological.’⁴¹ Writing history anachronically means being open to continuously making new, temporally unstable connections, that embrace and invite experiences of nonidentical temporality and nonidentical meaning making/signification as the only way to grasp and enact agency in our shared yet heterogeneously situated historical now.⁴² As Kernbauer writes: ‘There is no anachronism. But there are modes of connection that in a positive sense we can call anachronies: events, ideas, significations that are contrary to time, that make meaning circulate in a way that escapes any contemporaneity, any identity of time with ‘itself.’⁴³

In her conceptualization of artistic historiography as anachronic interventions Kernbauer also refers to historical and recent art historical and philosophical discourses invested in anachrony as a mode to challenge conventional chronological representations of history and art by scholars such as Aby Warburg (1866-1929) , Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), Hubert Damisch (1928-2017), Georges Didi-Huberman, Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, and Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey.⁴⁴ Artworks, Kernbauer argues, referring to arguments made by the scholars just mentioned and particularly by Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood in their ground-breaking book *Anachronic Renaissance* (2010) that takes Rancière’s concept of anachronism as its starting point, ‘have a particular capacity to illustrate—and moreover to activate—anachronies.’⁴⁵ Opposed to conventional, chronologically governed art history which argues that art objects only attain their ‘legitimate’ meaning when placed in their correct temporal container, period respectively, an anachronic practice of art history writing invested in continuously making new connections acknowledges that artworks are in fact temporally unstable and mobile because they

⁴⁰ Kernbauer, 7.

⁴¹ Kernbauer, 8.

⁴² Kernbauer, 21.

⁴³ Kernbauer, 8.

⁴⁴ Kernbauer, 8. Books mentioned in the text are Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s History of Art*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017. Walter Benjamin and Tiedemann Rolf, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999. Hubert Damisch, *The Judgment of Paris*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, New York: Zone Books, 2010. Keith Moxey and Dan Karlholm, *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology and Anachrony*, Taylor and Francis, 2018.

⁴⁵ Kernbauer, 8.

are produced and received in multiple contexts and by/through various agents.⁴⁶ Kernbauer writes: 'Just as chronological time has yielded its own figurations (clocks, calendars, annals, and timelines), art breeds its own formations of history: repetitions, regressions, distensions, duplications, folds, and bends—and, above all, alongside these formations, the ability to balance incompatible models of temporality.'⁴⁷

This 'ability of art to develop its own time',⁴⁸ and 'to balance incompatible models of temporality' according to Kernbauer, is particularly characteristic of contemporary art. In contrast to modernist art's inherent commitment to a particular now, to a specific *zeitgeist*,⁴⁹ contemporary art cannot be grasped by such temporal framework rooted in a chronological logic and, as I would add, any kind of unified framework of constituting status and meaning of art. Kernbauer writes: 'For in contrast to the "*Il faut être de son temps*" of modernism, the "contemporaneity" of contemporary art is an anachronic fiction: it does not denote the consonance of art and *zeitgeist* but instead has a distinctly disjunctive note.'⁵⁰

Being aware that in the wake of the 'digital turn chronological concepts of time have in fact become endangered species', Kernbauer points out that 'employing anachronies alone does not necessarily entail a critical or political-emancipatory attitude.'⁵¹ It is against that background that Kernbauer identifies artistic works as critical, when they not only adopt anachronic strategies, but critically engage with 'analytically specific methods, forms, and contexts of artistic anachrony (rather than indiscriminately embracing all its uses)' as a way to make history anachronically.⁵² Kernbauer argues that the works she discusses in her book have social and political impact, because they are 'destabilizing not only prevailing narratives but conceptions of history related to specific concepts and experiences of time.'⁵³ The artworks are committed to, make structural change by offering new temporal experiences, which according to Agamben, who refers to Walter Benjamin, is the necessary precondition for revolution. As Agamben writes: 'Every conception of history is invariably accompanied by a certain experience of time which is implicit in it, conditions it, and

⁴⁶ Kernbauer, 8.

Keith Moxey and Avinoam Shalem on intersectional art history in Jas Elsner's book on art history and comparativism, see Jas Elsner, *Comparativism in Art History*, London: Routledge, 2017.

⁴⁷ Kernbauer, 8.

⁴⁸ Kernbauer, 13.

⁴⁹ Terry Smith on the contemporary question, see Nancy Condee, Okwui Enwezor, and Terry Smith, *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

⁵⁰ Kernbauer, 13.

⁵¹ Kernbauer, 10. With the digital turn chronological concepts of time have become endangered species.

⁵² Kernbauer, 11.

⁵³ Kernbauer, 11.

thereby has to be elucidated. Similarly, every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration in this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to 'change the world', but also—and above all—to 'change time.'⁵⁴

It is in this regard that Kernbauer referring to Osborne argues, that anachronic artistic history writing and thinking potentially enacts political agency. Understanding that contemporary art has to be understood within the disjunctive unity of global/transnational contemporaneity,⁵⁵ Osborne argues that contemporary art opens up new speculative and imaginative spaces of social and political agency through critical engagement and re-structuring of contemporaneity.

In the words of Osborne: 'Forging transnationality and transhistoricity (transcending historical boundaries, eternal), the political significance of art lies in the creation of new social spaces and subjects ("speculative collectives") as its imagined recipients and coproducers. This significance is closely intertwined with art's historiographical function.'⁵⁶

Ideally, such artworks, Kernbauer argues, are created in and help creating an awareness of everyone's part in the co-constitution of our shared, yet multi-directional and hetero-temporal contemporaneity. It entails as she writes: '(...) a sense of the different temporal paces and directions of the global present that encompass conceptual as well as physiological, subjective as well as political dimensions, which in turn must be integrated into everyone's temporal experience.'⁵⁷ To make the point that this means to understand that 'the frame that you are in is already filled with the presence of others and what they bring to life' Kernbauer refers to the artist Sengupta and his use of the Sanskrit term *samay*, that 'connotes the ability to perceive that someone is standing with you.'⁵⁸

How can contemporary artistic historiographies' investment in critically activating history and our heterogeneous present be understood in historical perspective? What is the historicity of contemporary artistic historiographies' ethos, that means their value as artistic contributions to historiography, their methods and objectives, the problems and theories of history and history writing they reflect upon?

Arguing that despite and because of the fact that Enlightenment concept of history is a 'compromised idea of history',⁵⁹ it 'remains a source of orientation and a reference point for action' for contemporary artistic historiography'⁶⁰ Kernbauer's first

⁵⁴ Kernbauer, 11.

⁵⁵ Kernbauer, 14.

⁵⁶ Osborne quoted by Kernbauer, Kernbauer, 14.

⁵⁷ Kernbauer, 14.

⁵⁸ Kernbauer, 14.

⁵⁹ Kernbauer, 4.

⁶⁰ Kernbauer, 3.

chapter offers a thorough critical re-examination of modern European discourses on history and its relation to art since 1800. She legitimates this approach that bears the risk to be (mis-)understood as Eurocentric and self-referential, by emphasizing that critical historiography *is* continuous rewriting, it is in fact what constitutes it, and by emphasizing that her study is committed to uncovering the complexities of specific social contexts and media in and through which histories are written.⁶¹

The focus of her critical historiographical examination is the relationship between art and history, with a focus on discourses of different concepts of artistic and historical representation, respective concepts of historiographical temporality and temporal regimes, their related concepts of meaning making and subject constitution, and historiographical and political agency.

By shedding light on the plurality of historical discourses Kernbauer makes the argument that key aspects of contemporary critical artistic historiography discussed in her book – the understanding of history and historical representation as constructed, of history writing as non-linear and anachronic, of anachronic thinking and how it affords experiences of non-identical temporality that are in turn related to conceptualizations of criticality, meaning and subjectivity/identity as unstable, dynamic and relational, and of historiographical agency as political agency – have longer discursive histories.⁶²

Quite surprisingly Kernbauer doesn't chime in the conventional rejection of historicism in critical contemporary art history and post-colonial studies,⁶³ but instead seeks to complicate our understanding of historicism by referring to critics of positivist and historicist concepts of history *and* scholars of historicism within the European tradition. 'A close look also reveals that historicism's theoretical framework did not stop at the well-known postulates of objectivity and linear historical progression for which it is often rejected. Instead, historicism generated extensive material for a critique of these theorems as well as an array of potential links between "art" and "history" – even if both notions have been considerably transformed since.'⁶⁴

In the European context, art and history had a close but often ambivalent relationship. Things changed in the 19th century. Mainstream history sought to differentiate itself from art and subjective expression, when it established itself as an academic discipline based on an understanding of science as empirical and objective.⁶⁵ Generally speaking, history and art and art were both conceived as being about depicting/representing/making sense of reality and history and history writing were

⁶¹ Kernbauer, 4.

⁶² Kernbauer, 3.

⁶³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. Donald Preziosi, *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁶⁴ Kernbauer, 3.

⁶⁵ Kernbauer, 27.

often understood as artistic/creative. Kernbauer offers rich insights that range from historical, philosophical and art historical discourses.⁶⁶

In the following I will focus on discourses around different concepts of historical and artistic representation. The starting point of modern European discourses on historical and in artistic representation since 1800 was the double meaning of 'history', 'connoting both past events and their representation'⁶⁷ and the different conceptualizations of this relationship, ranging from naturalistic and idealistic to contemporary performative approaches. Following a naturalist conception of historical and artistic representation Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767- 1835) argued that in order to 'guarantee a strong connection to reality', it is the historian's task⁶⁸ 'to present what actually happened.'⁶⁹ He located 'the kinship of artistic and historical work in the presentation or depiction of history rather than its narration.'⁷⁰

'An historical representation, like an artistic one, is an imitation of nature. The basis of both is the recognition of the true form, the discovery of the necessary, the elimination of the accidental. [...] For it is the greatest virtue of a work of art to reveal the inner truth of forms which is hidden in their actual appearance.' The historian's task is 'the presentation of the struggle of an idea to realize itself in actuality.'⁷¹

Conceptualizing the relationship between history and the past as mimetic, and in this regard close to art, Humboldt rejected the idealist philosophical approach most famously articulated by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770 -1831).⁷² Different from the naturalist understanding of historical truth as 'correspondence between thoughts and external realities',⁷³ truth according to Hegel is the coherence between thoughts that constitute reality enacted through human agency.⁷⁴ World according to Hegelian idealist thinking is not what really is but how it appears in terms of naturalized categories: 'The finite world is a reflection of the mind which alone is truly real.'⁷⁵ In

⁶⁶ In addition to scholars who reflected on art's relationship to history mentioned in the text body, Kernbauer also mentions among others Quintilian (35-96), Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), Benedetto Croce (1866-1952) and Georg Simmel (1858-1918)

⁶⁷ Kernbauer, 28.

⁶⁸ Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'On the Historian's Task', *History and Theory*, 6: 1, 1967, 57-71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2504484>.1821.

⁶⁹ Kernbauer, 28.

⁷⁰ Wilhelm von Humboldt quoted by Kernbauer, Kernbauer, 28.

⁷¹ Humboldt quoted by Kernbauer, 29 and 33.

⁷² Kernbauer, 29.

⁷³ 'Absolute Idealism', Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Absolute-Idealism>.

⁷⁴ 'Absolute Idealism', Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Absolute-Idealism>.

⁷⁵ 'Absolute Idealism', Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Absolute-Idealism>.

consequence thought, and making sense of the world requires a self-conscious mind, self-reflection respectively, and cannot be achieved by imposing ready-made forms upon given material.⁷⁶ Each thought and each abstract ideas, according to Hegel, are part of the Absolute Idea which following a teleological concept of time and history writing human beings come closer uncover with each new thought and idea. It is against this background that history for Hegel is both, what actually happened and the representation, narration of it.⁷⁷ Because historical narration and representation give meaning to events Hegel understands history as philosophy.⁷⁸

Particularly important for Kernbauer's argumentation on the historicity of contemporary art's agency and criticality, is her understanding that the creation of meaningful historical narratives as Hegel understands them 'bestow a kind of pseudo-sovereignty – at least on the level of its interpretation – to individuals otherwise powerless against the course of history.'⁷⁹

This rejection of 'objectivist submission',⁸⁰ understanding of history as narrated and the empowerment of the individual through self-conscious history writing, Kernbauer argues, is brought to the next level by the historian Johann Gustav Bernhard Droysen (1808-1884). Droysen argued against Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) and his 'scientific' understanding of history that like art, as it was conventionally understood at the time, was committed to the 'objective' representation of reality. It is in this regard that according to Ranke historians like artists 'did not need to actively generate meaning at all: they only had to find the already existing structure of meaning in history, faithfully tracing and recording their sources to produce an entirely unartistic 'recreation' of history'.⁸¹

Droysen dismissed Ranke's claim to objectivity and instead emphasized the historian's agency. He wrote: 'Those, then, who view the historian's supreme task as [...] simply letting facts speak, fail to see that the facts do not speak at all, except through the mouth of one who has perceived and understood them; that the facts do not exist as such, only in remnants in which we recognize them as the causes that bring about events or in the form of memories [...], which to a great extent bring with them those subjective moments that are forbidden to the historian.' Droysen's rejection of

⁷⁶ 'Absolute Idealism', Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Absolute-Idealism>.

⁷⁷ Kernbauer quotes Hegel that 'Hegel 'history' combines both objective and subjective aspects and signifies the *historiam rerum gestarum* (historiography, or any form of representation, narrative) as well as the *res gestae* (history, what actually happened) themselves, the historical narrative as well as the events, deeds, and happenings themselves – aspects that in the strict sense are quite distinct.' Kernbauer, 28.

⁷⁸ Kernbauer, 28.

⁷⁹ Kernbauer, 28.

⁸⁰ Kernbauer, 30.

⁸¹ Kernbauer, 30.

objectivity was 'theoretically grounded as well as politically motivated.'⁸² History was a political and pedagogical tool to understand the present, understood as historically constituted, two aspects that Kernbauer also identifies in contemporary historiographic art. Droysen wrote: 'The historian is not limited to criticism, as Ranke brings to the fore in his doctrine, but is also an interpreter who must learn and teach to understand. [...] Every historical past must be perceived and felt as a political present. And then I also reverse this claim and demand that the present be understood and treated as an accidental cross-section of the stream of history.'⁸³

Kernbauer is especially interested in Droysen's conceptualization of historical representation as *apodeixis*, a concept of representation that in contrast to a mimetic concept includes criticism and interpretation.⁸⁴ Kernbauer explains how Droysen follows Hegel's distinction quoting Droysen: 'That what we want to grasp, what has happened and done, is quite different from that which we are actually looking for to understand by means of exploration (*forschendes Verstehen*).' The past 'becomes history, but it is not history'; one must first consider events as history and then 'transpose them, so to speak.'⁸⁵

As she explains: 'Droysen had systematised his historiographical method in the four progressive steps of heuristics, criticism, interpretation, and *apodeixis*, which are linked by the ongoing progress of historical research and the transformation of historical material. The processes of criticism (the preparation and examination of materials) and interpretation produce 'something that is different', namely 'precisely our understanding gained through criticism and interpretation, an understanding not only of that material, but from that material, understanding of what is expressed in it.'

'These cognitive processes must find their articulation in historical representation, which, as already quoted, 'contains more than our word representation' and comprises, after the catharsis of criticism and the analysis of interpretation, the synthesis of their results, the reconstruction of the context in which the researched issue appears both understandable and understood, the didactic form in which we can and should pass it on.'⁸⁶

Representation is thus an equivalent to heuristic (the first step); it is retrospective research: 'It shows something that does not yet exist in the being-outside-itself of things that is the material as we find it—but that the mind must first synthesize. [...] Research is searching for something; it is not just a matter of coming across something by chance: one must first know what one wants to search for; only then can

⁸² Kernbauer, 30.

⁸³ Kernbauer, 31.

⁸⁴ Kernbauer, 33.

⁸⁵ Kernbauer, 33.

⁸⁶ Kernbauer, 34.

one find it [...] and ἀποδειξις [*apodeixis*] only reveals that for which one is actually looking.⁸⁷

Droysen's rejection of 'the paradigms of factuality and objectivity', the emphasis on human historiographical agency, his connection of research and representation in the concept of *apodeixis*, 'made a radically new conception of historiography possible', and influenced contemporary theoretically historical scholarship.⁸⁸ Kernbauer argues that the concept of *apodeixis*, the connection of research and representation 'is inspiring for critical concepts of artistic historiography today'⁸⁹ 'entails an understanding of artistic historiography that does not limit itself to illustrating the results of research created elsewhere.'⁹⁰

Kernbauer juxtaposes the hermeneutical approach of Droysen's concept of historical research as 'exploratory understanding' with the sociologist Georg Simmel's hermeneutic approach based on empathy. For Droysen hermeneutics were connected to his didactic claims and political agenda. Simmel was interested in empathic understanding on the psychological level, 'the epistemological foundation of the science of history is a "psychology of history" that connects historical material with the historian's position in the present.'⁹¹

For him the historian like the artist had the genius ability to connect with historical persons. A 'historical genius' who 'represents an inwardly coherent, convincing picture of spiritual processes, links between the thoughts and passions of historical persons, for whose way of thinking there are no longer any examples; his imagination, bringing together the most remote, interpreting the most wondrous, has a material at its disposal that his experience could not have provided him with.'⁹² Walter Benjamin is introduced by Kernbauer as an important critic of empathy based history writing, of historicism and as a philosopher of history for whom art played a central role. According to Benjamin, history writing based on empathy assumes a 'universally ascertainable, continuous identity of all humans past and present',⁹³ it furthermore raises the historian to the level of genius with unlimited potential, and 'approaches history primarily in order to "understand" it, thus naturalising and legitimising the course of history.'⁹⁴ As is well known Benjamin's philosophy of history starts from the insight that the past is not retrievable. In contrast to historicism that believes in the full reconstruction of the past, his historical materialist perspective conceives of history

⁸⁷ Kernbauer, 34.

⁸⁸ Kernbauer, 30.

⁸⁹ Kernbauer, 34.

⁹⁰ Kernbauer, 34.

⁹¹ Kernbauer, 37.

⁹² Kernbauer mentions the broader discursive context of paradigm change of what was considered the humanities. Kernbauer, 36

⁹³ Kernbauer, 37.

⁹⁴ Kernbauer, 37.

writing as partial and constructed. Kernbauer explains how it in this regard that art played an important role for Benjamin's concept of history. She writes: 'The [Benjamin's] well-known phrase "history decays into images, not into stories" indicates how historical representation might be achieved without being absorbed by concepts or goals—or by all-encompassing empathy: interweaving art and science, research, criticism, interpretation and depiction.'⁹⁵ Benjamin was particularly interested in the avant-garde strategy of montage as a useful artistic and critical tool to question traditional concepts of art and representation, to break 'with vulgar historical naturalism'⁹⁶ and to instead 'grasp the construction of history as such.'⁹⁷

Kernbauer seeks to contribute to the rewriting of 'history's conceptual and methodological body'⁹⁸ and to reconceptualize artistic media, techniques, genres of artistic historiography in the global context. Emphasizing that 'history is always situated within and staged by specific media'⁹⁹ she argues that the artistic historiographies in her book not only shed light on history's constructed nature but also on how various artistic media 'structure history' in specific ways.¹⁰⁰ Kernbauer also repeatedly reminds us that 'artistic explorations of history emerge at different moments out of distinct contexts, social urgencies, and interests.'¹⁰¹ In order to avoid universalization, she argues, it is therefore crucial to attend to the 'complex social context in which historiography is practiced today.'¹⁰²

Among the many artistic historiographies she discusses are for example Harun Farocki's and Andrei Ujica's joint 1992 film project 'Videograms of a Revolution' on the media documentation of the Romanian revolution. Taking into account the specific socio-political context, the choice of video as the artistic medium and its respective way of organizing temporality as duration and not as representation, Kernbauer makes the convincing argument that this work isn't about the truth of events but how 'truth' is conveyed as true. In so doing she argues the work offers a reconceptualization of the documentary.¹⁰³ Other works discussed in the book are for example Hiwa K.'s video installation 'View from Above' (2017), which explains and in so doing critiques how the artist had to adopt a mimetic strategy of representation to be acknowledged as a refugee by the official institutions, or Dierck Schmidt's critical engagement with history painting as rooted in a mimetic concept of representation, and his reconceptualizations of history painting as apodeictic.

⁹⁵ Kernbauer, 43.

⁹⁶ Benjamin quoted by Kernbauer, 43

⁹⁷ Benjamin quoted by Kernbauer, 43

⁹⁸ Kernbauer, 4.

⁹⁹ Kernbauer, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Kernbauer, 18.

¹⁰¹ Kernbauer, 27.

¹⁰² Kernbauer, 4.

¹⁰³ Kernbauer, 52-67.

Eva Kernbauer's conceptual history of art's relation to history, her theoretical reflections on history, history writing and time offer invaluable new insights into the historiographical concepts and challenges that are discussed in contemporary artistic historiographies. Her critical re-examinations of European intellectual history contributes to the pluralization of Europe beyond over-simplified West-non-West binary thinking, and indeed shed new light on artistic historiographies from a critical historical and theoretical perspective. Her artworks analyses are best art historical practice and the precise socio-political contextualizations help to situate the artworks within specific local contexts. Her conceptualization of anachronic historiography as a tool to write history by continuously making and remaking temporally unstable connections is convincingly introduced not only as a way to challenge chronological historical representation but as a useful historiographical model for our hetero-temporal present.

However, despite its excursions into different socio-political contexts and the reference to non-European concepts such as the Sanskrit term *samay* adopted by the artist Sengupta, the book is centred in European issues around art's relationship to history, a positionality which the author could have marked more explicitly. Nevertheless, her book is of great importance, and it inspires scholars of other regional histories, such as myself, to expand the questions she asks about art's relationship to history beyond European traditions.

Birgit Hopfener is Associate Professor of Art History and current holder of the Ruth and Mark Phillips professorship at Carleton University, Canada. She situates herself in the fields of critical global art history and Chinese art history. Her present research centers upon questions around the heterogeneity of temporal assumptions (historiographical models, their respective concepts of time and temporality, and temporal regimes) that constitute and frame our world, its art, subjects, and knowledges. With the aim to shed light on the transcultural historicity of contemporary art, its multiple structures and experiences of time from a specific locale, her current book project focuses on art historiographic works by contemporary Chinese artists. She authored the book *Transkulturelle Reflexionsräume einer Genealogie des Performativen: Bedingungen und Artikulationen kultureller Differenz in der Chinesische Installationkunst* (2013) and co-edited the volumes *Negotiating Difference: Chinese Contemporary Art in the Global Context* (2012) and *Situating Global Art. Topologies – Temporalities - Trajectories* (2018). Currently, she is co-editing together with Karin Zitzewitz (Michigan State University) *Towards a multi-temporal pluriverse of art. Decolonizing universalized historiographic and temporal frameworks*, planned to be published as a special issue for *21:Inquiries* in 2023. She is the founding member of the international consortium *Transnational and Transcultural Art and Culture Exchange (TrACE)*, and she serves on the editorial boards of *Art Journal* and *21: Inquiries into Art, History, and the Visual*

Birgit Hopfener

Art that explores history: Reconceptualizing contemporary
art's historicity in the global framework



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)