A timely collection?

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A timely collection

Review of:


Kamini Vellodi

For several years now, the problematisation of time has been at the forefront of debates in art history. According to the editors of this volume, Keith Moxey and Dan Karlholm, this problematisation offers a way to revive the discipline from its current crises: namely, its perceived irrelevance within the contemporaneity of the present. Rather than retaining its traditional focus on putting art objects in their proper chronological places – a focus reinforced by a preoccupation with context (the social, economic, political circumstances under which a work was made) - art history might instead, by embracing the temporal qualities presented by the work/image such as ‘anachrony’ and ‘heterochrony’, affirm its relevance for a present that sees itself as ‘post-historical’. In this way, art history could loosen its inscription as a practice of history still laden with outmoded expectations of objectivity, contextualism, chronological positioning and the ‘Hegelian model of progress’, to become a reflection on time that is more responsive to the heterogeneous actualities of contemporary practice, discourse and experience. This transformation, Moxey and Karlholm suggest, would proceed through a foregrounding of the singular questions posed by the artwork/image over the broad structures of historical inquiry. With the affirmation that art/image is always more than, or other than, art history, the art historian’s leading questions would become: ‘what if visual art is in a position to explain and expand history rather than vice versa? What if the artwork *grounds* history?’

_Time in the History of Art* adds to the plethora of volumes published in the last decade that examine the temporality of art and art history: Georges Didi-Huberman’s masterful studies of the anachronistic being of images (such as *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg’s history of Art*, 2017), Christopher Nagel and Alexander Wood’s theory of the anachronic, ‘substitutional’ nature of Renaissance artworks and artefacts (*Anachronic Renaissance* 2010), Amy Knight Powell’s elucidation of formal correspondences between the medieval and the modern (*Depositions: Scenes from the Late Medieval Church and the Modern Museum*, 2012), and works by Mieke Bal, Michael Ann Holly, Claire Farago, James Elkins and Keith Moxey himself, amongst many others. These texts are linked by several themes: first, a perceived inadequacy of contextualist accounts of art objects and images; second, a critique of chronology, and in particular chronological sense, as the leading determinant in thinking the time of art/images; and third, a foregrounding of the singular ontology of the work of art/image rather than the treatment of art/image as a sign of broader historical processes and structures.
as period, culture and style). The rediscovery of intellectual figures such as Aby Warburg (who, in contrast to the demarcation of period styles practiced by his younger contemporary Erwin Panofsky, understood images as dynamic expressions of forces erupting across historical time) as well as increased interdisciplinary borrowings from philosophy, anthropology, sociology and psychoanalysis has further bolstered new approaches to thinking time. Essays in *Time in the History of art* share in these concerns and sources. Many of them also draw upon recent discourses such as new materialism, actor-network theory, object-oriented ontology, and the renewed interest in phenomenology and the latent life of images – all discourses that as Moxey and Karlholm point out affirm ‘the active role of objects in shaping their histories’. (2) Indeed, it is notable that many of the essays in this collection partake in this investment of artworks/images as things with agency.

As Warburg’s own investigations remind us, the intimation that art/image produces or exposes a temporal character beyond chronological sense and measure, and in excess to the intelligibility that can be extracted from the context of its production, is itself not new. Many of the notable art historians of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century including Riegl, Wölfflin, Focillon, Kubler, and Worringer explored alternative methods, concepts and categories for thinking about the meaning of art beyond the historicising determination of strict chronology and period style. Hans Tietze and Arnold Hauser, for instance, both felt that stylistic denominations were chronologically determined abstractions from the artistic currents ‘which flowed through the period in many directions’ and that ‘chronology, conclusive though it is in relation to tangible facts’ was inadequate for understanding art’s powers of anticipation.

However, whereas earlier art history explored temporality as one aspect of a philosophical examination of the ontology of artworks/images, recent art history increasingly frames its concern with temporality as a concern with the identity (and as Moxey and Karlholm point out, the valence and future) of the discipline itself. Two major factors have contributed to this increased concern with disciplinary identity, both of which run through the essays in *Time in The History of Art*: the first is the impact of contemporary art, and indeed contemporaneity itself, on the identity of art history. The end of modernism as the dominant ideology, and with it, certain understandings of time (its passing, the sense of historical distance, the dialectic conception of time, the preoccupation with the new), the changing nature of art since the 1960s (the rise in time-based performances, installations and projections which, as Hal Foster remarked, cannot ‘help but sensitise scholars to temporal questions’, as well as the rise in practices of the artist as art historian/curator, such that the experience of contemporary art integrates the experience of art history through juxtapositions of past and present, and the distinctive temporal nature of the contemporary itself (its perpetuity, its resistance to periodization, its heterogeneity as global phenomenon) have all contributed to the new urgency of the questioning of art history’s understanding of time. The

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second factor is the globalisation of art history. Sensitivity towards and new knowledge of non-Western experiences and theories of time and history informed in part by postcolonial critique have challenged the Western, Euroamerican ideologies of time - including, of course, the notion of chronology itself - that have dominated the scholarly practice of art history till now. Four chapters in this volume explicitly attend to this latter issue.

The strength of this timely collection is in presenting the range of questions, discourses and methods implicated by an investigation into the time of art history today. Divided into five sections: ‘historical time’, ‘post-colonial time’; ‘narrative time’; ‘ontological time’; ‘photographic time’ – the 14 essays in this volume provide the reader with ways of navigating a complex and dynamic territory. Some of the essays explore broad notions of methodology and historiography; others focus on specific case studies, cultures, or artistic media. The opening essays by Karlholm and Moxey set the tone and horizon for several of the other essays. Both foreground the object as the determining agent of particular temporal models and this is something also explored in the contributions by Grootenboer, Ross, Careri and Alloa.

In ‘Is History to be closed, Saved, or Restarted? Considering Efficient Art History’, Karlholm proposes an ‘efficient history’ which attends to the work of art as a producer of effects. Rather than locating artworks in a chronologically determined past (4) an efficient history attends to ‘the after-history of historical phenomena’, and, ‘like Foucault’s genealogy’, ‘would trace works in their state of non-permanent, non-chronic becoming’ up to the ‘slowly deferred now of the historian’ (17).

Karlholm appeals to Bruno Latour’s interminably fashionable Actor network theory (ANT) – a theorisation of networks between objects, processes and technologies that displaces the classical philosophical focus on the human subject. Karlholm argues that artworks can be understood as networks in Latour’s sense, idiosyncratic networks ‘immune to periodizing’ and with no predetermined end (17-18). Thus ANT provides another way of addressing the heterogeneous (and non chronic) social life of the artwork. A network, Karlholm writes, could be comprised of a myriad of factors including ‘loans, collection and display, criticism, vandalism or theft, chemical analysis, literary references, donations, attributions, online representation’’. As such the model for an efficient history, he continues, is the catalogue raisonné, ‘which ignores the prehistory or pedigree of the piece, its traditional history of art, heavily reliant upon its author/artist, and starts off from the material emergence of the finished or ‘definitely unfinished’ work (21). This rather strikingly conventional conclusion restores primacy to the artist’s ‘oeuvre’ - surely one of the most tenacious presuppositions of art historical study, and one by which art historians uphold the dominion of chronology, the very thing that Karlholm is trying to critique.

It is symptomatic of the current preoccupation with the agency of objects that runs through this book that Karlholm differentiates efficient history from Hans George Gadamer’s notion of ‘effective history’ (Wirkungsheschichte) – a theorisation of the ineradicable role of the interpreter in historical effects. Effective history was a notion used by Gadamer to describe a ‘proper hermeneutics’ that demonstrates the effects (Wirkung) of history within understanding itself. It described a history carried out by an interpreter who, recognising the inevitable foreclosure of the
hermeneutic circle (that all interpretation is grounded in the prejudices of the interpreter), arms himself with an ‘effective-historical consciousness’ such that he is aware of the ‘situatedness’, the prejudices and preconditions in the act of interpreting history. In his somewhat hasty dismissal of Gadamer’s philosophy as ‘highbrow reception history’ (17), Karlholm overlooks the profound implications of hermeneutics (which are acknowledged by other contributors in the volume, such as Partha Mitter) for art history’s current problematisations of time: namely our recognition of the ideologies governing our investigations, including our theorisations of objects and our theorisations of time.

In ‘What time is it in the history of art?’, Moxey (reiterating claims made in his 2014 monograph Visual Time. The Image in History) argues that the time of art history is not the same as the time of artworks, first, because the former is composite (it involves the time of texts as well) and second because ‘visual images, like objects, do not merely occur within time, they possess and actively create time.’ (27). Moxey then proceeds to analyse a disparate array of artefacts: a Picasso cubist collage, an Aztec feather work in the museum of anthropology in Mexico city, a 6th century bronze Buddha from Kashmir, a reliquary made in 14th century Venice bearing an Arabic inscription in Kufic. He argues that each object, in its heterogeneous materiality, belongs to multiple times: each is a visual example of heterochrony (35). For instance, Picasso’s collage embodies the ephemeral time of newsprint, the evoked time of music, the emergent models of time in the lived experience of modernity, as well as early 20th century philosophies of science and technology. However, in pointing to the difficulty in discerning the time to which objects belong (34), and to the ‘necessarily contingent nature of all art historical accounts’ (36), the artwork emerges as an ineffable mystery beyond the reach of any interpretation or theorisation.

This querulous tone also characterises Hanneke Grootenboer’s contribution. In ‘Arresting What Would Otherwise Slip Away: The Waiting Images of Jacob Vrel’, Grootenboer classifies Jacob Vrel’s painting Woman by the hearth (1655) as a ‘pensive image’, an image ‘which neither tells a story nor conveys a specific meaning but rather articulates, through its form and materiality, a form of thinking’ (121). The open-endedness of the painting leads us to our own thoughts. In its withholding, and in our waiting for it to disclose something, painting invites us to reflect on time. It invites us to move away from interpretation and ‘toward a state of suspension where thinking can start’. Theoretical apparatus are invoked (Jean Luc Nancy on portraits as concerned for us; Hegel’s on Dutch art, accompanied by the pervasive spectre of Heidegger) but without the analyses that could defend them as adequate models. What is the connection between the pensive image and waiting? Why does the interval of waiting bring awareness of the ‘nowness’ of looking? Why does waiting invite thought and ‘swarm with meaning’? (130). Is it not instead possible that suspension of waiting produces nothing but a deferral of thinking, the eruption of habitual thoughts, the drifting into reverie, or – as Samuel Beckett so astutely showed us - the impossibility of meaning?

In ‘Heterochronies. The Gospel According to Carravaggio’, Giovanni Careri critiques contextualism. He argues that Caravaggio’s Calling of St Matthew in the Contarelli chapel expresses three temporalities: the Now-Time of the spectator, the time of Then, in which these scenes were supposed to have taken place, and the
time of the creation of these works at the end of the sixteenth century. This heterochrony of times (already theoretically incongruent with Walter Benjamin’s Now-Time as a dialectical experience of temporality) is indicated by the complexity of the composition, including the clash of ancient and contemporary costumes in the painting. Careri treats Caravaggio’s painting as a ‘theoretical object’ – a notion coined by Hubert Damisch to describe something that obliges one to do theory, furnishes the means of doing it, and necessitates a reflection on theory. It is curious then that Careri retreats from any theorising, stating that he would prefer to proceed in a deductive manner than to risk generalisation (152). As a consequence, any concept of heterochrony – the conceptualisation required to think a rigorous alternative to contextualism - is lost in a description of the complexity of this particular painting’s narrative.

Christine Ross’s ‘Sarah Sze’s The Last Garden and the Temporality of Wonder’ reads the temporality of Sze’s installations through the terms of new materialism, speculative realism, object-oriented ontology and affective studies. For Ross, Sze’s installations are ‘fully engaged in an object driven investigation of time’ and ‘set in play a loose mobilisation of new materialist and object-oriented philosophical insights to elaborate a temporality of wonder’, where wonder is ‘an affective form of temporality that comes about when we encounter objects “as if for the first time”’(206). A contrasting reading of contemporary art’s temporality is presented by Miguel angel Hernandez Navarro. In ‘Twisted Time. Fernando Bryce’s Art of History’, Navarro attends to what he calls the historiographic turn in contemporary art since the mid-1990s (as seen in the work of artists such as Jeremy Deller, Matthew Buckingham, Tacita Dean, Doris Salcedo and the Atlas group). Turning again to Walter Benjamin, Navarro reads the drawings and montages of the Peruvian artist Fernando Bryce as an example of an anachronistic performance of history that functions as ‘a means of twisting time and disarticulating the hegemonic discourses that have constructed the past and continue to operate in the present.’ (134)

Two essays in the collection consider the ontology of the photograph as a means of reflecting on art’s time. In ‘Objects Moving are Not impressed: Reading into the Blur’, Amelia Groom returns to the origins of photography, showing how the long exposures of Louis Daguerre’s images could not capture the speed of modernity, such that the photos are oddly vacant of people and transport and possess an ‘irrational temporal density’ (246). The subsequent development of photography towards increasing legibility (in keeping with capitalism’s measurement and unitisation of time) obscured this pre-capitalist ontology of the blur, which operates as ‘a site of evasion and spatial disorganisation’ and, Groom implies, a model of critique. In ‘Showtime and Exposure Time: The Contradictions of Social Photography and the Critical Role of Sensitive Plates for Rethinking the Temporality of Artworks’, Emmanuel Alloa critiques the conditions under which contemporary art is exhibited and seen, arguing that contemporary art exhibitions privilege space over time. This is something exacerbated by the white cube aesthetic, which removes art from context and inhibits the experience of art,

producing an ‘immunisation of the gaze’ (225). Alloa distinguishes between ‘the shown time’, the time documented by an artwork, ‘the time of showing’, the time it takes for artwork to show itself, and ‘exposure time’, the time of the medium itself. Except in cases of performance art, Alloa argues, exposure time (‘long disregarded as being pre- or non-artistic, since it appears to be a purely technical issue’ (223)) cannot be fully transferred into show time (235). It is this dislocation that offers a means of resisting the impoverished conditions of contemporary art’s exhibition regime.

This is an oddly, and problematically, anachronistic claim, since we know that the showing of exposure, the presenting of medium and processes, was an essential characteristic of modernist art and therefore integral to all subsequent self-aware art. That is, the ‘showiness’ of contemporary art is not just a response to the external strictures of the gallery space, but needs to be construed as part of art’s own internal development. It is fitting then that Alloa’s example is from the 19th century: the night-time photographs of the 19th century photographer Jacob Riis which, again through long exposures, point to a previous moment that cannot be fully shown (although one wonders how Alloa would propose to exhibit these works today, if not in a white cube?) The historical collapse produced in this essay reminds us not only of the necessity for critique to be accompanied by historical understanding, but also of the demand of hermeneutics: that we recognise our own ideological positions in acts of historical interpretation, including the willful practice of anachronism.

The remaining six essays all address the inadequacy of Western or Euroamerican models of time for the continued practice of self-aware art history. John Clark and Partha Mitter both forcefully argue for the incommensurability between Asian and Western/Euroamerican art history, and between traditional time systems of Asia and chronology. Claiming that ‘we cannot assume the methodological neutrality of temporal concepts’ (46), and that time descriptions have no absolute or generalized descriptive power, Clark elucidates how the imperialism of temporal structures persist in art history and argues for the need for a new paradigm set of Asian modernities to redefine modernity in art and its myriad temporalities (57). The strength of Clark’s reading is in arguing that we must go beyond invoking mere heterochrony (which only replaces the status quo with a potentially interminable set of pluralities), and produce new paradigms. He offers three: ‘the epistemically broken’, attending to a sudden transition between two states; the ‘mundane’, where art branches away from straight lines of causation, and the ‘cyclic’, where the ‘distant future’ wraps around the remote past (47-50). In ‘Colonial modern. A clash of colonial and indigenous chronologies: The Case of India’, Mitter offers a typically lucid account of the history and historiography of art history in India, the persistence of its colonial origins, and the new directions opened for the concept of art’s time by hermeneutics and deconstruction, the work of subaltern historians such as Dipesh Chakrabarty and Ranajit Guha, and historians of ancient India such as Romila Thapar, whose in-depth studies of the Indian philosophy of time offer art historians much more than methodological correctives. In ‘Artists, Amateurs and the Pleated Time of Ottoman Modernity’, Mary Roberts argues that ‘histories of nineteenth century orientalist painting need to be written in tandem with a nuanced account of the intersecting temporalities of
the middle east’s multiple modernities.’ (95). And in ‘The Time of Translation: Victor Burgin and Sedad Eldem in Virtual Conversation’, Esra Akcan calls for ‘an intertwined history foregrounding translations across space and time’ that would displace both the linear, continuous, grand Eurocentric narratives on the one hand, and the radical heterogeneity and relativism that construes multiple histories as self-contained, simultaneous and unrelated on the other (113). He invests Victor Burgin’s ‘A place to read’ – a film about the demolition of a coffee house in Istanbul - as a starting point for a notion of ‘imbricated time’ that characterises the expression of history as intertwining acts of translation. For Akcan, the film loop is video art’s means of ‘coming to terms with the nonlinear conception of time that calls on us to write alternative histories of the world’ in terms of ‘events whose beginnings and durations may be out of phase, overlapping or divergent but always affected by each other.’ (114)

Zainab Baharani takes a more traditionally comparative approach. In ‘The Phenomenal Sublime: Time, Matter, Image in Mesopotamian Antiquity’, the analogies made between ideas from Ancient Mesopotamia and Western philosophy – in particular, of the Akkadian word ‘Melammu’, which describes the auratic, and splendid power of images of divinities and kings, with the Kantian notion of ‘sublime’ – renders the Mesopotamian tradition familiar through Western philosophical ideas. One wonders what would happen if we were to instead argue for the potential of Akkadian concepts – for instance, the idea of the image as a presence that persists rather than recording the past – on their own terms, beyond the familiar comparative approach? Lastly, and echoing Moxey’s essay, Avinoam Shalem’s essay ‘Resisting Time. On how Temporality Shaped Medieval Choice of Materials’ explores the links between specific materials in works in medieval artefacts and time, showing how certain specific materials such as rock crystal link the Islamic and Christian traditions (both understood as water petrified by God’s gaze), and suggesting how a focus on materials might help produce trans-cultural temporal accounts.

As moments of reflection on the current state of art history this collection is welcome. Unfortunately, it raises more questions than it indicates it can answer. On the one hand, this is unsurprising given the constraints of the edited volume format, which prevents any sustained argument or detailed development. However, there is something about the topic of time itself that seems to encourage a speculative tone. Writers typically spend a great deal of time pointing out what is wrong with the status quo, recounting the constraints of the discipline’s history, and posing a succession of ‘right questions’; less energy is devoted to a convincing and sustained resolution of these questions. In part, this is symptomatic of a reluctance to rigorously engage with philosophies of time.

As such, Time in the History of Art is best read as an interesting addition to and partial survey of an increasingly topical field. In particular, it demonstrates how the discipline’s recent preoccupation with time has renewed concerns that have long been part of its self-reflection, whilst also offering a pivot for a critique of contextualist art history and a renewed celebration of the object. As many of the essays here show, the impact of recent theories such as Object-Oriented-Ontology, new materialism, speculative realism, and Actor-Network-Theory have contributed to this return to the object as a thing with agency, including temporal agency. I say
'return' because such celebration is well-established, and it is curious to see recent theory being used to retrieve – to some, rather outdated and ideologically circumspect - notions of the autonomy of artworks and images, the primacy of visual evidence, the primacy of objectivity (of which the recent preoccupation with ‘object histories’ in art history is also a symptom) and even claims for the ‘elusiveness’ and ‘purity’ of the art object. More often than not, these fashionable contemporary theories are used in a piecemeal manner – concepts are borrowed and made use of, without any accompanying deep and critical engagement with the theoretical framework and the philosophical histories at stake.

One of the major risks of the preoccupation with the object is an oversight of the subject. This was a point made by Claire Farago in her incisive 2005 review of Nagel and Wood’s Anachronic Renaissance. Her view was that ‘any methodological consideration of ‘anachronism’ [and by extension, time] for the practice of art history deserves to be situated in the context of [...] critiques of existing models of historical time in relation to the historian’s subjectivity.’ Reminding us of the theoretical and political engagement with anachronism and the time of art in early twentieth-century critical theory, Farago criticised Wood and Nagel for losing sight of the political implications of their investigations, and for reducing the questioning of time to a debate about disciplinary practices. ‘[U]nless the subject position of the critic in the institution is brought into the equation’, she concluded, ‘the past will always haunt the present, and the most significant epistemological and ethical issues remain unarticulated and unaddressed.75

Foremost amongst these issues, for Farago, is Western imperialism and its disciplinary hold. To its credit, this is one of the issues that several of the essays in Time in the History of Art do directly address in a sustained way. However, we need to ask ourselves how this critique functions. Farrago suggests that the epistemological and ethical issues implicated by the discipline of art history require the critic to get beyond the discipline, beginning with the specific problems posed by a specific culture and engaging in a rigorous interdisciplinarity that displaces the discipline’s authorial ground. But even were we to remain within a critique of the discipline – as the essays in Time in the History of Art do - we cannot treat time as an isolatable element of disciplinary study. Calling for art historians to be aware of different models of time, proposing alternative models of time and pointing out the multiplicity and incommensurability of different time structures in art’s histories and the global contemporary, does not fundamentally challenge the form of art history. Instead, for the critique of time to mean anything more than methodological novelty, it must be staged as one aspect of a total critique of the nexus of presuppositions constituting art history’s form of thought. To use the terms of Peter Bürger, we have to engage a critique that is ‘self-critical’, one that critiques the entire system of the institution at stake, rather than a ‘system-immanent’ critique, which only critiques specific features within an institution whilst leaving the form of the institution fundamentally untouched.6

What is the problem with chronology? It is not only that it ostensibly undermines the ‘actual’ significance of artefacts/images, including their power to persist, but more crucially that it is used to uphold presuppositions of art historical study – presuppositions that are ideologically suspect or pernicious, or which, simply by virtue of being presuppositions, demand critical examination. As Didi-Huberman remarked, the contextualist use of chronological time is only one symptom of the epistemological, rational and representational form of thought that characterises mainstream scholarly art history and reveals its continued debt to its 18th and 19th century German roots (indeed, in his work, it is not chronology that he finds issue with, but the uses made of chronology). It is these presuppositions of rationalism, epistemological orientation, representationalism and art history’s ‘tone of certainty’ that need examination. Simply substituting certain concepts for others is inadequate. As several of the essays here reveal, one can replace ‘chronological time’ with ‘Now-time’, ‘heterochrony’, or ‘anachronism’, and yet continue to present information as new knowledge or with a tone of certainty.

Furthermore, it is not even clear that models such as heterochrony and anachrony do replace chronology. Infact, they depend on chronology for the apprehension of their effects. Both heterochrony and anachrony refer to the displacement, multiplication or disordering of chronological sense rather than the critique of chronology itself. Indeed, both remain compatible with standard forms of historical inquiry such as iconography, iconology, stylistic analysis, and documentation, as well as the presuppositions – of epistemological orientation and certainty, for instance – that ground them. The fact that many of the art historians who work with these terms fail to acknowledge these tensions and challenges, reveals a fascination with seductive terminology at the expense of conceptual analysis.

New, seductive terms mean little without accompanying critiques of extant presuppositions. The fact that the essays in \textit{Time in The History of Art} generally present their new terms, methods and insights as ‘better’ than previous models also shows us just how trenchant is the grip of Western suppositions such as ‘progress’. What is needed then is not only new terminologies of time integrated into new methodologies, but rigorous engagement with philosophies of time and their theoretical apparatus that put everything about art historical study (including the very notion of methodology itself) under examination. These philosophies need to be activated as practices of writing, thinking and questioning that can fundamentally destabilise the presuppositions of art history, including its preoccupation with its own history and historiography.

A critical art history can’t remain content with pulling out selected elements of art historical study for examination and transformation. Neither can it select and apply philosophical concepts superficially as modes of description without engaging with them to their full, perhaps even destructive potential. A critical art history needs to focus attention on the question of art history’s thought. Instead of naming, identifying, representing, categorising and knowing, it might begin its practice as something hardly recognisable as art history.
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