



History, Theory, and the Risks of Being Wrong

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Recommended Citation: Jessamine Batario, "History, Theory, and the Risks of Being Wrong," *Different Visions: New Perspective on Medieval Art* 6 (2020).
<https://doi.org/10.61302/YPON8275>.

Historians in general prefer not to risk being wrong, so they embrace the idea of facts and condescend to speculation. We might call their attitude scientific modesty or cowardice or philosophical laziness; it may result from a positivist abhorrence of theory.

— Georges Didi-Huberman, 2003^[1]

With these fighting words, art historian and philosopher Georges-Didi Huberman advocates for intellectual action. According to Didi-Huberman, historians ought to embrace the use of theory in the process of interpretation. Rather than excoriate scholars in the field of art history – did he just call us lazy cowards? – I argue that history and theory are already intertwined, and that the “risks of being wrong” now have less to do with factual inaccuracy than with moral responsibility.

In this essay, I take as my case study the wave of medieval-modern scholarship that surged within the last decade. Such accounts would be near unthinkable, or perhaps unpalatable, without the theoretical structures underpinning them. By framing the nature of inquiry as an opposition between history and theory, Didi-Huberman feeds into questions that initially swirled around medieval-modern interpretations: are these narratives historical, transhistorical, ahistorical? For all the theoretical flexing, is *history* itself somehow lost?

In order to begin answering such questions, I situate the comparative histories of the early 2010s in their own historical contexts. By connecting medieval-modern historiography to its contemporaries in the field of exhibition practice as well as artistic production, I aim to underscore the role of the historian as an author, one who constructs a narrative. This very role relates back to the critical theory, namely Walter Benjamin's, supporting medieval-modern accounts. Ironically, Benjamin's ideas are also proven true by recent nefarious medievalisms plaguing the field. From my position as a scholar studying modern and contemporary art, but with a vested interest in medieval-modern accounts, I suggest that the contemporaneity of these issues has caused a level of distress or hesitation that might prompt medievalist art historians to be wary of theory.

Ultimately, I make the case that the temporal comparative approach indeed produces *historical* accounts, albeit on a much larger scale. And I return to Benjamin to counter white supremacist appropriation of medieval imagery on intellectual grounds. Finally, I advocate for the prominent position of the author-historian in the full recognition that our contemporary moment demands an increased level of consciousness.

Co-temporality, or, the contemporary situation

In the contemporary art historiography of the last decade, the effect of critical theory plays out in the efforts to challenge the linearity of time. The early 2010s for the particular field of medieval art history witnessed a renewed interest in medieval-modern comparisons, as evidenced by Alexander Nagel's *Medieval Modern* and Amy Knight Powell's *Depositions*, to focus on two of the most prominent examples.^[2] Both scholars contend with the ideas put forth by Walter Benjamin in his essay, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."^[3]

In this influential text, Benjamin considers the relationship between the historian and the past. He configures the past as a form of accumulation, a vastness of data continuously accruing. From the position of the ever-moving present, the historian confronts this "pile of debris," finding constellations that connect the past and present. This visualization of accumulative history contrasts the linear view of events as a series of causes and effects. In the field of art history, we might think of the linear narrative of periods (e.g., medieval, Renaissance, Baroque) or even -isms (e.g., Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism). Rather than privilege the sequential ordering of data, the historian finds links from various time periods from the purview of the present.

Nagel prefaces *Medieval Modern* with an epigraph from Benjamin's text, setting the critical framework for the interpretations to come. Employing constellational thinking, Nagel makes "structural analogies" to compare medieval and modern material for the sake of opening insights into both fields. Likewise, Powell is also generally concerned with the conception of history as accumulation, using that as a condition for what she calls "pseudomorphic" comparisons. Yet unlike Nagel in *Medieval Modern*, a text that roves expansively into various topics, Powell focuses on the singular theme of the Deposition, a ritual taking down of images. She compares representations of Christ's descent from the cross to modern iterations of the so-called death of art since the invention of photography.

Georges Didi-Huberman's call to incorporate theory into history predates Nagel's and Powell's texts by nearly ten years. However, Didi-Huberman's essay champions Aby Warburg, an art-historical figure who complements Benjamin's ideas in certain ways.[4] Compatible with Benjamin's emphasis on the interpreter's position relative to the past, and visualization of history as a "pile of debris," is Warburg's *Nachleben*, or artistic survival.[5] *Nachleben* involves the persistence of forms and images across time, a phenomenon that hinges on the notion of continuity. Didi-Huberman equates Warburg's *Nachleben* to anachronism in art history, or the ability of an artwork to transgress the various periods of history, thereby accumulating meanings in other times beyond the temporal origin of its making. Historical forms exist through time, and we encounter them always from our temporal position of the present. In art history, past and present are always converging.

These conversations about temporality are contemporaneously taking place in the field of more recent art. In 2014, the Museum of Modern Art mounted the exhibition, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*. [6] The premise for this show, as its curator Laura Hoptman states, is to show "a kind of art-making that is inspired by, refers to, or avails itself of styles, subjects, motifs, materials, strategies, and ideas from an array of periods on the art-historical timeline." [7] This anything-goes (or perhaps more accurately, *anytime* goes) mentality, corresponds to atemporality, a description of life in the information era as ushered in by the internet: all time periods seem to exist at once. [8] To put this in practical terms, one might count the number of open tabs on their web browser and attempt to categorize each site's content into specific time periods. The content is available for us in near-simultaneous fashion, at the very least in what we consider to be our present time, but could easily refer to so many pasts. The immediate accessibility of data allows artists to appropriate, riff, and reiterate freely in the present. Hoptman cites St. Augustine as a conceptual source to describe the atemporal work of artists in *The*

Forever Now as existing in “the eternal present,” a state in which all temporal tenses have collapsed into one.[9] Relying on a thinker from Late Antiquity to describe a twenty-first-century situation about temporal flux, Hoptman suitably deploys the same strategy as the artists in her show.

Hoptman uses the framework of atemporality as license to show a wide range of contemporary painting: abstraction and figuration, monochromes and vibrant palettes, flat pictures and shredded canvases, Salon-style hangings and crumpled paintings on the floor.[10] Formally diverse, the element that ties this eclectic group of works together is that the artists all created them in the recent past, as if to show in soap-opera fashion that painting never died after all. The critic Walter Robinson formulated the category of “zombie formalism” to refer to contemporary abstraction that harkens back to the style of mid-twentieth-century abstract expressionism championed by Clement Greenberg.[11] Robinson might concede that painting did die in the 1960s, but has now been reborn.

Hoptman likewise uses a monster analogy to discuss contemporary painting. Instead of the zombie, she calls on the literary figure of Frankenstein to describe the strategy of juxtaposition used by the artists she considers to be working in the atemporal mode. In this case, paintings – cobbled together from formal elements from this time and that time – are themselves the monsters. I would extend the analogy of Mary Shelley’s narrative to describing the method employed by Alexander Nagel in *Medieval Modern*, written two years prior to *The Forever Now* exhibition. Like the artists that Hoptman champions, Nagel works like Frankenstein to stitch together two disparate forms from time periods separated, on occasion, by one thousand years. In that sense, *Medieval Modern* is an atemporal work that exists in “the eternal present,” for when can Nagel make his juxtapositions but now? Yet by extension, that present will always be tied to 2012, the year in which the book was published. Just as *The Forever Now* – despite being about atemporal painting – might be categorized in the future as an exhibition that firmly belongs to the early twenty-first century.

Writing on the eve of the internet age, Robert S. Nelson foretold the atemporal issues addressed by Hoptman’s exhibition, as well as the anachronic and pseudomorphic interpretations of the comparative approach.[12] In 1997, Nelson analyzed the art-historical categorizations that delineated our professional field and concluded by posing some prescient questions: “What kind of art history might be written if we were to abandon linear historical time?” and “Will all mutate or dissolve when the World Wide Web replaces the World Wide Map? Or will the latter merely remake the former into its and our own image?”[13] If we imagine *The Forever Now* in dialogue

with a contemporaneous mode of producing history, it becomes apparent that scholars working with the comparative approach are behaving like today's artists.

By putting into conversation medieval-modern scholarship with a contemporaneous tendency in artistic production, I do not mean to simply historicize and then suggest that a *Zeitgeist* of atemporality – itself somewhat of a paradoxical phrase! – is the sole cause of what we now see in both art and art history. In addition to shared social conditions, today's historians and artists are also all **authors**, that is to say, they are subjective makers of cultural things. Histories are constructed, arbitrated narratives, as I hope to demonstrate below. While historians in general have always been authors in this sense, medieval-modern scholars in particular raise the issue of authorship in more visible ways because they blur the line between art and history.

Some historians are behaving like artists, and the converse is also true: some contemporary artists are behaving like historians. In fundamentals, what constitutes the activities of historians? Richard Schiff proposes that the practice of writing history involves arbitration, in the elements of both chance and judgment.^[14] Consider Nina Katchadourian's *Sorted Books*, a series of photographs of arranged book spines that tell miniature narratives. Katchadourian began this project in 1993; at the time of this writing, *Sorted Books* is still an ongoing series. The artist visits private homes and various libraries, peruses the shelves, and pulls specific titles, which she then arranges to her liking. The arrangements are often humorous, though some are poignant or acerbic in tone.^[15]

Take, for example, Katchadourian's arrangement from the Akron Stacks, done in 2001 (fig. 1):



Fig. 1 – Nina Katchadourian, *Primitive Art*, from the series “The Akron Stacks,” 2001, from the “Sorted Books” project (1993 and ongoing). Courtesy of the artist, Catharine Clark Gallery, and Pace Gallery.

Primitive Art | *JUST IMAGINE* | *PICASSO* | *Raised by Wolves*

The relationship between the first and third titles, *Primitive Art* and *Picasso* – or rather, “primitivism” and Picasso – is a well-known narrative from the early twentieth century. But the punchline, *Raised by Wolves*, delivers the unexpected humor that nonetheless maintains some narrative sense. For example, those familiar with Rudyard Kipling’s *The Jungle Book* or its later Disney adaptations might get a chuckle out of the idea of Picasso-as-Mowgli. Incidentally, Kipling wrote *The Jungle Book* in 1894, just 12 years before Picasso first set eyes on African sculpture.^[16] A historian could make the case for the narrative sense of this sorted stack beyond its capacity to incite laughter: “primitivism,” Picasso, and Kipling are joined together under the aegis of colonialism as the shared condition of possibility.

If Katchadourian were to remain strictly in a narrow art-historical mode, perhaps the fourth title should have been something like *Looking at African Sculpture*. But the

process for the *Sorted Books* series involves chance, as Katchadourian has no control over the collections in people's homes or in various libraries. She has to use what she can find in what is already there. Additionally, Katchadourian's process of sorting inherently involves her faculty of judgment, as she chooses which books to include and then determines their order. Likewise, the outcome itself might be informed by the chance order in which she encounters the books. In these two senses of chance (arbitrariness) and judgment (arbitration), Katchadourian's process exemplifies the relationship between the lack of control and the assertion of control involved in history writing.

In examining the historical record, a historian makes choices regarding what is worth connecting and bringing to light. The resulting photograph of Katchadourian's process is similar to the historical narrative written by a historian out of bits and pieces of historical data. Note that Katchadourian arranged the spines of the books to align cleanly. The narrative is clear, and the physical books themselves maintain a structural integrity. With *Sorted Books*, an artist has behaved like a historian.

A more salient example of arbitration at work is in Theaster Gates' *Facsimile Cabinet of Women Origin Stories* of 2019 (fig. 2). In this case, Gates does not assume the role of historian, instead inviting viewers to do so. *Facsimile Cabinet* is an archive of approximately 3,000 images related to *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines, produced by the Johnson Publishing Company since 1942. Viewers to the exhibition are invited to wear gloves, pull framed plates from the shelves, and arrange their own juxtapositions and narratives on the ledgers.



Fig. 2 – Theaster Gates, *Facsimile Cabinet of Women Origin Stories*, 2019. Installation at the Colby College Museum of Art, Waterville, ME. Photo: Luc Demers. Image courtesy of Theaster Gates and the Colby College Museum of Art.

Due to the participatory nature of the exhibition, the conditions of display are constantly changing. The archive yields multiple narratives, informed by the subjectivities of the viewers who choose to engage with the collection. In addition to the biases and experiences that viewers bring with them to the work, another viewer's chosen images might prompt others to present complementary or counter-narratives. Chance encounters drive the production of more narratives, themselves constructed through the chance finding of related imagery and the judgment to bring them together.

In the case of *Facsimile Cabinet*, Gates cedes sole authorship of the work, a move that signals the enduring legacy of Roland Barthes on the field of art. Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author," sought to locate meaning in terms of reception and interpretation, rather than in the intention of the author.^[17] The receding

importance of the author likewise allowed art historians to refocus their attention on viewers. For *Facsimile Cabinet*, Gates shares authorship with both the original photographers of the magazine images as well as the viewers who activate the archive. As with other participatory installations, viewers have the more evident opportunity to move from passive reception to active production of interpretation. These activities constitute the work itself as much as the presentation of the archive.

For both Katchadourian and Gates, the types of narratives yielded by their respective archives are circumscribed by the parameters of the archives themselves. In Katchadourian's case, there are only so many books in a given private collection or library. Likewise, the Johnson Publishing Company archive focuses on the specific subject of Black women in the United States during the second half of the twentieth century. What happens when we allow Benjamin and Warburg to open the metaphoric archive, allowing us to envision history as an accumulation that includes our own present chance encounters with images?

The question is one of scale. Chance historical occurrences may appear related; a historian makes judgments in the process of interpretation, arranging events together to form causal relationships, or conceiving of analogic associations to elucidate concepts. Conventional writing involves the application of this process in a concentrated manner; only the evidence in a narrow temporal framework need be considered. Interpretation in this mode, pairing an ekphrasis with a medieval mosaic or criticism with a modern painting, is the manifestation of a learned intuition in art history. To analyze objects and events from the same historical period is the unquestioned second nature of historians. The historical scale goes unnoticed. Our positions as author-historians recede.

This intuition has hardened into orthodoxy, but it takes its root from the human intellectual instinct to categorize like things, to situate the new within a framework of one's pre-existing knowledge. What began as a means of survival is now an innate response: this looks like what I have seen before. A zip painting by Barnett Newman resembles a Byzantine mosaic.^[18] Commonplace in informal conversations, such observations are at best branded as ahistorical (thus counter-intuitive for a historian), or at worst veering toward the dark end of pareidolia, or the perception of patterns in natural phenomena where none might exist.

Why do things that are not alike look alike? They only look alike in the eye of the beholder, and as a result of the instinct to categorize according to resemblance; and when done without regard to conventional periodization, this instinct can be easily

dismissed by the present intuition – the learned, automatic behavior – of art history. If we take arbitration as a framework for understanding the process of history writing, then scholars who write medieval-modern accounts are still producing history. This is arbitration on a larger scale, and the elements of chance and judgment come into higher relief. Our positions as author-historians likewise emerge.

On working in this mode, Didi-Huberman writes, “The capacity to tolerate and deal with an absence of differentiable periods and episteme (to live with an oceanic, unanalyzable unity, lacking beginning, end, and formulable meaning) is to say the least a rare power.”[19] Historians from Europe and the United States have previously enforced a grid of vertical and horizontal interpretations on our field through institutional periodization. This type of classification, born out of the nineteenth-century beginnings of the institutionalization of the discipline, “invoke[s] the nation-state at every step.”[20] At this juncture, Didi-Huberman invites the historian to relinquish control afforded by periodization, to wrest control by other means. The comparative approach reveals plainly the active and discerning hand of the interpretant in the process of making both formal and conceptual juxtapositions. What results is a type of interpretive indexicality that engenders self-consciousness regarding the writing of history. Our positions as author-historians become undeniable. The risks are commensurate with the scale.

Taking risks and countering wrongs

To return to Didi-Huberman’s potentially shocking accusation that historians are cowards, I present an opposing configuration: theory is safe precisely because it remains in the realm of propositions and flexible generalization. In contrast, the positivist historian risks their interpretation against the appearance of a new fact to overturn their conclusions. In other words, historians are always already facing the risk of being wrong. And second, the binary of theory versus history overlooks the already intertwined relationship between the two categories. We are post-theoretical in the sense that critical theory already inflects – acknowledged or not – many of the historical narratives written today. In terms of subject matter, histories told from below or from the margins, as well as perspectives heretofore unexamined, are the narratives marshaled through the door that critical theory opened in the twentieth century.

Barthes’ “death of the author” alone has been liberating for art history, as his ideas ushered in narratives focused on reception. Emphasizing reception widens the temporal scope of inquiry to consider the long histories and multiplicity of contexts

of objects. It is no longer enough to teach the mantra that “art is not made in a vacuum,” to which we must now add, “nor was it ever seen in one.” Experiential factors and site-specificity, the fluid meanings of objects that travel along trade routes, the diversity of interpretations made by various viewers, beholders, agents in their own rights – histories that pay particular attention to these factors are informed by theoretical texts communicated through transdisciplinary channels.

In theory, we might champion contextual instability and plurality of meaning; but in practice, at least in the most severe cases, we condemn it when we see it play out before our eyes outside the walls of higher education. Critical theory has paved many paths, and one of them leads to a dark cul-de-sac of medieval runes as surrogates for swastikas and the acceptance of “alternative facts.” White supremacists use “Celtic” crosses as racist dog whistles, while lies spew forth from the White House on a regular basis.^[21] If theory taught us that there is no absolute truth, if we cannot accept (let alone identify) an original and authoritative meaning – propositions that we initially took to be positive and liberating – then we are forced to confront an intellectual dissonance. Perhaps the current socio-political landscape has prompted medieval historians to remain “indifferent to theory,” even abandoning theoretical projects, for the most negative medievalisms today have proven some long-held critical theories to be true. Images persist through time and gain new meanings, including interpretations that serve evil agendas.

There is a great irony here, as a lot of critical theory arose in large part as a response to fascism. A Jewish intellectual, Benjamin himself tragically committed suicide while trying to escape Europe in 1940. With theory does indeed come the “risk of being wrong,” but wrongness needs to be reframed. There is factually incorrect, a mistake easily remedied by the appearance of historical data; and then there’s morally abhorrent. To be clear, I am referring to the appropriations of medieval imagery by white supremacists. Would it be “wrong” to discount appropriation and viewer agency altogether, when these features have proven to be so fruitful in other arenas, just because some ideologues have deployed the same strategy?

To address some moral dilemmas facing the discipline of art history, particularly in the field of medieval studies, I wish to turn to the very ideas that seem to be so troublesome: the visualization of history not as line but as accumulation, at the face of which a viewer freely locates and interprets a constellation of “surviving” forms. Has this idea gone too far, has it encouraged an anything-anytime-goes mentality? I still accept this Benjaminian proposition, despite its mixed results. The key distinction to emphasize here is historical data as multi-dimensional accumulation

instead of two-dimensional line. Seeing history as accumulation indicates that all subsequent, accruing interpretations are heterogeneous, multiple, and varied. We can likewise judge the value of each interpretation. As author-historians, it might be our moral imperative to do so.

Seeing history as a line is the illusion. The appropriators [in question] are guilty of doing exactly this. They likely do not see themselves as appropriators, but as rightful inheritors of a false lineage that itself traces back to a sham world that never existed. What results is a distorted homogeneity of interpretation, one that we can judge as we evaluate all other interpretations. Theirs is just one of many, despite the fact that their views are predicated on domination. The very theories that give them license to appropriate likewise prove them wrong, not only on moral grounds but on intellectual ones.

At the double risk of making a pronouncement with so little historical distance and simultaneously a considerable separation in terms of “specialization, I would venture that the 2010s witnessed two watershed moments for the field of medieval art history: first, the rise of the creative author-historian as seen in medieval-modern accounts, subsequently obscured, perhaps nearly halted, by the second, or the events of Charlottesville in 2017. From my current vantage point, I consider these to be two moments that shocked the field into awakening without the possibility of returning to sleep. Speaking partly from the outside, those shocks had reverberations beyond the medievalist corners of the academy.

For author-historians, Barthes’ “death of the author” does not equate to our own funerals. Author-historians might sound like “authoritarian,” but I am advocating merely for the recognition and assumption of agency, itself subject to ensuing criticism. If we fully accept our roles as author-historians, then we can conceive of theory as a frame. Such frames transform historical data into historical interpretation, the past into history. The application of modern or contemporary theory to medieval subject matter is another mode of the temporal comparative approach, itself a historical endeavor on a large scale. The forms juxtaposed in this scenario are ideas rather than material objects.

The bigger risk is to disavow the role of theory altogether. Doing so implies an ignorance of historiography and a denial of our own subjectivities inherently embedded in the histories we write. It would be like looking at a painting and ignoring its frame, analyzing the formal content without regard to its contexts. We

can counter the moral transgressions of today with our own faculties of judgment to produce the histories that our contemporary situations demand.

At the most recent College Art Association annual conference, I overheard a young scholar speaking to her colleagues. In a wistful tone, she remarked, “I so admire anyone working on a historical topic that has contemporary relevance.” Ironically, historians of contemporary art have expressed a similar but converse feeling. Operating within an emerging sub-field, we who write on more recent art often ask ourselves, “how can I present the historical relevance of contemporary art?” As the panelists hosted by the Society of Contemporary Art Historians at the CAA conference of 2019 posited, one solution is to refer back to historical conditions most similar to our present circumstances. Germany in the 1930s seemed the most obvious touchpoint, but the room was full of modernists. What would medievalists add? It’s possible that the type of creative, consciously arbitrated, medieval-modern scholarship might return in these types of conversations.

Perhaps the most valuable outcome of medieval-modern scholarship is the continual erosion of the walls that stand between the sub-fields of art history. Disciplinary borders are already permeable; why not temporal ones? I cannot advise that unknown scholar with any specifics, though I might suggest topics (in addition to critical race) related to authoritarianism, environmental disaster, and strategies of resistance to oppression. More broadly speaking, any historical topic has contemporary relevance by virtue of the fact that we, living in the present, have chosen it.

To consciously acknowledge the role of theory in our histories constitutes a recognition of our intellectual positions relative to the discourse that surrounds us today. The result would involve a full awareness and acceptance of our roles as author-historians, the arbiters of both the past and its histories.

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