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Notes
1. Gerhard Wolf, Schleier und Spiegel: Traditionen des Christusbildes und die Bildkonzepte der Renaissance (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2002); see, for example, the discussion of Schongauer on 174.
7. Ibid., 28.
8. Ibid., 74.
12. Ibid., 110–13, esp. 112v: "with anticipationi the work is sometimes made beautiful, and delightful."

Response:
Time Out of Joint

Claire Farago

And—to pose a question that sums up all of the others—what do we mean by "anachronism"?—Hubert Damisch, "The Theme of Choosing," 1992

What Erich Auerbach understood as an "omnitemporal" scheme of history that attempts to adopt God's point of view through figural thinking, grasping history all at once, Wood and Nagel develop into a brilliant reading of material works of art as "the capacity of the figure to embody materially its own signified." But is it surprising that Wood and Nagel do not acknowledge that their art historical ruminations perform (at a metacritical level) the same operations that occupy the depicted humanist saint in his studio, surrounded by works of art? The most obvious typological structure in Car- paccio's painting is (the presumed) Cardinal Bessarion's imitation of Saint Augustine. A memorializing portrait that captures its sitter receiving a lesson in humility offers many parallels to their stratified acts of interpretation, not the least of which are the multiple ways in which they tease out of the picture a series of distinctions between the discursive manner in which humans come to knowledge over time and the timeless presence of divine knowledge.

The topic of "anachronism" was discussed at length by historians of what came to be known as the French Annales school to express philosophical doubts about the practice of history as an exact science. Reconsiderations of the historian's "sin of sins," as Lucien Febvre referred to "anachronism" in 1942, were initially framed by Marc Bloch and Febvre, who worried about historians projecting their mental "equipment [outillage]" onto other eras. The influential concepts of mentalité and longue durée emerged in response to the question of how, if ever, the past is objectively portrayed, given that historians necessarily approach the past from the present, anachronistically, "like a movie reel that is unwound in the opposite direction from which it is viewed." In other parts of Europe, most famously in Frankfurt, where another "school" was simultaneously forming, similar discussions of the contingency of historical truth developed on the same Marxist foundation. The most sophisticated theoretical model of "anachronism" conceived as a term operating in opposition to "chronism" is undoubtedly Walter Benjamin's notion of the "dialectical image."

Any methodological consideration of "anachronism" for the practice of art history deserves to be situated in the context of these conundrums and unfolding critiques of existing models of historical time in relation to the historian's subjectivity. The artwork's complex relation to time has always been central to the debates, though they took shape outside the discipline of art history. Karl Marx's contribution was considerable: the artwork's temporality was integral to his analysis of the commodity, laying the foundation for all future discussion on the understanding that what it means to do history must address what history does to members of society. After the revolutions of 1848–50 were crushed throughout Continental Europe, Marx and Friedrich Engels retreated to England, where they revised their short-term plans for attaining social justice through revolution into a long-range educational program intended to prepare the working class for leadership. For the next decade, the British Museum library served as Marx's humanist study. Not since his shattering critique of the political economy in terms of
the social relations involved in the production of commodities had European intellectuals been as politically engaged with the ongoing social crisis as they were during the years that World War II devastated Europe. The sudden loss of civil liberties, persecution, and genocide—the failed dream of the modern nation-state and its escalating nightmares—were the living conditions of the historians who first questioned the scientific historian’s techniques of factual representation and linked them to explicitly political agendas.

Wood and Nagel seem to want to position themselves in relation to existing discussions of anachronism by locating a different sense of historical time, one that existed prior to the development of the hegemonic chronological narratives of modern nation-states that Bloch and Fevbre, no less than Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Benjamin, dismantled in their critical writings. But the context of the discussion in which Wood and Nagel wish to participate has lost sight of its political engagement with society at large, transforming urgent concerns with social justice into the reductive terms of a debate directed to revising existing disciplinary and subdisciplinary practices. In Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory (1996), Robert Young argues that the dialectical form of theoretical conflicts, far from tearing academic institutions apart, constitutes their necessary structure. These “torn halves of an integral freedom” never add up because the dialectical structure of academic dissension reproduces the economy of capitalism itself. What is the point of making “anachronism” a self-reflexive tool for interrogating the hegemonic structures of chronologically organized historical narratives today? I would like to broaden the terms of discussion, and it will be useful to dwell on the role that Marx assigned to the work of art, which has an unexcavated history of its own in the same historical continuum as Auerbach’s “omnitemporal” scheme, Leonard Barkan’s archaeological scheme, and Wood and Nagel’s “principle of substitution”/”principle of performativity,” which might just be two modern names for the same dialectical phenomenon seen from different, mutually exclusive points of view.

Historical time conceived as a chain of replicas somewhat resembles the structure of typological exegesis, Wood and Nagel observe, and both resemble the structure of “dialectical anachronism” defined as the strategic juxtaposition of heterogeneous moments in time. Yet the substitution of an “ana-chronic” structure for a “chronological” one does not eliminate the need to legitimize the reality of the historical account. It is crucial for the narrator to articulate his or her position in relation to the events narrated. Marx posed the question of why we moderns still find aesthetic appeal in the cultural products of past and different societies. For Marx and Engels, Trotsky, and Lenin, to name some of the most famous political analysts to address this question, the work of art is far richer and more “opaque” than political and economic theory. The work of art yields insight into the realities that ideology hides from view.7 The specifics of Marx’s arguments, grounded in typological assumptions of the nineteenth century, are probably less interesting than the way he framed the question.

In his reading of Marx, Jacques Derrida observed that “if a work of art can become a commodity, and if this process seems fated to occur, it is also because the commodity began [historically] by putting to work, in one way or another, the principle of art itself.”8 There are two fundamental ways in which the concrete work of art, in its distinctly modern sense that the word acquired by the late fifteenth century, prefigures the nineteenth-century commodity. First, because works of art commanded price and prestige beyond the cost of their manufacture, they illustrate Marx’s concept of surplus value, source of both the capitalist’s profit and the worker’s exploitation. Second, because the work of art is too complex to be explained in terms of base and superstructure alone, it provided Marx with a test case for developing a theoretical model sufficiently subtle to explain the political economy. The majority of writing on art in the Marxian critical tradition obscures the relations and oppositions between artwork and commodity, however, and pressures to erase these distinctions entirely (thereby maintaining their conflation) persists in all fields, including art history, art criticism, museology, and visual and material culture studies.

Precedents for Marx’s general notion of the work of art exist in philosophy and political theory, where the Thomistic/Aristotelian understanding of the work of art as a unified composition appeared as a paradigm for productive legislation in discussions by seventeenth-century political philosophers. Long-standing associations existed between philosophical “reflection” as the quintessential activity of human judgment and the order that actual works of art manifest.9 John Locke’s 1690 Essay Concerning Human Understanding is an important philosophical precedent for the abstract idea of the work of art as the product of “reflection and deliberation.” Human knowledge is acquired in successive stages, according to Locke, and when knowledge is finally gained, the order of things within the mind will be displayed simultaneously.10 That is, the activity of reflection disposes knowledge, arranging it in a manner comparable to visual order. And this analogy is not surprising, given the longevity of the theory that cognition proceeds on the model of vision. René Descartes and many other philosophers combined the language of rhetoric and optics to distinguish the “clarity” or “distinctness” of ideas represented in the mind from “dark” impressions at the “lowest” levels of conscious attention.11 Beyond this, the description of human knowledge as a simultaneous display recalls descriptions of God’s omniscient gaze. Both kinds of “time” were defined as a divine proportion, or harmony, for example, in a well-known passage of Leonardo da Vinci’s defense of painting, where painting is judged as if it were a creation of nature: “In effect, whatever there is in the universe by essence, presence, or imagination, the painter has it first in his mind and then in his hands, which are of such excellence that in an equal time they generate a proportioned harmony, as things do in a single glance.”12

While Jacob Burckhardt drew explicit analogies between actual works of art and the state as a work of art, the same metaphors played out somewhat differently for Marx. Marx used the abstract example of the work of art to put his own schematic account of social relations involved in the production of commodities into question—a motif he probably borrowed from political theory. He also used the figures of the fetish and the camera obscura, two kinds of human artifice at the opposite ends of the spectrum of made things, as concrete metaphors to aid his analysis of the multiple ways in which commodities appear unified but mask an underlying
set of contradictions and conflicts. Marx’s reading of things as concrete metaphors and his theoretical appreciation of the work of art might have derived from Thomas Hobbes’s comparison of productive legislation, which “makes” a commonwealth, with God’s creation of the world, where the underlying paradigm of the work of art connoted an illusory unity in the way that anamorphic art does—and also like Marx’s camera obscura. In a sense, both Burchhardt’s cultural history of Italy and Marx’s contemporaneous writings on political economy are self-consciously fabricated “works of art” by their authors’ own definitions of the term and in keeping with long-standing conventions for discussing beauty in philosophy and political theory.

The pejorative charge of anachronism as the inadmissible confusion of periods or eras presupposes that the accuser knows what the correct time of history is. Even though Bloch and Fevre understood the reduciveness of positivist historians’ conception of historical time in this sense, the Annales school notion of the longue durée never called into question the ideological effects of chronological time itself, as Hubert Damisch recognized in the passage excerpted at the beginning of this text. Benjamin, on the other hand, developed the Marxist understanding that art is a social practice into the argument that the revolutionary artist develops existing forces of artistic production to create new social relations between the artist and audience. Howard Caygill glosses Benjamin’s concept of a dialectical cultural history as a concrete illustration of what it might mean to rub history against its grain in this manner. The decisive element in establishing new social relations through writing or other revolutionary ways of making art is not the restitution of past suffering by the present, which would be for the present to come into complete possession of the past, but rather the impossibility of ever possessing the past. A dialectical cultural history, which would recognize that the past can unsettle and disrupt the present, is possible if it adopts “the destructive element which authenticates both dialectical thought and the experience of the dialectical thinker.” The “destructive element” refers to the possibility that the reserve of the past will destroy aspects of the present and open it to the future. Ultimately, historical materialism fails to achieve this because its practitioners prescribe in advance the relation between past and present, selecting what is relevant and why it is relevant and reducing the past to items in an inventory of the present.

Disciplinarity and professionalism do not excuse intellectuals from taking responsibility for the effects of the knowledge they produce beyond their own narrow specializations. The ways in which the subfields of art history and its neighboring humanistic fields of study are framed have wide-ranging concrete effects in and well beyond Western Europe that are crucially implicated in contemporary thought and action. Yet most contemporary discussion among art historians of “anachronism” as a creative interpretative paradigm has not acknowledged the culturally and historically specific nature of chronology as a Western, European construct.

The most fundamental problem at hand for conceptualizing disciplinary knowledge as an ethical practice is the notion of identity itself. Emmanuel Lévinas has argued for a notion of truth that is at considerable odds with the dominant rationalist one: his framework relies on the lived experience of the other. Against a notion of the truth as the instrument of a mastery being exercised by the knower over areas of the unknown as he or she brings them within the fold of the same, Lévinas proposes that there is a form of truth that is totally alien to me, that I do not discover within myself, but that calls on me from beyond me, and it requires me to leave the realms of the known and of the same in order to settle in a land that is under its rule. And this other is not a threat to be reduced, nor an object given to a knowing subject, but that which constitutes me as an ethical being. In this encounter I discover my responsibility for the existence of this other, a responsibility at the root of all my decisions: this is the ground of my response-ability—that is, my capacity to communicate with others and with myself in noncoercive ways.

Connections between foundational critiques of disciplinar-ity as such and the concrete project of critiquing a given disciplinary practice are often obscure. It may be one thing to critically assess practices that conform to existing disciplinary expectations, but it is often quite another to question the configuration itself. Nonetheless, unless the subject position of the critic in the institution is brought into the equation, the past will always haunt the present, and the most significant epistemological and ethical issues remain unarticulated and unaddressed. The specter is invisible in the mirror, as Derrida put it, and this condition can either haunt us in the manner of the ghost of Hamlet’s father reminding us that “time is out of joint” or we can remember our past, learn from it in the present, and use the lessons to devise a better future.

Regarding the standing of anachronism in current debates over the status and nature of historical time, Sanjay Seth writes that “constituting an object as an object of historical investigation” involves dividing it from our present, marking it off as different, definitively separated from the present, yet the practices and protocols by which we do so are always those of the present (what else could they be?). The current methods, which have erased these events and transformed them into codes or problematic issues of research, nonetheless bear evidence of former structurings and forgotten histories. Thus founded on the rupture between a past that is its object and a present that is the place of its practice, “history endlessly finds the present in its object and the past in its practice.” Yet “history” cannot do precisely this in the case of the non-Western world. Here, history continues “to find the present in its object,” but it does not find “the past in its practice,” for the past of non-Western countries is not history’s past. It follows that history is not a fact of the world that is more or less accurately represented, but rather that it is only one way for a society to constitute the past and establish a relation with it. To live in history, and to wish to write it, is not a universal anthropological postulate, but it is a certain way to conceive of and be in the world, and it is a certain practice of subjectivity. We have to conceive writing history as a transnational exercise; Kalahari bushmen, Seth continues, do not write anthropologies of the white man. If we take this as a regulative ideal of how to give reasons when confronting other modes of reasoning besides the cause-and-effect model of historical narration, it may serve to make history writing an ethical rather than an imperial practice.
Could the moral urgency of the indignation of those who have suffered at the hands of victors and colonizers be the starting point of constructive involvements with an ethical politics? Unless our museologies and art histories are linked explicitly to the oldest and most fundamental questions of how our societies should be run, of how free societies in particular should be structured, they will remain, wittingly or not, facets of the corporatized aestheticism of identity politics and of the infatuation and edutainment industries that constitute cultural practice in the current epoch of neostructuralism euphemistically called globalization.21

In the current political climate in the United States and elsewhere, the extent of our responsibilities as academics and intellectuals to link museology, history, theory, and criticism to contemporary social conditions is an urgent and painfully obvious question. Museology and art history have long remained under the sway of scientism. The ethics of scholarship, however, demands radical acts of self-reflection. In 1978, conveying the lessons of French deconstructionists (who succeeded the Annalists), Hayden White criticized the assumptions of empirical historians who assumed that they eschewed ideology if they remained true to the facts, who believed that history could produce a knowledge as certain as anything offered by the physical sciences and as objective as a mathematical exercise. White’s famous essay entitled “The Fictions of Factual Representation” problematized the illusion that history could be written without employing any fictional techniques at all, an illusion that was itself a reflex of the nineteenth-century ideology that a value-neutral description of the facts prior to interpretation or analysis was possible. As White observed, “What is at issue here is not, What are the facts? But rather, How are the facts to be described in order to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another?”22

What has been at stake in the writing of art history is likewise the control of “modes of explaining”—that is, the legitimization of the “reality” of history has often been cast in terms of legitimizing a single interpretive truth. The truth (in the guise of the facts of history) would make us free. But, as White argued, the difference between history and a philosophy of history is one of degree, not of kind, in the explicitness of its philosophical content: every history contains a full-blown if only implicit philosophy of history. History buries its conceptual apparatus in the interior of its narratives, whereas philosophy brings that apparatus to the surface of the text. Factual (re)presentation is grounded in an implicit philosophy that claims that a chain of causes and effects constitutes mere temporal succession and not narration. Chronology is a powerful and seductive rhetorical apparatus, a fictive construct that masks ideology under the guise of “natural time.”

There is, of course, nothing “natural” about constructing time as chronology or privileging temporal succession above other forms of narration. White’s point about the distinctions between history and a philosophy of history being at base a matter of implicit versus explicit philosophical argumentation resonates with the arguments of Michel de Certeau in an essay entitled “Psychoanalysis and Its History,” where he observes that history writing and psychoanalysis contrast with each other as two modes of structuring or distributing the space of memory.23 They stage two strategies of time, two methods of formatting the relation between past and present. While history juxtaposes past and present, psychoanalysis recognizes the past in the present. For conventional history writing, this relation is one of succession (one thing after another), cause and effect (one thing following from another), and separation (the past as distinct from the present). Psychoanalysis, though, treats relations between past and present as one of imbrication (one thing in the place of the other) and repetition (one thing reproduces the other but in another form). Both, de Certeau argued, developed to address analogous problems—to understand the differences, or guarantee the continuities, between the organization of the actual and the formations of the past; to relate the representations of the past or present to the conditions that determined their production.

Wood and Nagel might have adduced additional cultural evidence to support the existence of a “principle of substitution,” such as geometric habits of telling time and of measuring space as a series of proportional units, along the lines of Michael Baxandall discussing habits of gauging or estimating volume as an exercise in practical geometry. Baxandall suggested that art historians interested in historical modes of artistic production and reception deserve to consider geometric habits of analysis, even though they are not, strictly speaking, artistic procedures, as pertaining to the “period eye.”24 Similarly, Wood and Nagel might also have inquired more deeply after the philosophical underpinnings of the two types of artistic authority that they argue operate in tension as mutually exclusive theories of origin. In their historical investigation of how the “cause” of the work of art was understood by audiences contemporary with its physical manufacture, it appears to me that they rely on standard forms of historical documentation and iconographic analysis to provide the historical evidence for their argument, despite their simultaneous critique of Erwin Panofsky’s iconological method. By contrast, when Georges Didi-Huberman posited that art history was an “anachronistic” discipline, he meant that in practice, art historians impose a modern notion of art on evidence that came before this notion of art developed. Read as an active interrogation of the limiting conditions of art historical writing and research in general, Didi-Huberman’s study of Fra Angelico’s S. Marco frescoes explored the philosophical context in which works of art might once have functioned as both devotional practice and theological meditation. Viewing art in this expanded field of cultural production, the colored blotches that imitate the appearance of feigned marble panels are recognized by the historian to be “enigmatic” and not merely decorative features of the fresco cycle. Didi-Huberman refers the fictive marble panels “back to the mystery from which it [the enigma] drew its most profound and peculiar necessity,” namely, Christian theology of the Incarnation and the figured language in which this theology found expression.25

Thus, various types of historical evidence that the artist may not have known directly or to which neither he nor his viewers necessarily had access can be brought to bear on our present-day comprehension of historical works of art. In thus characterizing the pictorial poetics of blotches and traces, Didi-Huberman conceived the pictorial sign as a material
imprint, the symptom of a culturally and historically specific kind of figurability—in this case, one that "presupposes" both resemblance and distance, Dissemblance and a manner of touch. He refers the artistic image to the figuration of a mystic understanding of the Christian doctrine of Incarnation as the sublime union of opposites, a simultaneous contradiction. Or, if you will, to a historical variety of a sensate dialectical image, a concrete metaphor with which the informed viewer interacts to experience individually the ineffable truth of divine presence as collectively envisioned by a society. I have already mentioned why Didi-Huberman's concept of anachronism does not go far enough, because it fails to put into question the culturally constructed concept of time as chronology.

Wood and Nagel appear to be interested in a similar set of cultural conceptions and methodological issues regarding the ability of cultural historians to recuperate the metafigurability of artistic production within a specific historical setting. However, they have not pushed the envelope of conventional art historical practices as far as Didi-Huberman did. They reflect critically on one of the categories of Panofskian art history, namely, the unacknowledged tropic structure of "chronology" as an ordering device. Yet Wood and Nagel seem untroubled by other chronological assumptions that inform their own interpretation, such as the terminology of periodization ("Middle Ages," "Renaissance") that they employ without comment. Writing history in terms of continuities and ruptures does not mandate reliance on nineteenth-century notions of distinct historical periods identifiable by certain characteristic traits. Nor do they call for the consideration of other forms of evidence than those that would be adduced in an empirically conceived model of inferential argumentation. Richard Krautheimer's discussion of medieval floor plans or historical attitudes toward relics and forgeries, for example, are asserted within the framework of their own argument as analogous cases, similar on the basis of their resemblances perceptible to us from our own standpoint in time. The historical and cultural (dis)continuum between us and "them" as different categories of viewers is collapsed into a single point of observation. To argue in this manner is still to think in terms of an art historical model of "style" as something that privileges us to understand material evidence from other times and places directly, using our trained X-ray vision.

I don't mean to discount Wood and Nagel's efforts to interrogate scholarly conceptions of artifacts as anchored in historical time by the legibility of their style, but the manner in which works of art exist "through" time deserves even more scrutiny, even more vigorous shaking of our discipline's epistemological foundations. To introduce one key category of available evidence that seems beyond their purview, Aristotle described recollection as an inferential series of mental connections between discrete experiences stored in the material memory. Aristotelian accounts of recollection as an inferential process taking place in the physical medium of the brain in certain respects resemble both contemporary accounts of the topology of memory that Wood and Nagel mention and historical attitudes toward certain works of art as "ancient" regardless of their actual date of manufacture. Might it have been useful to bring the Aristotelian underpinnings of certain long-standing mental categories to bear on their observations? If time was perceived as a proportional regression of moments into an authoritative past, and if the workings of the individual mind were once conceived on this Aristotelian model of recollection, then Wood and Nagel's understanding of two conflicting "principles" might be described differently, as two halves of a single dialectic operating at a deeper level of historical relatedness than the discipline of art history generally acknowledges as part of its domain. That's just one possible avenue of investigation disclosed by their valuable critique. The value ascribed to the artistic design over its material form, the manner in which this historical set of categories operates in various settings, the way in which such historical categories impose on our present-day understanding of which questions are worth investigating, and what kinds of evidence are related, simply because we do not recognize the categories themselves as forms of cultural production—all these open up existing disciplinary and subdisciplinary formations to healthy and creative acts of self-reflection. My remarks are intended to suggest why and how the process of meaning production is inherently, and without exception, always politically charged. Writing with a social conscience in 2005, one cannot fail to ask who is served and who is excluded today by studying the capacity of early moderns to manipulate two theories of origin in the same conceptual field. How do we deal with historical theories of "origin"? How do we define our own "conceptual field"?

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Notes


7. Terry Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), provides an excellent summary of Marx's dis-
The Authors Reply:

Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood

The image produces the effect of a collapse of time, an effect that we attempted to describe and account for in various ways. Philology, the science of difference, emerged in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a tool for chronological sorting. Philology is therefore compelled to dismiss the constitutional anachronism of the image as mere error. In one classic account of the Renaissance, reasserted by Charles Dempsey, art proceeds in step with the recovery of letters initiated by Petrarch. Our account stresses instead the misalignment between philology and art. The new category “artwork,” we have argued, offered a theoretical sanctuary for the lies and confusion generated by reconceiving forgery and anachronism as intertextual citation.

The aim of our paper, in any case, was not to readjust period labels but rather to introduce an analytical model that describes the emergence of the modern institution of the