


11-2019

## Art as a Political Witness

Lenore Metrick-Chen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal>

 Part of the [Ethics and Political Philosophy Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [International and Intercultural Communication Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), and the [Political Theory Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Metrick-Chen, Lenore (2019) "Art as a Political Witness," *International Dialogue*: Vol. 9, Article 11.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.ID.9.1.1172>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/id-journal/vol9/iss1/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the The Goldstein Center for Human Rights at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Dialogue by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

# Review

## ***Art as a Political Witness***

Kia Lindroos and Frank Möller. Opladen, Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2017. 239pp.

### Lenore Metrick-Chen\*

Kia Lindroos and Frank Möller, the editors of this volume, raise a serious question: Can art increase political awareness either through witnessing itself or by creating witnesses in its audience? Wisely, the book does not attempt to provide a single, definitive answer to these questions; instead, the editors explain that they selected authors who examine aesthetic forms of expression, with the intention of an inquiry into an expanded idea of who is a witness. Beginning with the definition of witness from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles* as someone “who is or was present, and is able to testify from personal observation,” the editors then briefly relate how each author departs from this standard definition. Lindroos and Möller have created a collection in which each chapter fits the theme of exploring art as a political witness, and yet, from Bruno Lefort’s “*Achrafiyeh: The Politics of Fear in a Visual Representation of Lebanese Factionalism*” to Sally Butler and Roland Blelker’s “Embodied Witnessing: Indigenous Performance Art as

---

\* **Lenore Metrick-Chen**, associate professor of art and cultural history at Drake University, specializes in investigating visual art as a language of cultural communication and memory. In her book *Collecting Objects/ Excluding People: Chinese Subjects and the American Visual Culture 1870–1900*, SUNY Press and in numerous articles, she concentrates on relationships between art and the social construction of race and ethnicity. She also has curated significant exhibitions exploring this topic, and her exhibition *Out Town: Reclaiming the Narrative*, about preserving and reconceptualizing the history of Black lowans, is touring numerous locations throughout 2018–20. She is currently working on an edited volume on monuments and memory, forthcoming from SUNY Press.

Political Dissent,” each chapter offers a fascinating viewpoint. And through these highly original essays, the notion of witness begins to be moved.

As the editors explain, the traditional understanding of a witness is a person at the site when an event occurs. The witness would have first-hand experience of the event—in other words, an eyewitness. While deliberately rejecting the equation of all witnessing as eye-witnessing, the essays nevertheless stay close to the idea of a witness as one who viscerally experiences some aspect of the event, as opposed to learning about it through mass media’s “widespread dissemination and the possibility of anonymous and thus unpredictable uptake” (Luhmann 1996: 103).

All the chapters contain valuable extensions of the idea of witness. Those most successful have a clear purpose in their reasons for changing the traditional definition. The book begins with “Image Control in the Age of Terror,” Louie Palu’s instructive and cautionary essay on photographs on war and violence circulating widely through all media. Palu, an award-winning documentary photographer, speaks with an insider’s knowledge when he states that “When I see a photograph, the first thing I do is figure out who took it” and then immediately goes on to ask “for what purpose was the photograph taken?” (58). As Palu explains, photographs are often detached from the witness/photographer and used for purposes not necessarily intended by the photographer. Palu’s question “who controls what you see?” (64) encourages our awareness of who selected the context in which we see a photograph. And it provokes us to question why a particular photo was selected from the many taken on that subject. In his central question about our visual literacy “what are [sic] we are and are not seeing or understanding in this new world visual order?” (ibid.). Palu moves beyond the facile truism that a photograph is a direct expression of the viewpoint of the witness/photographer to the realization that the photograph, as all visual representation, cannot speak for itself. Instead, it can—and is—put to uses that might distort the understanding of the originating event. Palu does not claim the photograph witnesses what the photographer experienced or saw, but instead, cautions us that a photograph is always brought into a context, and therefore gains a meaning from its location.

Another fascinating essay “Children Witnessing War: Emotions Embodied in the Theatre Play *Wij/Zij*,” by Susanna Hast, extends the idea of witnessing to children’s experience of living through a siege. Rather than communicate their ordeal through word or image, she describes how children’s expression is through the dualism of body and mind.

Children witness their bodies as well as their words and silences. Hast specifically discusses the aesthetics of child-actors in a play titled *Wij/Zij (Us/Them)*, written and directed by Carly Wijs, about the perceptions of children in the siege of Beslan, Russia, in 2004. Hast's fundamental question was "how does a theatrical play bear witness to war through the bodies of two actors in movement?" She is not interested in the degrees to which art reproduces reality but in the insights it produces.

The playwright was concerned not only with children's victimization in war, but equally with their agency. Through her direction, the bodies of the children /actors convey through movement and posture what their words cannot tell. Throughout her essay, Hast emphasizes that in the play, war experience is *heavily* mediated and that the witnessing she is focused on, conveyed by the play, is not a "you are there" emotional recreation, but an aesthetic production that encourages reflection. Hast makes it clear that she does not claim that the play is witness to the events it depicts. The aesthetics are designed to exhibit the agency of children, seen in their bodies, whose expression of war is "more corporeal than social"; to witness the children's bodies as the site of the political. Through aesthetic interpretation, the audiences reflect on "silences, glimpses of something that does not quite fit the dominant narratives of war" (205).

Suvi Alt's chapter "Bearing Witness and Playing in Ruins: On the Onto-Poetica of Abandoned Places," proposes that the visitor to ruined urban sites, not yet turned into tourist commodities, can reclaim a buried history. Witnessing remnants of the urban past opens the visitor to an experience of ambiguity and alterity that contrast with the canned, prescribed experiences designed by profit-seeking amusement parks. Instead, urban exploration of ruined factories or abandoned industrial spaces subvert the capitalist apparatus that has overtaken public sites in our culture, which expect every experience and transaction to be an action for monetary profit. Rather than putting remnants of the past "to a new use" (190)—one understood as domesticating the site for smooth functioning within the system—their location off the grid allows the visitor to witness the silence and attend to absence. They give evidence to what is missing from dominant history, suggest what is not spoken about in dominant culture.

In "The Violence of Witnessing," Frank Möller grapples with a question many have wondered about: how to create knowledge of genocide and yet not perpetuate aspects of violence, visual violence, in the retelling. Möller posits a possible solution: he describes the possibilities of a visual language of allusion, writing "Pointing at one thing (a cloud, a

passport) but actually pointing at another thing (genocide), thus capitalizing on the space of architecture, may help turn photographic reception into (critical) reflection of that which is singled out for representation—a cloud, a passport or a comb, a hat, a wedding ring, a stove—but also, and more importantly, of that which is alluded to in this representation—genocide ...” (235). Underlying the importance of visual indirection—allusion—is the desire to find a way to disseminate knowledge of violent events without “simultaneously violating the dignity of the victims and doing harm to the beholder” (ibid.). By showing a photograph that does not represent genocide but presents images that refer to effects of genocide he suggests that what cannot be seen directly gains power through simultaneously evoking both presence and absence through the imagination. To speak of those murdered by showing a photograph of their passport with no passport photo, or a passport photo in which the image can be barely deciphered, fugitive like a ghost, awakens emotions of loss and anguish, while the passport itself points to official, administrative complicity in this adversity.

Throughout the book, the authors make it clear that, however defined, witnessing demands invention. “Witnessing Language: Charles Bernstein and 9/11” by Tommi Kotonen presents a nuanced meditation on language itself. Kotonen conveys the insight that witnessing occasions the inability to use the given language as before; witnessing necessitates the creation of a new language to convey the witnessing. In this way, witnessing is not a description of an event but includes the transformation of the person going through the event. The witness can no longer speak the same language, and the author explains how a key factor in witnessing is creating “not digestible messages, but a new vision” (172).

The chapters present distinct ways to think of new visions for witnessing. In contemplating art’s role as witness, the editors recognized Walter Benjamin’s groundbreaking work in this area and reflected that “art is not conceived of as the presentation of something else, such as ‘reality’ or ‘truth’, but is understood as *the presentation itself*. Here, presentation is actually the idea that connects to the witness: art has (or might have) the capacity to be a witness in the very act of its presentation” (44). Art, then, can be a witness to its own subject: it witnesses itself as it presents itself. Susanna Hast’s chapter on *Wij/Zij* exemplifies that relationship of art and witness. Clarifying that “The play is not a ‘window to reality’ in the way a film or a photograph is often considered an eyewitness,” nor is the play “a witness that was present at an event,” Hast asks: “What kind of a witness is a theatre

play, which relies on some known facts about a terrorist attack on a school, but takes great liberties in interpreting war experience? The play does not even transmit a witness testimonial or attempt to capture the authentic” (205, 206). She answers her own question: “Experiencing and witnessing are mixed into the art created by the play” (206). The play does not witness the event, but it is a form of art which, as Benjamin had described, witnesses its own subject, and in this regard: “The play is a witness to visual politics in an age of war photography and film” (205).

But a vulnerability in transforming a definition is determining the limits of the transformation. How far can a definition be pushed before it begins spiraling and becomes decentered from meaning? New ways of understanding can seem rather fantastical, and ambiguities occur if the relationship between art and witnessing is not carefully unpacked. For instance, in several of the chapters, an object is spoken of as itself “witnessing” an event and it is difficult to differentiate whether the word “witnessing” is intended to be understood literally or metaphorically. In some instances, the agency given to an inanimate object seems perhaps at least partially unintended: the elision of metaphor and literal seems accidental, a slip of the tongue. But in other chapters, it is clear that the object is meant to be understood as a literal witness. Is there any longer a difference between thinking of the objects poetically as a witness and treating them as actual witnesses? Can an inanimate object have agency or does the Marxist idea hold that an object is fetishized when it is imagined to act as if it had personhood? Does witnessing still require a sentient being?

Approaching this from a slightly different direction, is proscribing agency to an object a phenomenon inherently associated with visual language? We don’t say that a poem is witnessing, we remain aware of the person—that the poet is witnessing through the medium of the poem. What is the slippage that allows us to say that “the photograph is witnessing” instead of saying that the photographer is witnessing? Is this the remains of the aura, the magical thinking Benjamin famously refers to? The link between the art object as witnessing agent needs to be explored further.

One last caveat regards a more deliberate, intentional experiment in a proposed semantic shift. In his chapter on the violence of witnessing, Möller considers visual art’s ability to depict an event that the artist did not witness. Throughout his essay, it is clear that Möller desires a way to extend the network of people who comprehend the atrocity of the genocide as if in a first-hand way, and yet without expanding the violence of the genocide, even through visual representation. In his conscientious investigation of imaging

genocide, Möller asks if an artwork can bear witness to an event even when the artist arrived too late on the scene to have experienced or viewed the incident. His stated hope is that, in depicting the aftermath of the horrific event, the art can “shed light also on the original event” (229). And, pushing his concept of the late-arriving artist even further, Möller posits that the late-arriving artist does not merely *shed light* on the original event, but is in fact a witness to the event: “Thus, image-makers are witnesses *of the original event even if they arrive late*, after the event, imaging the event’s aftermath” (ibid., my italics).

He explains: “Their absence from location during the event does not undermine their subject position and their political role of witness” (ibid.). But this is the key: What is it that they witness? If it is the original event, has the meaning of “original event” also changed, becoming extended in time? If the artist goes to a site a day after an event, is this witnessing the original event? What about a year after the event? Or a century? Taken to the extreme, can we witness without participating? And in one further removal in the definition of witness from eyewitness, Möller writes: “Engagement transforms spectators into witnesses—not only of a given work of art but also of that which this work of art references” (220). This is an entirely different role for art, creating witnesses to the originating event and not, as Benjamin would have it, of the artwork itself. Several essays in the volume direct us to Primo Levi’s comments on the (un)reliability of eyewitness accounts. Yet the discrepancy from one eyewitness account to another does not make these accounts equivalent to those of people not present at the event. Especially in regard to acts of genocide: to blur the experiences of those whose lives were at risk with those who safely and comfortably are affected by an artwork—no matter how deeply affected, is to lose sight of the weight and unique status of victims of the violence.

In its wide-range of thoughtful and original chapters, this collected volume achieves its goal of exploration of “art’s unique capacities to serve as a political witness ...” (45). Each essay adds a new way of thinking of art as a witness, illustrating ways that these distinctions can be helpful. Möller discusses both directly and indirectly what is gained by these extensions, the extension of the time in which one can be a witness, the extension of agency of witnessing. Nevertheless, the caution remains, as the authors clearly know, that the new definitions don’t also dilute the idea of witness. We also need to ask if anything significant is lost by any of the extensions of witnessing.

As these essays test the word ‘witness’, stretch it and experiment with it, the core meaning of witness maintains its integrity, demonstrates what it can resist, and lends itself to further understandings of relationships between art and politics. Even if the reader ultimately remains unpersuaded about all the claims, the new definitions propel the viewer to methods of gaining insight beyond reading dominant historical narratives. The essays are little gems, offering new ways to understand and to locate historical voices that have been lost or deliberately silenced.

#### **REFERENCE**

Luhmann, Niklas. (1996). *The Reality of Mass Media*. Translated by Kathleen Cross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).