Variantology
Barnaby Dicker

**Siegfried Zielinski and Silvia M. Wagnermaier, eds,
*Variantology 1 – On Deep Time Relations of Arts,
Sciences and Technologies*, Cologne: Walther König,
Köln, 2005, 384 pages, 41 illustrations, €58**

**Siegfried Zielinski and David Link, eds, *Variantology
2 – On Deep Time Relations of Arts, Sciences and
Technologies*, Cologne: Walther König, Köln, 2006,
450 pages, 40 illustrations, €58**

**Siegfried Zielinski and Eckhard Fürlus, eds
*Variantology 3 – On Deep Time Relations of Arts,
Sciences and Technologies in China and Elsewhere*,
Cologne: Walther König, Köln, 2008, 479 pages, 78
illustrations, €48**

**Siegfried Zielinski and Eckhard Fürlus, eds,
*Variantology 4 – On Deep Time Relations of Arts,
Sciences and Technologies in the Arabic-Islamic World
and Beyond*, Cologne: Walther König, Köln, 2010,
518 pages, 100 illustrations, €48**

**Siegfried Zielinski and Eckhard Fürlus, eds,
*Variantology 5 – Neapolitan Affairs. On Deep
Time Relations of Arts, Sciences and Technologies*,
Cologne: Walther König, Köln, 2011, 608 pages, 164
illustrations, €48**

The field of so-called media archaeology is no longer
marginal. Its most forceful intervention has been to
render nigh untenable the view – so pivotal to film and
media history – that 'cinema' began with the Lumière
Cinématographe of 1895 or the Edison Kinetoscope of
1894. In place of this view, media archaeologists have
pointed to earlier practices and technologies that may be
considered proto-cinematic, showing their importance
in shaping modern conceptions of spectatorship,
aesthetics and even social and cultural knowledge. In
so doing, media archaeology's relationship with art
history has come through as equally important. So
far, this relationship has been less antagonistic, if not
complimentary, and is linked to the increased acceptance
of the place of film, video and 'new media' within
art history. In recent years a number of prominent
art historians have published works hinging on and

advancing media archaeology, including Jean Clair,
Jonathan Crary, Linda Dalrymple Henderson, Rosalind
Krauss, Philippe-Alain Michaud, Margit Rowell, and
Barbara Maria Stafford, with Walter Benjamin's *Arcades
Project* occupying a strong pre-cursory position.[1]

As a more or less distinct field, media archaeology
has and will continue to present a valuable contribution
to our account of the emergence of (cultural)
modernity.[2] However, as this statement implies, that
value resides in the degree to which media archaeology
intersects with or acts as a bridge between disciplines.
The recent growth and interest in the field of media
archaeology demands that the disciplines from which
it derives make inroads to assimilate it more decisively.
The *Variantology* series – which claims to explore 'deep
time' relations of arts, sciences and technologies
– provides one such platform for this. But what is
variantology? What is meant here by 'deep time'? And
what do these terms and the research published under
their mantle offer that 'media archaeology' does not?
These are the questions, taken from an art-historical
perspective, that guide this review.

The five *Variantology* volumes bring together work
by over sixty renowned contributors across cultural
and scientific disciplines, including art historians Hans
Belting, John Berger, Laura Marks, Miklós Peternák
and Elizabeth von Samsonow. There are also short
excerpted texts by additional authors annexed to a
number of essays.[3] The stout, abundantly illustrated
and attractively designed volumes carry extended
pictorial contributions by Werner Nekes (volume 1),
Peter Blegvad (volume 2), Ingo Günther (volume 3),
Irit Batsry (volume 4) and Giovanni Ricciardi and Rosa
Barba (volume 5).[4] As their subtitles suggest, the last
three volumes adopt specific geo-cultural perspectives.

The notion of 'deep time' lacks a clear explanation across
the book series. While its meaning is partially self-
evident, the specific frame it affords variantology must
be garnered piecemeal. As an introduction, however,
readers can consult editor Ziegfried Zielinski's book
titled *Archäologie der Medien: Zur Tiefenzeit des Hörens und Sehens*,
Reinbek, 2002, translated in 2006 as *Deep Time of the
Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical
Means*.[5] The term 'deep time' emerged in geology where
it refers to the 'almost incomprehensible immensity'
of geological timescales.[6] Although the term was
coined by John McPhee in 1980, its discovery is dated
to a period spanning the seventeenth and nineteenth
centuries.[7] According to Stephen Jay Gould, 'deep time

is so difficult to comprehend, so outside our ordinary experience, that it remains a major stumbling block to our understanding. ... We can really only comprehend it as metaphor.'[8] Gould's equation of deep time with metaphor is not carried over into variantology, which follows media archaeology's concern with interlinked concrete practices and conceptual frameworks. The timescales here are naturally less expansive and thus more readily comprehensible, although they generally exceed most disciplinary periodizations. Following the Italian philosopher and historian of science Paolo Rossi, Gould notes that 'the discovery of deep time combined the insights of those we would now call theologians, archaeologists, historians, and linguists – as well as geologists ... [with] several scholars ... work[ing] with competence in all these areas.'[9] This interdisciplinary setting is mirrored in variantology, where contributors are drawn from various fields.

For Gould, 'deep time ... imposed a vision of reality rooted in ancient traditions of Western thought [about time], as much as it reflected a new understanding of rocks, fossils, and strata.'[10] The vision of reality of which Gould speaks hinges on dichotomous conceptions of time, one linear, one circular.[11] Similarly, variantology seeks to penetrate deeply into, unravel and look beyond Western traditions of thought, as well as to reconsider notions of time and cultural development.

In the face of a perceived 'culture of bloc formation and programmatic standardisation',[12] variantology takes its task as opening up an 'experimental field'[13] in order to 'draft a cartography of research that deviates from the familiar map of established and well-known [conceptual] centres.'[14] As its name suggests, emphasis is placed on the 'variant', and in such a way as to house a paradox in which 'invocation of the *logos* ... serves ... [as an] ongoing irritation' to all users.[15] Opening volume 1, editors Zielinski and Silvia Wagnermaier describe the 'variant' as interesting 'both methodologically and epistemologically as a mode characterised by lightness and ease'.[16] 'To be different, to deviate, to change, to alternate, to modify', they stress, is a positive thing: 'To vary something that is established is an alternative to destroying it'[17] (the implication here being that destruction is a negative thing).

This seemingly unusual approach becomes more familiar when we read that Michel Foucault and Georges Bataille are key influences on the idea

of variantology.[18] While neither were art historians, they did write extensively on art, as is well known. Bataille penned two highbrow coffee table studies on Lascaux Cave and Manet for publisher Albert Skira, published simultaneously in French and English in 1955, whilst Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (1966), translated as *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1970) opens with, and arguably hinges on, an astounding reading of Diego Velázquez's 1656 painting, *Las Meninas*. Variantology's application of the ideas of such figures as Bataille and Foucault may be taken as an attempt to further extend the discursive space they have opened up, rather than rehabilitate their ideas into historiographic models to which they were opposed – an action that is all too easily and unintentionally done.

Elsewhere in volume 1, in an essay that works to establish the interplay between media archaeology and variantology, Timothy Druckery underlines the need to

> delineate an approach to 'media archaeology' that, on the one hand, avoids idiosyncrasies or subjectivities, and, on the other, doesn't lull itself into isolating media history as a specialized discipline insulated from its discursive historical role.[19]

Following variantology's own terms, Druckery's second point is paramount. The first point, however, rather clashes with Zielinski and Wagnermaier's view that 'research that is not ... driven by wishes and hopes belongs to the hades of academe; it is anaemic and lifeless.'[20] For Nils Röller, variantology is well suited to take stock of various 'relationship[s] between norm and deviation'.[21] This subtle twist to Zielinski and Wagnermaier's opening schema provides a pragmatic means to firmly link variantology (and potentially media archaeology) to established disciplines such as art history and the history of science (as called for by Druckery). Röller's emphasis on norm and deviation could, furthermore, supplement feminist and globalist reflections on the art-historical canon and the ways in which it has and might be constructed. Here, we come to touch on the potentially contentious aspect of the art history–media archaeology intersection, namely, regarding the inclusion of 'popular', mass-produced, often science or technology driven 'entertainments' within the framework of art. In place of definitive judgements on the matter, we have many questions over the degree to which art can be separated from

science and technology and what this might mean for art history. These are less philosophical problems than historical problems that can be addressed through careful study – such as we see in many of the variantology essays and elsewhere.

'To conceptualise and pursue art *after* media', Zielinski and Wagnermaier argue, is to recognize that 'the processing, transforming, and shaping energy of technology does not have to be shunned or denied, but neither does it have to be celebrated as a spellbinding event.'[22] Noting the role of technology and media in the production and maintenance of historical records, they reason that 'to acquire expertise in the depths of a subject presupposes a working method that allows interpretation from a media perspective.'[23] In this way, variantology is at its most pointed, aspiring to encompass and potentially interlace both methodological theory and historical subject matter.

Primary initiator and co-editor of the series, Siegfried Zielinski provides an added (counter-) unifying principle to the variantology project. In Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka's assessment, Zielinski and his work stand in opposition to any move towards media archaeology's 'assimilation and hardening into the normalcy of contemporary media studies',[24] while variantology 'take[s] his plea for a radical heterogeneity to a new level'.[25] In volume two, Zielinski describes his own conception of variantology as an 'operational anthropology', citing an 1806 lecture by Johann Wilhelm Ritter entitled 'Physics as Art' as an influence:[26] 'Through studying the history of the specific tensions between the arts, sciences, and technology, this anthropology attempts to keep options open for possibilities of action in years to come.'[27] Here Zielinski differentiates:

> between four qualities: art *before* media, art *with* media, art *via* media, and art *after* media. As in Ritter, these qualities should not be understood as a chronological succession but as differently weighted priorities within the deep time structures that we are interested in.[28]

This schema is valuable for art history (albeit not unheard of), suggesting novel, non-chronological modes of study. The essays comprising the series generally gesture in this direction and/or address the wider rationale of the project; however, few of them read as fully-fledged excursions into variantology.[29] This is an observation, not a criticism: the essays are all insightful, cogent, nuanced, routinely compelling, often excellent studies on cultural history and its diverse traditions of serious observation and innovation. Variantology's distinctive impact is thus strongest at a 'global' level, where the scope of the series can be grasped.

Recurrent themes emerge over the five volumes (while recurrent contributors often change tack): iconology (religious, scientific, philosophical); notational systems (mathematical, musical, communicative); cyborgs/automata/robots; generative/machine/computer poetry; time; forms of measurement/mapping; and, unsurprisingly, (historical) research methodologies.

The Variantology series functions best as a set, providing an international survey. The absence of Pre-Colombian America within the variantological worldview presented so far looks set to be remedied by a mooted forthcoming Variantologia Brasiliana workshop and book. Paleoart and the remains of archaic human culture is one area that has received scant variantological attention so far, despite its obvious significance to 'deep time' relations of arts, sciences and technologies.[30] As Jean-Luc Nancy remarks with regard to paleoart, 'what men subsequently will name with a word that means knowledge and know-how, *tekhnē* or *ars*, is at man's beginning the total of his science and his consciousness. (But will he ever have ceased beginning again?)'[31] To this end, the aboriginal art and culture of Australia could offer productive food for thought, given that the continuity between archaic times and the present has only recently become compromised.[32]

The Variantology series presents a wealth of insightful essays in English by leading international scholars, most of whom generally publish in other languages. The range of topics covered and approaches taken offer a valuable resource for students, teachers and researchers tackling the history of art in relation to media, technology, science, language, mathematics and religion. But what does variantology offer that 'media archaeology' does not? Two things strike this reviewer. Firstly, variantology provides media archaeology with a welcome counter-model to prevailing tendencies. Rather than place (potentially generalizing) emphasis on a privileged timeframe, event or invention around which precursors and successors are arranged, variantology invites us to look at specific deeper constitutive factors and objects

without hierarchy.[33] This leads to the second point: variantology dispenses with the established 'media' tag and frame through long-range histories, diverse sources and nuanced conceptualizations. In doing so, it reaches into other disciplines, art history in particular. From its interdisciplinary position, variantology offers art history a compatible and constructive means to better account for its 'media' in the widest sense. The historical model in which cinema and other media spectacles are derived neatly from literature has surely run its course. A global conception is emerging which pools the insights of several disciplines. Limited solely to art history, the number of fascinating avenues of inquiry opened up is almost limitless. For art history to leave media archaeology to media history would be folly.

Notes

1 Jean Clair, *Duchamp et la photographie: Essai d'analyse d'un primat technique sur le développement d'une oeuvre*, Paris, 1977; Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century*, Cambridge, 1990, and *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, 2000; Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *Duchamp in Context: Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works*, Princeton, NJ, 1998; Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge, 1994; Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, New York, 2004; Margit Rowell, *František Kupka, 1871–1957: A Retrospective*, New York, 1975; Barbara Maria Stafford, *Artful Science: Enlightenment, Entertainment and the Eclipse of Visual Education*, Cambridge, 1994, and (with Frances Terpak), *Devices of Wonder: From the World in a Box to Images on a Screen*, Los Angeles, CA, 2002; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften, Band V: Das Passagen-Werk* (2 volumes), Frankfurt am Main, 1982, translated as *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, MA, 2002.

2 For an account of the antiquity of 'modern humanity' and the difficulties in defining it see: Robert G. Bednarik, 'The Origins of Human Modernity', *Humanities*, 1, 2012, 1–53.

3 The full list of contributions is available at: http://entropie.digital.udk-berlin.de/wiki/Variantology

4 The books have been designed by Silke Fahnert and Uwe Koch, with cover art and frontispieces by the Brothers Quay, Peter Blegvad and other contributors.

5 It is interesting to note the slight rearranging of the title of Zielinski's book from the German to the English, deep time and archaeology exchanging places as title and subtitle.

6 Stephen Jay Gould, *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle: Myth and Metaphor in the Discovery of Geological Time*, Cambridge, 1987, 2.

7 John McPhee, *Basin and Range*, New York, 1980. It is worth noting that Hayden White proposed an 'analysis of the deep structure of the historical imagination' in 1973. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, Baltimore, MD, 1973, ix.

8 Gould, *Time's Arrow*, 2–3. Zielinski discusses the geological heritage of deep time in *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, Cambridge, MA, 2006, 3–6.

9 Gould, *Time's Arrow*, 4.

10 Gould, *Time's Arrow*, 10.

11 Gould, *Time's Arrow*.

12 Variantology, Vol. 1, 8.

13 Variantology, Vol. 1, 9.

14 Variantology, Vol. 1, 10.

15 Variantology, Vol. 1, 8.

16 Variantology, Vol. 1, 8.

17 Variantology, Vol. 1, 9.

18 Variantology, Vol. 1, 8.

19 Variantology, Vol. 1, 249.

20 Variantology, Vol. 1, 9.

21 Variantology, Vol. 1, 195.

22 Variantology, Vol. 1, 11.

23 Variantology, Vol. 1, 11.

24 Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, 'Introduction: An archaeology of media archaeology', in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications and Implications*, Berkeley, CA, 2011, 10.

25 Huhtamo and Parikka, 'Introduction', 12.

26 Variantology, Vol. 2, 7–12.

27 Variantology, Vol. 2, 8.

28 Variantology, Vol. 2, 8–9. Here, Zielinksi notes that art *with* media and art *via* media are the 'easiest to grasp'.

29 In this reader's view, the most palpably 'variantological' essays are: Mara Mills (volume 1), 'Hearing things: Telephones and auditory theory – theatrum fungorum. John Cage's mycology and photomechanical reproduction'; David Link (volume 1), 'while(true). On the fluidity of signs in Hegel, Gödel, and Turing'; Anthony Moore (volumes 3, 4 and 5), 'Transactional fluctuations: Towards an encyclopaedia of sound (parts 1–3)'; Almut S. Bruckstein (volume 4), 'Textual body landscapes and scripture's visual form'; Otto E. Rössler (volume 5), 'Variantology: Einstein-Bohr Battle confirms Everett's eternal now'; Zielinski (volume 5), 'Towards an institute for southern modernities'; and Nekes's pictorial essay 'Surface tension – Various images', distributed across volume 1.

30 Anthony Moore discusses archeoacoustics with reference to the work of Paul Devereux in 'Transactional fluctuations 3: "Reflections on sound"', Vol. 5, 357–8. See also Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, 'Athanasius Kircher's concept of prehistory', Vol. 5, 461–76. However, the scope of the essay is necessarily fixed to recent prehistory (c. 10,000 BP).

31 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Painting in the Grotto', in *The Muses*, Stanford, CA, 1996, 70.

32 See for example: Robert G. Bednarik, Geoffrey D. Aslin and Elfriede Bednarik, 'The cave petroglyphs of Australia', in *Cave Art Research*, Vol. 3, 2003, 1–7. Available at: http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/cara13/shared_files/Oz_cave_art.pdf

33 Placing emphasis on specific timeframes, events and inventions can be important and useful. Fruitful recent and relevant examples include: François Albera and Maria Tortajada, 'L'Epistéme "1900"', in André Gaudreault, Catherine Russell and Pierre Véronneau, eds, *Le cinématographe, nouvelle technologie du XXe siècle / The Cinema: A New Technology for the Twentieth Century*, Lausanne, 2004, 45–62. Translated as 'The 1900 Episteme', in François Albera and Maria Tortajada, eds, *Cinema Beyond Film: Media Epistemologies in the Modern Era*, Amsterdam, 2010, 25–41; Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, 2001; Lynda Nead, *The Haunted Gallery: Painting, Photography, Film c.1900*, New Haven, 2007.