In ‘Notes on Quotes’ (Rosler 2004), a text first published in 1982, the New York-based artist Martha Rosler reasoned that although the ironic quotational strategies adopted in many postmodern art practices laid claim to a politics, they did not in themselves constitute a form of politicisation. For Rosler, the appropriation of oppressive forms, for example from commercial advertising, threatened to reproduce rather than critique such hegemonic representations. These works, reflective of the historical situation in which they were produced, thus offered no way to understand how things could be otherwise.

How then, in our own political present, might we think of the persistence of quotation as a device employed by artists? Indeed, how might such a practice allow us to reconsider the relationship of the past to the present? These are the questions posited by *Quotational Practices: Repeating the Future in Contemporary Art*, in which Patrick Greaney addresses precisely the difference that quotation makes.

Greaney’s latest book builds upon his scholarship that has focused on various dimensions of modernity and sets these broader concerns in dialogue with a number of artists who have employed quotation in their work. An introduction elucidates the author’s desire to extend this discussion of citational strategies beyond the concerns of authorship commonly emphasised within postmodern criticism. Framed by the theoretical insight of various thinkers, including Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault, Greaney reorientates the subject of quotation so that it is informed and advanced by the philosophy of history. In doing so he contributes to an emerging body of scholarship that considers what becoming historical has meant and continues to mean for artists.

Greaney goes on to develop his thesis in dialogue with a number of twentieth century avant-garde practices. A chapter that focuses on Guy Debord and the Situationist International’s adaption of détournement, whereby dominant forms are hijacked and reused to subversive ends, is evocative of Rosler’s remarks, mentioned at the beginning of this review. Yet Greaney indicates how détournement extracts liberatory possibilities from commodity language. In a powerful account of the poet Heimrad Bäcker’s *Nachschrift (Transcript)*, Greaney again examines tensions that exist in the text between the language of the avant-garde and that of another dominant power. Here the author engages with Bäcker’s direct appropriation of administrative texts of National Socialism in order to figure a potentially emancipatory role for quotation that, with recourse to Adorno, produces the ‘refunctioning
transformation of bureaucracy’ (110). In these examples and more Greaney demonstrates how quotation allows histories to become available in the present in a process of ‘estraning perspectives that are messianic and modest at the same time’ (9).

With an eye on the present, Greaney turns in his final chapter to three contemporary practitioners. The matter of political efficacy forms a pivot for the author’s appraisal of Sharon Hayes’ respeaking of historic political utterances, Vanessa Place’s verbatim rehearsals of US legal proceedings and Glenn Ligon’s mediation of political speech through painting. Each of these examples demonstrates a reluctance to occupy certain categories of identity and the text offers a compelling account of how citation can work to formulate disidentifications with past cultural texts. Greaney indicates how this conflict between identity and difference produces viable critical positions that emphasise ‘the possibility of other forms of subjectivity’ (142).

Greaney concludes this study by demonstrating that, quite apart from engaging in the reproduction of sameness, these artists have understood quotation as always already being in the service of some other beginning. By insisting on this difference, Greaney advances existing literature on artists’ uses of quotation as he takes heed of Benjamin’s assertion of history as a dynamic process that inflects on contemporary political life. In this way, Quotational Practices offers not only a timely account of how artists have sought to engage with history in practice but also how these practices might work to illuminate the place of quotation in twentieth century philosophies of history in potentially productive ways.

References