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# Animation, Abstraction, Sampling: Kota Ezawa in Conversation with Karen Beckman

## Abstract

### Kota Ezawa

**Kota Ezawa** is a Japanese-German artist currently based in San Francisco. He re-creates, frame by frame, animated sequences from television, cinema, and art history using basic digital drawing and animation software. He has had solo exhibitions at venues that include The Box, Wexner Center for the Arts; Hayward Gallery, London; the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford; and the Santa Monica Museum of Art.

### in Conversation with Karen Beckman

**Karen Beckman** is the Elliot and Roslyn Jaffe Professor of Cinema and Modern Media and interim chair of the Department of the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania. She is an editor of *Grey Room*.

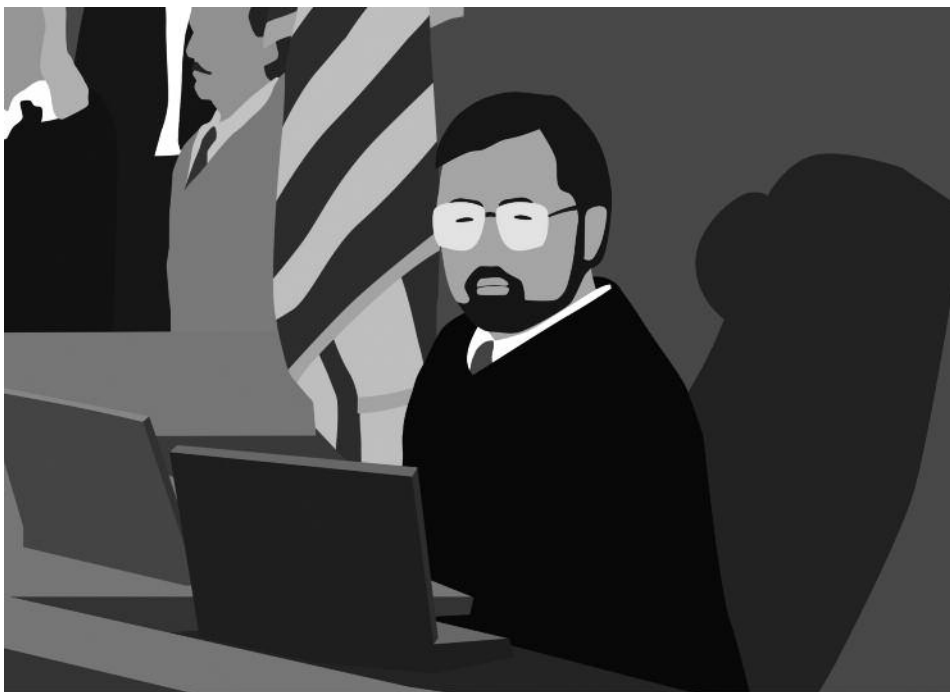
## Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology | Interdisciplinary Arts and Media

## Comments

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Kota Ezawa. *The Simpson Verdict*,  
2002. Courtesy of the Haines  
Gallery and Kota Ezawa.

# Animation, Abstraction, Sampling

## KOTA EZAWA IN CONVERSATION WITH KAREN BECKMAN

*Kota Ezawa is a Japanese-German artist currently based in San Francisco. Utilizing a frame-by-frame process, he re-creates, using basic digital drawing and animation software, animated sequences that draw on a variety of sources, including television, cinema, and art history. His work betrays an eclectic range of stylistic antecedents, including pop art, Alex Katz, paint-by-numbers pictures, and Japanese animation, often providing facsimiles of historical source material. This material ranges from popular culture (Mike Nichols's 1966 film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and the television coverage of the O.J. Simpson trial) to major historical events (the assassinations of Presidents Lincoln and Kennedy) and the history of art, with which he is deeply engaged in spite of his occasional suggestion that his encounters with canonical images are casual, almost accidental. As he brings flatness, color, and other forms of stylistic artificiality to bear on photographically based images, he provokes viewers to explore the relationship between memory and realism and examine both how historical spectacles are visually manufactured and what happens to the truth claims of visually reduced images. In both his images and his discussion of them, Ezawa seems to minimize some of the affect that surrounds emotionally charged images—in part through visual or tonal flattening—in order to create a wider terrain in which to consider how and why certain images operate with such potency.*

*In *The History of Photography Remix*, 2004–2006, a slide show made up of forty photographs, he references some of the iconic images from the medium's history, such as William Henry Fox Talbot's *Botanical Specimen* (1839), Nan Goldin's *Nan and Brian in Bed* (1983), and Jeff Wall's *Dead Troops Talk* (1992), which Ezawa has reproduced multiple times as a computer-generated drawing on a light box, a 35 mm slide, an image in a book, and a paper cutout collage. In the printed version of this series, he cites not only the title and date of the original photograph but a second date, the date of the production of his own image, as he does in his rendering of one of Bernd Becher and Hilla Becher's photographs, *Water Tower* (1963), 2005. Through the form in which these images appear, the slide show, Ezawa also conjures up the pedagogical methods of art history.*

*Whereas the art historical lecture encourages comparisons by presenting images in pairs, Ezawa's slide shows offer single, rendered images that provoke comparison not with seen but remembered or imagined (if not recognized) "originals."*

*In the wake of federal judge Deborah A. Batts's recent ruling against Richard Prince's appropriations of Patrick Cariou's photographs, Ezawa's engagement with found visual material plays an important role in the ongoing conversation about the relationship between photography and authorship. But his multimedia work also extends beyond the realm of appropriation art's concerns and challenges viewers to think about the interaction between Japanese and Western art traditions, between the handmade and the automatically rendered, between artistic and commercial images, and among the media of photography, television, film, drawing, collage, and painting.*

**Karen Beckman:** I'd like to start by asking you to describe your process in the different mediums in which you work, including digital animation, transparencies, ink drawings, and 16 mm film.

**Kota Ezawa:** My style of animation could be described as a self-developed form of rotoscope animation. Rotoscoping is a technique in which camera-recorded footage is traced by hand and thereby turned into an animation. In conventional rotoscope animation the camera footage is recorded specifically as source material for an animation. In my case, the source footage is archival, meaning I don't record images to trace them later on but instead find them. The light-box transparencies, ink drawings, and other still image works are rendered in the same way, using found photographs instead of video and film.

**KB:** Why did you start making this kind of work, and what were you doing beforehand?

**KE:** As an art student in Germany I produced a body of work that was often text based and conceptual. After I moved to the United States in 1994, I began to make narrative short films with actors, script, and dialogue. The animations I do now are a mixture of my two previous bodies of work. It's a form of filmmaking that is more conceptual than narrative. I was drawn to this kind of work because I wanted to do something idea-based that was entertaining at the same time.

**KB:** How do you think your work has developed over the last ten years, what are you currently working on, and which directions do you want to explore in the future?

**KE:** Well, a lot has changed . . . and some things have remained the same! I still think animation itself is the backbone of this project. Animation is the hub of this bicycle wheel, but I've tried to have many spokes going in different directions. Also, it's not always my intention that counts. The project moves by itself, through conversations, through the way the work is viewed, the way the work is put in different contexts. I learn a lot about it and am following lines that the work creates.

What am I doing now? I'm in the middle of working on a new project. All of these animations—I don't know how many of them I've made to date, probably about ten or fifteen—take about six months to a year to make, and some of them overlap. So every development that happens extends periods of time. It's a very slowly moving ship in a way. The project that I'm currently working on deals with depictions of nature in fiction films, but it's also an animation project. Of course there's a relationship to prior work, but I think that what most connects, what is a kind of red thread in my work, is looking at animation as an abstraction tool. Nature already is an abstract visual phenomenon, if you think of leaves, for example.

**KB:** Right, especially in fiction film, where our visual attention tends to be focused upon the characters . . .

**KE:** And then by drawing it again it becomes more abstract. I think this interest in looking at things in a more abstract way was already there in the beginning.

**KB:** Can I ask which fiction films you're looking at?

**KE:** Oh, a lot. This project incorporates footage from a lot of different pictures. I tried to make as wide a survey as I could using my own personal library of films and films that my friends talk about. So it starts with obvious candidates like Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* and the Amazon, but also I'm interested in untouched nature in fiction films, not nature created by computer generators. I was surprised that the film *Twister*, which even puts nature in its tagline, doesn't contain any actual "nature."<sup>1</sup> It's all computer-generated nature. I've looked at very old films, like German mountain films, and at really recent films.

**KB:** *Animation* is one of the terms most frequently used to describe your work, yet it is a complicated term, one that artists often resist and that critics writing about artists who work with animation also resist. For example, when Rosalind Krauss writes about William Kentridge's work, she emphasizes its status as drawing rather than animation.<sup>2</sup> There's ambivalence about this word, maybe

because of its proximity to cartoons or its uncertain relation to the art world. What in animation specifically appeals to you? You mentioned before the interview that you don't want to think of yourself as a mainstream animator. Do you think of yourself as an animator at all?

**KE:** At this point I do, but the way I started in animation . . . well, my upbringing was more in conceptual art. I thought that animation was a useful tool to illustrate ideas or give form to ideas because it's abstract and because it's a seismograph of thoughts. Every drawn line you see in animation comes out of human consciousness. The lines don't appear by themselves. But to go to the beginning of your question, I'm unembarrassed about the term *animation*, and I'm not so protective of my practice being a pure fine art practice; it exists more in the contemporary art world than anywhere else, but that's a coincidence. I was in grad school when I started using animation. Then some museum curator visited my studio. Then it leaked out into the museum and gallery world, and there it had more response than at animation film festivals, the traditional home for animation.

**KB:** And are you happy for your work to be shown in cinemas as well as museums?

**KE:** Something I like about the gallery or museum context—is not necessarily that it's fine art but that there's a freedom to the viewing of films in museums that I don't see in cinemas. It's the captive audience versus the wandering eye. I like this wandering eye that gets captivated and stays for something rather than being stuck in a row of chairs, unable to leave until the program is over. So that's why I really like the gallery or museum, but it's not because I don't like nonart animations. I look at a lot of animation that wouldn't be considered contemporary art—for example, early Japanese animation—just for technical things. Animation is like printmaking. You can express complicated thoughts, but there's also a technical side.

**KB:** A couple of reviews have made comparisons between your work and *South Park*. What do you think of that? Does that seem right to you, or does it surprise you?

**KE:** It's not surprising, but I think there's just one link between what I do and the *South Park* production studios. We share a formal quality. *South Park* animation is almost like cut pieces of paper moving on a screen, and that's also in a way what I am doing. But in terms of content, there's no overlap.

**KB:** This brings up the absence of line, which you've spoken about before. Could you talk about whether this absence of line is something you're committed to? What are you trying to achieve formally or in terms of content with it? Why did your animation evolve in that way?

**KE:** A decision you have to take when you make drawings is whether you want to define shapes and forms through hues or an outline. The conflict between the two has existed for hundreds of years. In the Renaissance, Venice used color and Florence used black lines. It's almost like a political decision. You can't really do both, I find. Working with color is more painterly, and I also hope these animations are some kind of perceptual experience. I think color can do that much more than lines. Lines are more intellectual in a way.

**KB:** Over the last few years, museums have increasingly embraced animation as a guiding principle for group shows; for example, *Everyday Imaginary* at the Philadelphia ICA (2010), *SITE Santa Fe's The Dissolve* (2010), and *The Image in Question: War-Media-Art* at the Carpenter Center (2010) and *Mathildenhöhe, Darmstadt* (2011). Why are museums becoming so interested in animation? And what does this signal about animation itself? Do you think animation makes available images that engage our moment in a way that photography, perhaps, cannot? Do you think this is a historically rooted phenomenon?

**KE:** I think what is happening right now is not so different from what was happening with video art in the 1980s. Video was a tool that only a few people had access to prior to that, TV stations and so forth. The moment it became accessible to them, artists tried to democratize it. And the same thing is happening with animation. Animation had belonged to the big studios before, and now is the moment when, with all this software for the computer, animation can be done by artists and any other people. That is why it is more widespread. The reason why curators and museums are more interested . . . animation is not something recent—it's old, even precinematic. Animation is an abstraction tool, but in a way animation is less abstract than a photograph. With a photographic or camera-recorded image, the brain has to make this jump. You're looking at a flat screen, but what you see is something that is, for example, happening in Kosovo. You have to look through the screen. Animation happens on the surface of the screen. When you look at the animation you look at the thing itself. I think that's what modernist painters like Paul Cézanne also thought of their paintings. Cézanne was just painting the surface of the canvas; he was not trying to create this illusionistic space. I think that's why so many children watch



animation before they start watching films with actors: what the brain has to process is less “beyond” the little box.

**KB:** But your work complicates this because you take images that *are* referencing this “elsewhere” in the image and turn them into animations.

**KE:** But you could also say I’m destroying the referent. Because of the work I do, I stumbled upon Jean Baudrillard’s essays on simulation and simulacra. He always talks about the destruction of the referent as a goal of simulation, and so, yes, you could say the animations I’m drawing refer to something else, but you could also say the original much more strongly refers to this other thing. The work I’m doing refers more to its own surface.

**KB:** Do you consider yourself part of a generation of contemporary animators? Reviews have tended to compare your works with the preexisting images to which they often refer, whether images from the history of photography, existing television or film footage, and so on. But there’s little comparison of you with other artists of your generation, and I wonder whether you think of yourself as in conversation with particular artists or animators and what the nature of those conversations is.

**KE:** Of course I’m in conversation with artists of my generation, a lot of whom do things that upon first sight might seem completely different. And these are more just personal encounters. My undergraduate education was at the Kunstakademie in Düsseldorf, and at that time it was loaded with international, star professors like Gerhard Richter, Nam June Paik, Tony Cragg, and so forth. At the time they were teaching, they were already pretty much solid “art history,” but that was my first undergraduate experience, and because I came from a little town in the country I learned about art history by bumping into it in the cafeteria without knowing anything about it before then. I don’t necessarily seek out the artists with whom I’m in conversation; I just bump into them. I could rattle off long lists of names. But then there are also similarities between my work and other contemporary artists. For example, have you heard of Brian Alfred, a painter who also makes animations?

**KB:** No.

**KE:** Well, that’s lucky for me [*laughter*]! In some circles he’s quite well known, and he has a similar visual style, just on the surface because he also doesn’t use

outlines. He uses fields of color, and we get compared all the time . . . well, not all the time, but at times. I think one of his shows was reviewed in *Art in America*, and they compared his work to mine. There could be uneasiness about this . . . this person is doing something similar to me. Why? Who did it first? Brian actually contacted me. He sent me an e-mail that said, “I’ve seen your work; have you seen mine?” These conversations are a relief because I think it’s a myth that artists have to have singular positions. To know that other people are looking at things in a related way—I find that comforting . . . to know that you’re not out on a limb, all by yourself, on a lonely island.

**KB:** I’d like to ask you about something that the philosopher Stanley Cavell writes in his extended version of *The World Viewed*. When comparing live-action cinema with cartoons, he suggests that because we are uncertain as to whether animated characters will be subject to the laws and limits of the world, the world of animation becomes “a world devoid of sex and death.”<sup>3</sup> Does the fact that your animations are rooted in live-action cinema and photography make the bodies of your figures, which you have also described as puppets, more corporeal and therefore more vulnerable than other types of animated bodies, or does the separation from referent in the animation process take that vulnerability away?

**KE:** It’s both. On the one hand, animation takes the corporeal experience away because the figures become more abstract and more cartoonlike, but on the other hand, the visual information of the image gets distilled and stylized. One reason why artists have used stylization for centuries is to get the attention of the viewer. Japanese theater and animation are examples of that. By stylizing something, by distilling information, the experience can also become more vibrant and more visceral. So both. Of course, the figures get abstracted and less real and less full of blood, but the way they hit the viewer can be more extreme.

**KB:** So that the violence is happening in the body of the spectator rather than being located in the body represented?

**KE:** Exactly.

**KB:** Can you compare some specific examples of your work in relation to this question of animation and drawings that grow out of camera-based images of death? You seem to draw on two kinds of images of death. On the one hand, there’s the Zapruder footage of Kennedy’s assassination, which you animate in

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (2005), an iconic example of a real death caught on film. On the other hand, on several occasions you have drawn or animated photographs or films of historical deaths that make some kind of a truth claim upon us but are nevertheless staged or reenacted; for example, Matthew Brady's Civil War photographs, Jeff Wall's *Dead Troops Talk*, and the reenactment of the assassination of Lincoln in D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. In a way, what such films and photographs are doing resembles what your animation is doing as different forms of reenactment. These images close the gap between photography/film and animation, whereas the Zapruder footage seems different in regard to what's at stake in animating these distinct forms of photographic images of death.

**KE:** Hmm. Yes, but the actual effects, the way I work, are like a great equalizer. So I'm almost interested in how the Zapruder film becomes the same as *Dead Troops Talk* when you look at it without the knowledge of where all these images come from.

**KB:** Are ethical questions involved in that equalizing, in that erasure of the difference between these two kinds of images? Especially within the context of documentary film scholarship, but also within our culture more generally, live footage of real death takes on an almost sacred aura.

**KE:** I would much more expect this question to come from an American interviewer than from a European interviewer. I want to talk a little more about the Zapruder film, because it is part of a work called *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, and it starts with a piece from *The Birth of a Nation*, where I reanimated Abraham Lincoln being murdered. Later on, I added the Zapruder footage, and I was almost embarrassed to do this because it's very well-trod terrain; it's obvious that these two clips relate to each other. But this is one example of something you do leading you somewhere you don't think you would have gone on your own. This work received a big response from people whom I would not have suspected would gravitate to something like this. The first venue to show the work was the Wrong Gallery, a sort of a punk rock gallery in New York that was run by artist Maurizio Cattelan, curator Massimiliano Gioni, and curator Ali Subotnick. I didn't think of this piece as punk rock, but then the most prominent American punk band *is* called the Dead Kennedys. And so I'm not even so sure if this piece talks about reality that much; maybe it talks more about punk rock sensibilities. I thought there might also be something offensive, from an American perspective, about seeing the death of the head of government



depicted on film but then several very reputable American museums decided to show this piece for months in a row. I'm really still figuring out what's going on.

**KB:** Yes, I was thinking about your version of Zapruder's film in relation to Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco's video reenactment, *The Eternal Frame* (1975), about the difference between their live action performance of Kennedy's death and your reanimation of the footage. I'm interested in whether documentary reenactment and animation do different things, given that the reenactment lacks the abstraction of animation.

**KE:** Reenactment has a more comedic feel to it than reanimation. Reenactment has a relationship with parody, while animation refers to the history of drawing and painting. When photography was invented in the nineteenth century, it was often used as an aid to painting. Painters commissioned photographs so they could transcribe a visual scene more accurately without having to be in a certain location. The animations I do work similarly. They are in a way transcriptions of moving photographs and not really comedic.

**KB:** One recent review of *Odessa Staircase Redux* comments on the lack of affect in the work, on the "coolness" of the images, and another review describes your work as "coolly contemporary." What do you think about this assessment of your work as "cool"? Would you agree that your work in general involves something like a paring away of affect? At times, you have chosen to animate some of the most intensely charged, emotional moments of contemporary television culture, such as the assassination of President Kennedy or the delivery of the O.J. Simpson verdict in 1995—but you are also drawn to live-action cinema in which a certain kind of spectacular affect is already missing, as in Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961).

**KE:** When my work is described as cool, it's merely an aesthetic assessment. There are no soft edges or gradual transitions in my visual vocabulary. It's a



deliberate choice to have forms stand next to each other and not mix; it can't be confused with emotional coolness, although I do like to have a certain emotional distance from the subject that I am portraying or redrawing. This might prompt the comment "lack of affect." It doesn't mean I am in any way dispassionate about the work I do; it just means I think a distanced gaze, an emotional bird's-eye view can reveal something that a more involved gaze might overlook.

Even though affect might be missing in *Last Year at Marienbad*, I find it an incredibly emotional and psychological film, similar to the way the Simpson verdict was an emotional event.

**KB:** In the case of *Last Year at Marienbad 3D*, why did you choose to make a 3D work?

**KE:** The wish to make a 3D work was a reaction to the renaissance of 3D in mainstream cinema. To me, this renaissance is a return to the origins of cinema as a circus act or vaudeville spectacle. *Last Year at Marienbad* was to me fitting material for a 3D film because it resists this treatment so strongly. 3D connotes summer blockbuster or cheap entertainment, whereas *Marienbad* is solidly identified as intellectual cinema. To collapse this division is enticing. On the other hand and on a more formal level, *Marienbad* was already a 3D film before I turned it into one. The sweeping camera pans highlight the relationship between foreground and background, which is the base ingredient of the 3D experience.

**KB:** You have talked about your work in terms of sampling, of being a DJ who acts as a part-time art historian, remixing the history of art, disrupting the linear history of photography. What does this disruption allow us to see and understand about the history of photography that the linear version obfuscates? How do you understand sampling's relation to memory, nostalgia, and history?

**KE:** I find that the terms *DJ* and *art historian* are almost interchangeable. Music

DJs like Grand Master Flash were also historians of music who educated their audience about the history of musical styles and beats. Art historians are also entertainers who put on weekly shows in the university lecture hall.

The difference between my project and the work of an art historian is that I insert a layer of drawing into the lecture. Drawing erases the patina, the time reference of an image. In this way the history loses any linear progression and turns into a visual DJ mix.

**KB:** Finally, can you say something about the role sound plays in your work and how you think of the relationship between your treatment of the soundtrack (when there is one) and your animation process?

**KE:** The first animation I made that uses sound was *The Simpson Verdict*. The soundtrack of this piece (which is the original sound of the TV broadcast) was an accident. I originally planned to re-create the soundtrack just like I had reconstructed the image, using voice actors and so on. I had the opportunity to show the animation in progress to a group of people, and because the soundtrack was not completed I just used the original sound; it was a happy accident. I find sound most interesting when it is far away or counter to the visual experience. Paired with a highly stylized hand-drawn image, the raw, untouched soundtrack creates a clash where image and sound energize each other and don't just mirror each other in their respective material form.

#### Notes

1. *Twister's* tagline was "The Dark Side of Nature."
2. Rosalind Krauss, "'The Rock': William Kentridge's Drawings for Projection," *October* 92 (Spring 2000): 3–35.
3. Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed*, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 170–171.