

ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2007 US \$7 CAN \$9 UK £4 EU €6



REENACTMENT
A RETRO-NECRO
POLITICS

EYE
BLACK METAL AS
CRYPTO LOGO JIHAD

ANXIETY
DAVID ROSETZKY'S
LIFESTYLE SUBLIME

AMBIANCE
MOVING-IMAGE
SOUNDSCAPE



Art in the period of its dissolution, as a movement of negation in pursuit of its own transcendence in a historical society where history is not yet directly lived, is at once an art of change and a pure expression of the impossibility of change.

—Guy Debord, Thesis 190, *The Society of the Spectacle*

The industrial noise engulfing the theater is not unpleasant. The crowd stands back cautiously at first, then moves closer to better observe the action of the men and women on stage, unable to decide whether to enjoy the music or keep at the safe distance normally assumed by visitors to re-stylized period rooms in European castles. The sound of a coordinated group assault on the humble wooden floor of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) is almost like a well-preserved archival item stored on a CD of twentieth-century sound effects, next to the rattle of a film projector and the gentle clang

of an analogue telephone. Originally used by Einstürzende Neubauten when they performed here in 1984, the handheld industrial machinery is in itself already a nostalgic signifier of the might of European manufacturing power, crumbling under the new forces of globalization and financialization. More than twenty years on, we see at Jo Mitchell's 2007 re-enactment of *Concerto for Voice and Machinery*, commissioned by the ICA's Vivienne Gaskin, who has been responsible for a significant number of artists' re-enactments. With actors recreating the postures, sounds, and ensuing mayhem of the German

RETRO/NECRO: FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE OF THE POLITICS OF RE-ENACTMENT

TEXT / PIL AND GALIA KOLLECTIV





industrial band's destruction of the venue that commissioned them, this feels like looking back at what is no longer there—like the light from a distant ancient star that, collapsed thousands of years ago, is still visible in our sky. Planted, rioters in the audience begin to rip apart the stage, already in tatters from the air drills and saws, apparently causing security to put a stop to the proceedings. But of course the link between cause and effect has been broken: the ICA guards are equally fake, and it becomes hard to tell when the performance is actually over, the entire event having been meticulously predetermined by fragmentary surviving documentation of the original show.

Guy Debord's thesis number 190 concisely defines the paradox at the heart of twentieth-century art practices—the demand for an impossible permanent revolution, the mediation of an unmediated, authentic experience, and the con-

stant pull of both past and future, progress and decadence. The recent spate of artists' re-enactments of historical events and performances seems caught up in this dialectic, haunted by Debord's paralyzing circular discourse. In his writing about history and time, Debord claims that modern time, in the wake of the domination of linear history, is subordinated to pseudo-cycles of work and leisure. Fads, consumerist seasons, remakes, and retro fashions are, in his view, imposed by capitalism on history. Are we therefore to see artistic re-enactments as logical conclusions of the spectacle's repetitive imperative? Or do they, in fact, form blockages in the spectacle's seamless flows, exposing the construction of time within its media and technologies? On the one hand, re-enactment suggests a reactionary nostalgia for an idealized past where unmediated, live experiences were possible—a reference that reifies performance, aligning it with the

demands of the market for reproducibility. On the other hand, opposing this self-defeating narrative, re-enactment is celebrated as a means of interrupting the march of time as progress and of rewriting canonical history against the forces of power and capital. This opposition can ultimately be traced back to modern debates around originality and reproduction, but the problem with both approaches is that they quickly degenerate into a battle for art's purity in which work is either denigrated for its complicity with capitalism or burdened with the mission of somehow bringing it down.

Much of the recent discussion around re-enactments has centered on projects in which artists have revisited old, undocumented performance work: their own—as with Marina Abramovic's recreation of *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, and Carolee Schneeman's restaging of *Meat Joy* at

PHOTO: Jo Mitchell, *Concerts for Voice and Machinery II*, March 26, 2007, performance courtesy of the artist and the Institute of Contemporary Art, London /

ARTIST: Andrea Fraser, *Mani! Muss! Hongkong! Art Must Hong*, 2007, DVD, 32:55 minutes, courtesy of the artist, Friedrich Petzel Gallery, New York, and Galerie Christian Nagel, Köln/Berlin



Whitechapel Gallery, London—or others’—as in Andrea Fraser’s re-enactment of a Kippenberger speech and the Synthetic Performances of Eva and Franco Mattes, a.k.a. 0100001101010101.ORG, which are re-enactments of Joseph Beuys’ 7000 Oaks, Chris Burden’s *Shoot*, and Vito Acconci’s *Seedbed* on *Second Life*. According to Peggy Phelan, who is oft quoted in relation to the subject, performance art is defined by its singularity—for in being repeated or reproduced it becomes something different. A double resistance—to capital and the technology that subjects performance to its dictates—signifies what she calls “the ontology of performance.” In fact, art’s performative turn, which goes all the way back to action painting and its emphasis on the singular action of the painter, has been theorized as a displacement of the auratic object: “The artist stepped (or danced) into the place of the object and rescued origin, originality, and authenticity in the very unrepeatable and unapproachable nature of his precise and human gesture—his solo act.” Of course, as Philip Auslander writes in response to such claims, the liveness of performance can only ever be conceptualized in relation to the possibility of recording: the live and the mediated exist in a relation of

mutual dependence and imbrication, not one of opposition. The live is, in a sense, only the secondary effect of mediating technologies. Prior to the advent of those technologies, e.g. photography, telegraphy, phonography, there was no such thing as the “live,” for that category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility. Ancient Greek theatre, for example, was not live because there was no possibility of recording it.

But it is precisely the tension between liveness and mediation that seems to be attracting contemporary artists to classic performances, salvaging from their meager documentation a script from which to ask questions about authenticity and originality. As Mark Cameron Boyd points out in his article, “Performance Simulacra: Reenactment as (Re)Authoring,” this logic can quickly lead to a dead end: *It is this denial of the original, this re-casting of previously enacted performances as “new experiences,” that introduces the final thorny summation of reenactments like Abramovic’s as weak copies, drained of their specific time-based authenticity, that transform performance into vapid simulacra to re-place the real Being of the original!*

Despite these accusations of a weakened, slight return aiding the commodification of the

supposedly uncommodifiable, many attempts have been made to valorize re-enactments as a critical practice, in exhibitions like *A Little Bit of History Repeated* [Kunstwerke, Berlin; 2001], *Life, Once More* [Witte de With, Rotterdam; 2004], *Re-[Site Gallery, Sheffield; 2007]* and most recently *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-Enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance* [Hartware MedienKunstVerein (HMKV), Dortmund, and Kunstwerke, Berlin; 2007], in artists’ projects—such as Jo Mitchell’s and Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard’s re-enactments of popular music concerts—and in a series of debates, articles, and panel discussions, including the Art And Re-Enactment Conference at The Australian National University in Canberra. A question recurs in this context: on what grounds can we differentiate critical—and therefore “good”—re-enactments from those that simply rely on the familiarity of established art to launch new careers or cash in on previously immaterial art? Or, as Melanie Gilligan writes in her essay on performance and its appropriations, “Which practices involving re-enactments might be retrograde withdrawals from new aesthetic and political struggles, and which others are catalysts for them?”

ABOVE: Iain Forsyth + Jane Pollard, production stills from *Filly Diner Sacred Music*, 2002, projection with sound, 22 minutes (courtesy of the artists and Kate MacGarry, London)
OPPOSITE: Jeremy Deiler, stills from *The Battle of Orpierre*, DVD, 2001, 62:37 minutes (directed by Mike Figgis; commissioned and produced by Artangel, London; photo: Martin Jenkinson)

Against the Debordian pseudo-cyclical time produced by trite Hollywood remakes, Sven Lütticken suggests that art might be better able to tackle reiteration as a form of critique: *Perhaps the peculiar economy of the art world makes it a more suitable sphere for the realization of remakes that resist the dominant culture of repetition. But wherever it originates, the hope held out by the remake lies in the liberation of the dormant possibilities of mass culture—its utopian potential. The vicious circle of standardized remake production—its frozen movement of mythical signs—needs to be derailed. It is intrinsic to these signs that such a practice is possible. The myths of the media themselves harbour a potential to generate second-degree myths that offer glimpses of what Barthes called a “true mythology,” in which myth is fleetingly transformed by reason and history.*

The desire to liberate mass culture's utopian potential seems to lie at the heart of many artistic re-enactments. Jo Mitchell was hoping that the re-enactment of *Concerto* might “create a rupture in our viewing and witnessing in relationship to the idea of the authentic experience and in this sense challenge what might be seen as an apathetic consumption of experiences.” The need to reexamine and question passive consumption of ideas and historical narratives unites many re-enactment projects. Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001, one of the

progenitors of this strategy, famously revisited the miners' conflict with Thatcher's police forces with the intention of reinserting the miners' perspective, originally vilified in the press, into history. Iain Forsyth & Jane Pollard, who have produced several re-enactments including the last performance of David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust and the Cramps' gig at the Napa asylum, have claimed that it is the gap between the reproduction and its point of origin that cuts through the mediation to reveal the real and subvert the logic of the spectacle: *it's rarely the event or action being repeated that we're interested in reconsidering. Repetition works like a catalyst, and it's our relationship to the imitation and the act of creating and witnessing the “copy” where something interesting happens. Failure is hugely important to us, and understanding its importance is vital to our work. Copying anything, the copy never reproduces the original completely. And this shortfall is where the real emerges, where understanding can begin. Good art always, at some level, fails.*

At Dortmund's HMKV, as part of the exhibition *History Will Repeat Itself: Strategies of Re-Enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance*, Forsyth & Pollard's *File Under Sacred Music*, 2003, a video of contemporary musicians performing as the Cramps to a mentally disabled audience replicating the bizarre occasion at the Napa Mental Institute in

California, shares a noisy space with Deller's film and a host of other—mainly video—works looping repetitions of historical instances and commentaries on the appropriation of the past. American students rehearse a revolution that has already been televised, reading out transcripts in a language they do not speak alongside original footage from Romania, 1989, in Irina Botea's *Auditions for a Revolution*, 2006. Felix Gmelin's *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II*, 2002, reconstructs Gerd Consadt's film *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne*, 1968, of a relay run of young men carrying a red flag through Berlin, in which his father participated, this time transposed to a far less radicalized Stockholm. In *The Eternal Frame*, 1975, T. R. Uthco & Ant Farm refilm Kennedy's assassination, this time with the president's full awareness of his status as a media image. The selections avoid the obvious Abramovic/ Acconci/Schneeman references in favor of a wider exploration of the subject. Curator Inke Arnes explains: *We decided not to include artists performing or re-enacting performances from the 70s for example. This has been done in shows quite a few times already and content-wise we wanted to concentrate on artists repeating historical events. It was about how we relate to history and how it is conveyed or mediated to us. The question of media is very important. We are moving forward in time and, depending on our position in time, history becomes readable in a different way.*





In the last five or ten years, there has been a growing interest in the strategy or logic of re-enactment, which means taking things out of history books and making them happen again to allow for a different kind of experience that is neither reading nor looking at images. It has to do with the fact that, in a media-saturated society, you are more and more unable to relate to what's been going on.'

There is a danger in this reading of re-enactments as engines of criticality, which deals mostly with questions of commodification (of art practices and historical moments), or of spectacle and simulation, and ultimately relies on the very categories that are used to condemn supposedly facile remakes. We run the risk of reducing re-enactments to a list of collaborators and resisters of capitalism and its institutions: artists either produce passive spectators obeying the pseudo-cyclical logic of the market or emancipate their viewers from the hold of the media and its narratives by short-circuiting its fake cycles. Whether we single out unrealized utopian moments and rewrite them as successes—as in Rod Dirkinson and Tom McCarthy's *Greenwich Degree Zero*, 2006, a re-enactment of the failed bomb attack on Greenwich Observatory, also on view at HMKV—or failures—as in Forsyth & Pollard's flawed reconstructions of mythical performances, we could find ourselves forever stuck within Debord's "art of change and a pure expression of the impossibility of change." However, as Jacques Rancière has maintained, this is only because, in insisting on this relationship between performance and politics, we are making contradictory demands: *the equivalence of theater and community, of seeing and passivity, of externality and separation, of mediation and simulacrum, the opposition of collective and individual, image and living real.*



its activity and passivity, self-possession and alienation... makes for a rather tricky dramaturgy of guilt and redemption. Theater is charged with making spectators passive in opposition to its very essence, which allegedly consists in the self-activity of the community. As a consequence, it sets itself the task of reversing its own effect and compensating for its own guilt by giving back to the spectators their self-consciousness or self-activity."

When we renounce this idea that there is a truth and a corresponding politics to be uncovered once the spell of the spectacle is broken, subtler distinctions in terms of the temporal play involved in re-enactments come to the fore, following Nietzsche's "Untimely Meditations," Michel Foucault opposes history and genealogy: unlike the supposed scientific objectivity of history, which seeks to trace the inscription of a "point of origin" which "comes before the body, before the world and time" on the present, genealogy is concerned not with the birth, but

with the emergence of regimes of knowledge. Rejecting the notion of origin of historical moments, Foucault's genealogy privileges the accidents, the coincidences, and the ironies that inscribe time with meaning. Within this framework, a historical moment is never new, which means that there is no original to repeat. A successful re-enactment would therefore simply expose this historical moment to a whole new set of "haphazard conflicts" that ultimately produce a "true historical sense [that] confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference."

This disloyalty to the point of origin does not amount to historical relativism, but rather activates history from within the present, allowing us to move away from the sterile attempt to cut through the infinite mediations of the spectacle. This is also where, as Inke Arnes observes, artistic re-enactments diverge from historical re-enactments of famous battles: if you see the show in the context of popular re-enactments (as in

medieval villages or civil war battles), the artists here deal with real history that has to do with life today. The pieces in the show, despite dealing with historical events, are never nostalgic because, unlike popular re-enactments that don't make a connection to yourself and your time, the works here deal with twentieth-century events and make a very direct connection to your role in them.

For Rod Dickinson, the specific historical point of origin of these works is important, but primarily because it can offer a play of interpretation and create a discourse around the idea of historical representation. Perhaps this is rather different from a more relativist approach where the point of origin might not be seen as important as the interpretation. The audience is presented with something inherently contradictory in that they are being presented with something live and happening in real time, yet they know that this is an impossible scenario, since the event has already happened, and they know the outcome (in most of my events/work the audience is given informa-

PHOTO: TOP: Irena Botea. *Icons from Alamo to J. Revolution*, 2006. Video installation, mini DV and screen led on mini-DV, transferred to DVD, 12 minutes, English and Romanian (courtesy of the artist). GREGGIE, MCGEE + WITKIN. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Se-Who-Came-It*, 2002. 2 channels video installation, 12 minutes, silent (courtesy of the artist). Macquereff, New York, and Murray, Saskatoon, producers. Teva Genie, Anna Schmal, and Hinderl/Laura Anderson AEI, photo. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. *Walter Benjamin*, 1987-90, 1987, 100, transferred to DVD, 25 minutes, English with German subtitles. (© Museum of Contemporary Art)



tion sheets that tell them what happened]. Their "live" experience is constantly undermined by knowledge about what they are watching (or participating in), which is prescribed and is being carefully re-staged."

Elsewhere at HMKV, housed in the great hall of the spare-parts warehouse of the disused neighboring factory, Walter Benjamin, resurrected in 1987, lectures on the value of Mondrian copies, arguing that they are more complex than the originals. This Benjamin's compatriots, Slovenian art and music project Laibach, have long been proponents of the "Monumental Retro-Avantgarde," whose founding manifesto states: "We proclaim that copies have never existed and we recommend painting from pictures painted before our times. We claim that art cannot be judged from the viewpoint of time. We acknowledge the usefulness of all styles for the expression of our art, those past as well as present."¹⁶ This insistence on "usefulness" seems to resonate with the notion of "effective history" that Foucault borrows from Nietzsche. In his book about Laibach and the NSK collective, Alexei Monroe sees in this retrogardism an opportunity to "unfreeze" the situation, "enabling disruption, change and reformation. Yet," he continues, "this is not an avant-gardist attempt to construct a new future based on negation of the past. Rather, retrogardism attempts to free the present and change the future via the reworking of past utopianisms and historical wounds."¹⁷ This idea is perhaps most cruelly demonstrated in Artur Zmijewski's *80064*, 2004, in which an Auschwitz survivor is persuaded to have his tattoo refreshed, the present literally overwriting the past.

It is this emphasis on the present that differentiates much of the work included in *History Will Repeat Itself* from other forms of bringing history to life. Whereas historical dramatization tries to visualize the unknown and unknowable, imagining the detail of unfilmed battles or putting words in the mouths of famous leaders to produce biographies and historical epics, artistic re-enactments often limit themselves to the known, however partial, filling in the gaps to produce a genealogy of current conditions. To an extent, these re-enactments are preoccupied with a question of scale. Earlier this year, at the *Materialism Today* conference at Birkbeck University, Slavoj Žižek posited the ontological incompleteness of reality, which, like the unrendered interior of an unexplored house in the background of a videogame, is not determined to a point beyond the atom. Magnifying the past beyond the point we know to be determined by historical documentation, we arrive at a similar *cul-de-sac* where we quickly have to fill in the pixels. This may point to a radical shift in our perception of history in the digital age. If the most significant sites of recent history have operated thus far as invisible black holes (from Nazi death camps to Tiananmen Square and Guantánamo Bay), we increasingly assume that the past is subject to total access. A reconfiguration of the search parameters or a digital zoom at a higher resolution are all it takes not to get to the truth of an event, but to actually participate in historical events such as the recent open call for a Google Earth search after lost pilot Steve Fossett.

As artists appropriate more moments for themselves, they will not be reclaiming them



4804E, TOP: Red Dickinson + Tom McCarthy, *Film Still*, Greenwich Observatory, aprte 4pm, Feb 13th, 1992 and Martial Bourdin depicted in *The Sun*, Saturday Feb 17th, 1994 from Greenwich Degree Zero, 2004, installation, including film footage (reconstruction: Royal Observatory, Greenwich Park, London), 15 tables, 15 lamps, 30 chairs, archival materials, photographs, video (courtesy of the artist) / MIDDLE: Daniela Comani, *ich war's*, Tagebuch 1900-1999, 2005, 9000 project for Reaktion—Archiv für aktuelle Kunst (courtesy of the artist), BOTTOM: Daniela Comani, *ich war's*, Tagebuch 1900-1999, 2005, installation, digital print on net vinyl, 300 x 900 cm (courtesy of the artist)



from the media as such, but rather producing their own private mediatizations, turning them into individual experiences for their viewers. This shift will require us to move away from an understanding of repetition as technical reproduction, for the repetition of an act, unlike the reproduction of an object, does not diminish its cult value, as the real Walter Benjamin wrote in 1936. Instead, this repetition turns event into private ritual, an idea born out by Tom McCarthy's pivotal novel of re-enactment, *Remainder*, included in part in the catalogue of *History Will Repeat Itself*, in which, following an accident, the protagonist finds himself compelled to repeat increasingly violent events with the aid of paid actors and staff—the repetition heightening his sense of an otherwise dim presence in the here and now. Like Zmijewsky's film, McCarthy highlights the potential for sadism within the framework of the re-enactment and the power relations produced in taking ownership of history. In Daniela Comani's installation, *Ich War's Tagebuch 1900-1999*, 2006, the artist reports her presence in the first person at every significant event of the twentieth century, becoming history. Writing about the relationship performance produces to the past, Joseph Roach has employed the metaphor of a necrophilic impulse, seeking "to preserve a sense of the relationship to the past by making physical contact with the dead"¹¹ in exhuming these raw data corpses, reordering and staging them as actors in new old plays, contemporary art is writing its own genealogy, in which private, individualized, unofficial versions compete for cultural space in the public sphere.

NOTES

1. Guy Deboed, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, tr., New York: Zone Books, 1995, originally published in French in 1967.
2. Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London: Routledge, 1993, 146.
3. Rebecca Schneider, "Solo Solo Solo," in *After Criticism: New Responses to Art and Performance*, Gavin Butt, ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 33.
4. Philip Auslander, "Liveness," in *Performance and Cultural Politics*, Elin Diamond, ed., London: Routledge, 1996, 198.
5. Mark Cameron Boyd, "Performance Simulacra: Reenactment as (Re)Authoring," *Theory Now*, 2007, at: <http://www.theorynow.blogspot.com/2007/05/performance-simulacra-reenactment-as.html>, accessed September 30, 2007.
6. Melane Gilligan, "The Beggar's Pantomime: Performance and its Appropriations," *Artforum*, Summer 2007, 429.
7. Lätticken, Sven, "Planet Of The Remakes," *New Left Review* 25, January-February 2004, 119.
8. Irke Arnes, all quotes from conversation with the authors, September 2007.
9. Jacques Rancière, "The Emancipated Spectator," *Artforum*, March 2007, 274.
10. Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, tr., Oxford: Blackwell, 1977, 143.
11. *Ibid.*, 154-5.
12. Rod Dickinson, email to the authors, September 2007.
13. Alexei Monro, *Interrogation Machine: Lailach and NSK*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005, 53.
14. *Ibid.*, 120.
15. Joseph Roach, "History, Memory, Necrophilia," in *The Ends of Performance*, Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane, eds., New York: New York University Press, 1998, 29.

Contributing Editors Pili and Galia Kollektiv are London-based artists, writers, and independent curators. Their essay "Militant Ironies: Art as a Strategic Weapon in Israel's Culture Wars" was published in *ART PAPERS* 30:05 (September-October 2006).