



LIFE, ONCE MORE



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FORMS OF REENACTMENT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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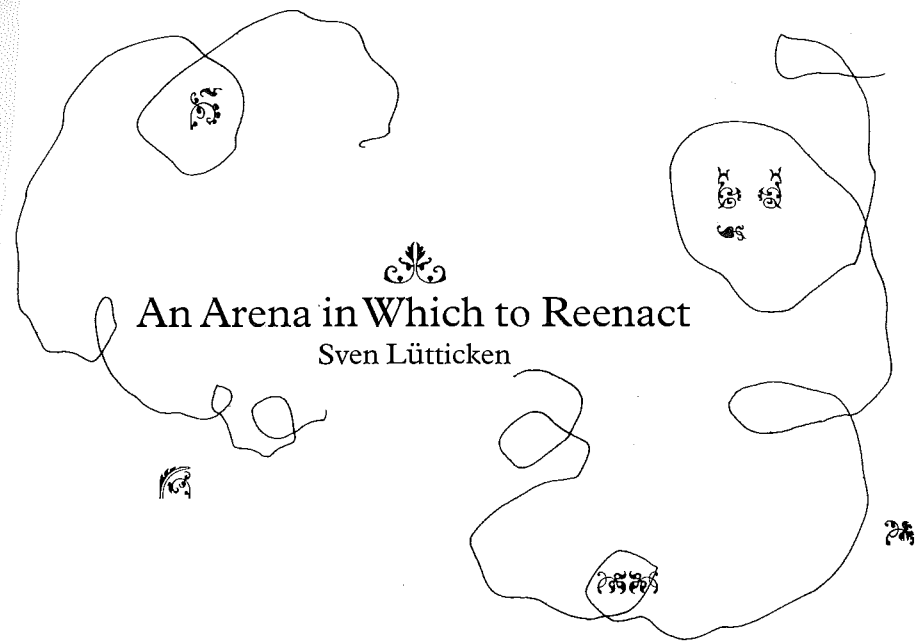
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03 AN AMERICAN REENACTMENT OF THE BATTLE OF THE BULGE, 1994.
 FROM: JENNY THOMPSON, WAR GAMES, WASHINGTON, 2007
 P. 171.



“History has emerged as a drama seen from within by a spectator who, willy nilly, is also an actor and in some indefinable sense an author.” Harold Rosenberg, 1970¹

¹ Harold Rosenberg, “Foreword: After Ten Years,” in *The Tradition of the New* (London: Paladin, 1970; first edition 1959), p. 21.

In the 1960s, Guy Debord and the Situationist International conceived of spectacle as a theater performed by commodity-images, consumed passively by people who lead impoverished lives. What was not sufficiently emphasized in this analysis was the spectacular imperative for people to present themselves, to perform themselves *as* commodities. In the post-Fordist economy, as service jobs became more important, it became imperative to present oneself not so much as an interchangeable supplier of labor-power – which is the commodity most people sell – but to perform oneself as a unique commodity-person. In a spectacular culture, everybody is a performer forever re-presenting him/herself in an attractive way. Of course, as Erving Goffman pointed out in his 1959 study on the “presentation” or the “performance” of self in everyday life, every society has a theatrical element, with people presenting themselves in ways that seem favorable and suited to themselves – a presentation that is also a *representation* of who they want to be or must be in a certain situation, for an audience whose members engage in the same practice.² Yet Goffman’s book is specific to its time,

² Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959). Although Goffman uses the term “presentation of self,” he also uses the term “misrepresentation” (p. 58), thus indicating that the presentation of self as “some kind of image” (p. 252) is an act of representation.

04 JEREMY DELLER, THE BATTLE OF ORGREAVE, 2001. COMMISSIONED



05 ROY VILLEVOYE, OVER THE TOP, 2003.



the late fifties, when corporate culture was already becoming more concerned with the performativity of employees; the book itself stimulated this development, being in this sense performative rather than merely descriptive. The performative aspect inherent to any social situation became exacerbated as certainties eroded; slightly later, the emphasis of the counterculture and the protest movements of the 1960s on free creativity was also absorbed by capitalism as it came to stress employees as creative, reliable people who are constantly improving themselves.³

By now, reality TV shows and an immense reservoir of banal quasi-celebrities have fulfilled Warhol's famous prophecy about the fifteen minutes of fame. Media images, however – including those of artists, whose performance of their identity is now often more important than the works they produce – are in a sense only the superstructure of a society of neoliberal performative subjects. As actors in a spectacle we have to appear as authentic beings with unique feelings and acts, but celebrity shows and real life soaps demonstrate only too clearly the unoriginal, repetitive nature of performance: the actors – we, potentially everyone – are assemblages, montages of repetitions. But while it is one thing to state that all subjects are created by something that precedes them – by language, by interpellation through speech – it is another to note that citation has to operate within narrow limits, without much variation.⁴ Basically, all acts have to be repetitions of the ultimate act: to play oneself in order to be visible and hence to have a certain exchange value in relation to other self-performers – whether the audience is a television audience or one of potential employers to be networked with. But if in the neoliberal theater everybody constantly reenacts himself *and* indirectly everyone else as well, reenactment becomes a crucial performative strategy – one that is explored in different ways by artists and other performers. If one is always reenacting roles partially scripted by others, one might just as well use reenactment against itself by recreating historical events. But can such a re-enactment succeed in breaking through the eternal return of the same, rather than ensuring its continuation? Historical reenactment may only be an escapist diversion from daily life, but perhaps it is also an anachronistic challenge to the present. Either option could itself be seen as a reenactment of older forms of reenactment.

3 See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *Le Nouvel Esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000). On the artists (especially female artists) in performative capitalism, see for instance Isabelle Graw, *Die bessere Hälfte: Künstlerinnen des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts* (Cologne: DuMont, 2003).

4 On interpellation and citation, see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 43–52.



In a society in which performance becomes the commodity par excellence, the *act* of painting can take on an autonomous function, reducing the finished painting to the status of a by-product. As Harold Rosenberg famously put it, "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event."⁵ Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters" is a peculiar text. It's not quite clear whom Rosenberg is talking about; he does not mention any names. Most people associated action painting with Jackson Pollock, but Rosenberg at the time was a champion of De Kooning. It was his rival Clement Greenberg who celebrated Pollock, but he praised him as a serious modernist painter who worked through certain formal problems left unresolved by cubism – *not* as an "action painter." Greenberg was appalled by Rosenberg's dadaist-surrealist-cum-existentialist rhetoric, which tended to dismiss the formal and colorist qualities so dear to Greenberg, "An action is not a matter of taste. You don't let taste decide the firing of a pistol or the building of a maze."⁶

Mary McCarthy responded to Rosenberg with the remark that "[you] cannot hang an event on the wall, only a picture."⁷ This was precisely what attracted younger artists like Allan Kaprow to Rosenberg's art-as-act or art-as-event theory. Events, happenings and performances seemed beyond commodification; being ephemeral, they could not be sold as precious artifacts. For artists like Kaprow, phrases from Rosenberg's article – even if not explicitly aimed at Pollock – blended with Hans Namuth's photographs and his film (1950) of Pollock painting his pictures to create an image of the prototypical action painter.⁸ The "acts" seen in these images seemed at least as vital and intriguing as Pollock's paintings, and yet they are only accessible as images. During the making of Namuth's film, Pollock began to feel that he was a phony who "acted" for the camera – acting in the sense of play-acting. Numerous publications and Ed Harris's film *Pollock* emphasize that it was because of this experience that Pollock began drinking again. It has

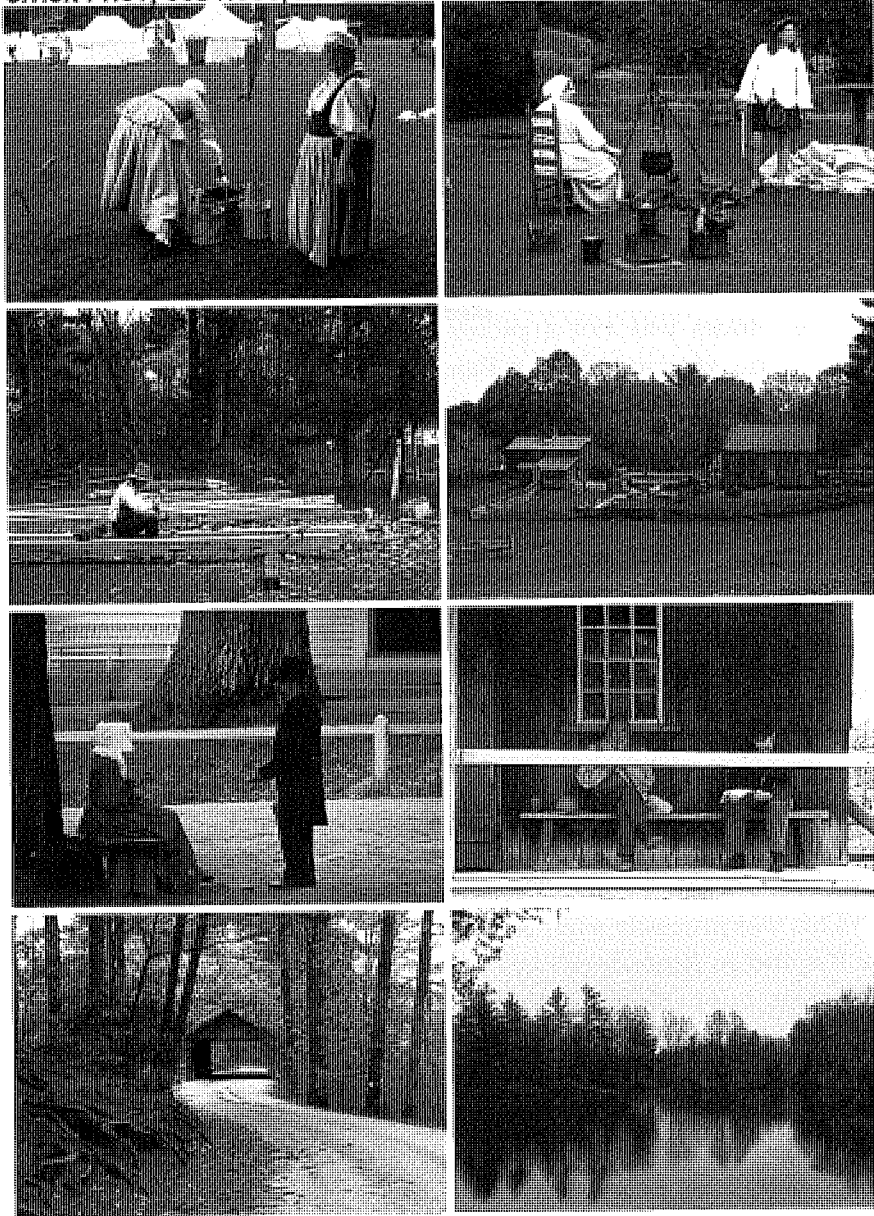
5 Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters" (1952), in *Tradition of the New*, p. 36.

6 Rosenberg, "Action Painters," p. 47. Greenberg (belatedly) attacked Rosenberg's essay in "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name" (1962), in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 135–144.

7 Quoted in Harold Rosenberg, "Preface" (1960), in *Tradition of the New*, p. 9.

8 Allan Kaprow, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (1958), in Kaprow, *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 1–9.

07 OMER FAST, GOODVILLE, 2005. PRODUCTION STILLS.



been suggested that Rosenberg may have been deliberately ambiguous in his use of the verb “to act,” perhaps using method acting as a model for an act that is a form of play yet emotionally real, but Pollock seems to have made a fatally rigorous distinction between authentic non-theatrical acts and “phony” play-acting (or film-acting).⁹

Later happenings and events too were thoroughly caught up in the spectacular economy; starting out as rather obscure avant-garde events, they were soon absorbed by spectacle, which itself became a parade of happenings. The commodification of performative works in the 1960s and even more so the 1970s manifested itself in such phenomena as the sale of limited edition photographs and videos, of objects and entire “sets.” And if the object played an important and marketable part in many performances, object-based art also became performative – Greenberg’s follower Michael Fried denounced minimalism for its “theatricality,” since minimal objects shared the same “literal” space as the viewer(s).¹⁰ The literalist, everyday “presence” that Fried decried in minimal art has been championed by defenders of performance art as its prime quality and *raison d’être*. In the face of media representations that reduce us to passivity, performance art presents us with live presence that eludes the grasp of permanent representation. This aspect has often given rise to claims for the progressive or critical qualities of performance art, in spite of the fact that performance in a wide sense is thoroughly integrated in media spectacle. Peggy Phelan insists that “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.”¹¹ Performance art, then, would seem to be an attempt to use performance against the aims of a dominant performative culture, which is only too eager to “lessen the promise of performance’s ontology.”

The expression “representations of representations” implies that a performance may create a strong sense of presence, but that it nonetheless takes place in a context that differentiates it from “normal life” and makes sure it is seen as a representation. Yet the thing that has distinguished performance art since the late 1950s, as Erika Fischer-

9 Graham Birtwistle, “Actie, oordeel en authenticiteit: Hoofdstukken uit de geschiedenis van het schildergebaar,” *Jong Holland* 19, no. 3 (2003): 22–29. For a detailed analysis of Namuth’s Pollock photographs and film, see Pepe Karmel, “Pollock at Work: The films and Photographs of Hans Namuth,” in exhib. cat. *Jackson Pollock* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), pp. 87–137.

10 Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” (1967), in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 148–172.

11 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked. The Politics of Performance* (London/New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

Lichte has noted, is that this representational context is often challenged: if Marina Abramović maims herself in the context of a performance, the actions are nonetheless shockingly real, even if we realize that “it is art.”¹² This also has consequences for the audience’s behavior. The audience may intervene in order to help, as when spectators try to protect Abramović, or in order to disrupt things, as in the case of the famous Fluxus evening in Aachen (1964), when members of the audience felt provoked and fought with Joseph Beuys, resulting in the well-known photograph of a bleeding Beuys holding a crucifix. Undoubtedly this is “something other” than the real, ephemeral, unique event, but is Phelan right in drawing such a strict boundary around “pure” performance? With the perverse essentialism of Roland Barthes’s claim – in *The Third Meaning* – that cinema’s essence resides in film stills, one could also claim that the essence of a performance or event lies in the reproductions that give it an afterlife – photos, films and videos, descriptions.¹³ Is it not here that ephemeral art becomes truly alive, in its afterlife, giving rise to ever new interpretations – and fantasies? It is here that the reenactment of “classic” performances becomes important.

On the one hand, such reenactments seem to be based on precisely the assumption that only a reenactment can give a real impression of such an ephemeral work, contrary to the misleading representations of photography and video, which tend to integrate performance art in the dominant spectacle; on the other hand, these photos and videos are in many cases so well-known that a reenactment will risk seeming like a sham, a poor substitute for the auratic images of the original event. In their video *Fresh Acconci* (1997), Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy based themselves on the film and video recordings of Acconci’s works from the early 1970s. Some of these were “straight” recordings of performances, while others, such as *Theme Song*, in which Acconci talks directly into the camera, were specifically geared towards video. Kelley and McCarthy restage these works in the idiom of soft porn – naked men and women reenact Acconci’s performances in a Californian villa, thus suggesting that the old footage just isn’t sexy enough for today’s visual culture, and that what is needed is not so much a live reenactment of Acconci’s pieces as a filmed reenactment that effectively functions as a *remake* of the old films and videos.¹⁴

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Historicism in Action: Parade, Pageant and Reenactment

The success of the terms “happening” and “event” in the 1960s, which quickly outgrew their origins in the neo-avant-garde, is an indicator of the theatricalization of culture in the sixties and beyond. Just as the increasing performativity of capitalism led to the neoliberal ideology of work-as-play, which recuperates for capitalist purposes notions of the 1960s movements that were aimed *against* capitalism, happenings became a provider of images for spectacle in spite of the fact that they were originally aimed against the spectacular regime of commodity-images. In 1961, Daniel J. Boorstin noted the growth of “pseudo-events” that exist only to be reported, to be represented by the media; in his *Blue Key Archive*, artist Eran Schaerf presents war reenactments as one of several categories of these pseudo-events.¹⁵ These theatrical events result in two-dimensional representations, commodity-images. Artistic happenings were meant to be beyond this kind of representation, but they too were documented in photographs and sometimes on film, and some happenings indeed became pseudo-events intended to generate media attention. As the openings of trendy shops or art shows became “happenings,” the happening became commodified. Warhol’s Silver Factory was a permanent happening by exhibitionists presided over by a voyeur. Far from a “pure” live performance, the factory revolved around media of mechanical representations – film, audio tapes, silk-screens. Allan Kaprow withdrew increasingly from the art world, disgusted by this development.

In the early 1960s, when events and happenings conquered art, the United States were teeming with activities related to the centennial of the Civil War – activities that in many cases also became a kind of happening. The centennial of the Battle of Bull Run (or First Manassas) in 1961 was commemorated with a reenactment of the battle on the original site, which received a lot of press attention and proved very popular with tourists.¹⁶ The reenactors – led by a retired army general – were mainly members of the North-South Skirmish Association (NSSA), an organization founded in 1950 as the North-South League. Although standards of authenticity were low at the time, some units strove to be accurate – the predecessors of later “hardcore”

12 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), pp. 9–30.

13 Roland Barthes, “The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Several Eisenstein Stills” (1970), in *The Responsibility of Forms*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 41–62.

14 On remakes, see Sven Lütticken, “Planet of the Remakes,” *New Left Review*, no. 25 (January/February 2004): 103–119.

15 Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961); Eran Schaerf, “Scenario–Data for Demographic Design: A Selection from the Blue Key Archive,” in exhib. cat. *Territories* (Berlin: KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2003), pp. 198–212.

16 Jenny Thompson, *War Games: Inside the World of Twentieth-Century War Reenactors* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004), pp. 29–33.

08 OUTSIDE THE KUNSTVEREIN IN MUNICH, 2004.



reenactors.¹⁷ After the First Manassas and similar reenactments, the modern reenacting hobby took off. Whereas the NSSA was and is focused on shooting contests, not on engaging in “realistic” fights or reenacting historical battles, these activities became crucial for later reenactors who became ever more precise in their quest for historical authenticity. In the late sixties, historical reenactment also crossed the Atlantic – the first reenactment group in the UK, The Sealed Knot, being formed in 1967 – it was named after a secret society that was active after the defeat of Charles I. It was, however, the Napoleonic era that would quickly become the European equivalent of the American Civil War as the most popular era for reenactments, supplemented by earlier but also by more recent conflicts such as the world wars of the twentieth century.

Reenactments are historicist happenings. At a time when pop art, Fluxus and minimalism celebrated the now, reenactments tried to create an experience of the past as present, or as much present as possible. Both war reenactments and many happenings and performances seemed to retreat from language into a realm of – seemingly – purely physical acts, away from preformed speech and its conventions, clichés and booby-traps. Happenings, and forms of 1960s and early 1970s avant-garde performance and theater in general, also eliminated the safe distance between performers and audience in order to create ambiguous, mixed states; similarly, the battle reenactment places viewers and performers in the same landscape, even if in the case of “public” events the audience is at a safe distance. In the case of “living history museums” the distance is much reduced – performers in historical costumes and visitors who themselves become part of the performance mingle in what Stephen Eddy Snow has termed an “environmental theater.”¹⁸ Some American living history museums – essentially historical theme parks based on reconstructions of historical towns or villages – date back to the 1920s or 1930s. Examples are Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village or Colonial Williamsburg, restored with Rockefeller money. In the case of the Pilgrim Village of Plimoth Plantation, which was founded slightly later, is representative, it was only around the 1970s that museum guides or interpreters switched to first-person narration – that is, to actually performing historical characters rather than explaining history

17 Ibid., pp. 36–38. For a first-person account of reenactments during the Civil War centennial of the early 1960s, see Ross M. Kimmel, “My Recollections as a Skirmisher during the Civil War Centennial: or, Confessions of a Blackhat” on http://wesclark.com/jwk_1960.html (accessed November 2004).

18 Stephen Eddy Snow, *Performing the Pilgrims: A Study of Ethnohistorical Role-Playing at Plimoth Plantation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), pp. 185–212.



from a contemporary perspective.¹⁹ In living history, the act is not abstracted into something existential and physical, outside of language. Living history shows daily life and hence subjects that are integrated in a society, through language and other means. Nonetheless these museums have merged with the historical reenactment movement – many reenactors in fact prefer to describe themselves as “living historians” and, apart from recreating battles, they also participate in less bellicose living history demonstrations. Conversely, the daily activities at living history museums are supplemented by occasional larger reenactments of exceptional occurrences, and in the case of the “occupation” of Williamsburg by British troops the “actors” are members of reenactment units.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 21–37.

Ultimately the roots of these contemporary forms of historicism lie in the period of historicism proper – the nineteenth century. This is not to say that the origins explain the current form, which is a *transformation* of historicism in a new cultural regime. By historicism here I understand the re-use of various old or “exotic” styles and models in nineteenth-century art and culture. This cultural historicism was shaped to a large degree by an approach in philosophy and history that is also often called historicism – fuelled by romanticism and German idealism, each historical period and its culture was conceived as having its own unique organic essence, which was the character of a particular stage in the development of Spirit, of Humanity or of a *Volk*. By integrating the unique essence that is a historical period and the march of progress or ethnic-spiritual continuity of a race, the past could gain relevance for the present. The recreation of historical styles, forms and details also helped to stimulate identification with the past and overcome the difference between it and the present; thus cultural historicism led to countless historical novels, to sumptuous history paintings and to neo-styles in architecture and interior design; European (and American) culture became a perpetual reenactment of any number of historical periods and “exotic” cultures. Thus a continuity was suggested that made the modern bourgeois the legitimate heir of his own people’s past, but also of other cultures.

The historical accuracy suggested by many forms of historicism in literature, art, architecture and various forms of festivities did not prevent it from being phantasmagoric

10 STILL FROM: STANLEY KUBRICK, BARRY LYNDON, 1975.



and phantasmatic at the same time; on the contrary, constant fact-checking legitimated and strengthened its oneiric character. As Walter Benjamin noted, nineteenth-century interiors aimed to give the bourgeois the impression that a historical event such as the crowning or the murder of an emperor could have taken place in the next room.²⁰ Actual reenactments were also an integral part of this culture. Whereas in the theater, dramas by playwrights such as Shakespeare were increasingly performed with sets and costumes that were painstakingly based on the period in question, historical parades or *Festzüge* brought the performed past onto the streets of the city.²¹ Although these parades have predecessors in pageants of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, mythology and allegory were much more prominent in those earlier forms; now history replaced myth. Unlike drama in the theater, these historical parades did not usually portray specific events; they reenacted history in the form of a procession, thus in a sense emphasizing the linearity of historical time while bringing back the past. In the late nineteenth century, crucial impulses for historicist spectacle came from art, especially from the Arts and Crafts movement and its romantic attempt to revive pre-industrial crafts. Before Jugendstil, symbolism and the twentieth-century avant-garde abstracted the notion of style from specific historical precedents in order to create a uniquely modern style – modernism is historicism applied to modernity itself –, the Arts and Crafts movements looked back towards historical styles to revive culture and ennoble everyday life. Costumed events were a part of the Arts and Crafts movement, often in a private context. Historicism-in-action reached a new level in terms of scale, publicness and publicity in England with the 1905 Sherborne Pageant, organized by Louis Napoleon Parker – whose parents performed an intriguing linguistic reenactment when they named him.²²

Parker's pageants, and many inspired by them both in the UK and elsewhere, were more narrative than most *Festzüge*. Typically they presented elaborate scenes from the history of the town or region where the pageant was performed, ranging from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, interrupted at some points by ballet or allegorical masques. These historical pageants were no parades: they were performed in front of a grandstand by a large troupe recruited from the town itself, in front of a picturesque

20 Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagen-Werk, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. V.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 286.

21 Werner Telesko, "Der Triumph- und Festzug des Historismus in Europa," in exhib. cat. *Der Traum vom Glück: Die Kunst des Historismus in Europa* (Vienna: Künstlerhaus Wien/Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Wien, 1996), vol. 1, pp. 290–296. On historical parades in nineteenth-century Belgium, see Tom Verschaffel, "Aanschouwelijke Middel-euwen. Historische optochten en vaderlandse drama's in het negentiende-eeuwse België" (1999), Digitale bibliotheek voor de Nederlandse letteren, <http://www.dbnl.nl/tekst/vers059aans01/> (accessed October 2004).

22 David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill/London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 43–44. Parker's grandson later continued staging pageants in the UK according to his grandfather's recipe, see Anthony Parker, *Pageants. Their Presentation and Production* (London: The Bodley Head, 1954).

11 KAISER-HULDIGUNGS-FESTZUG, VIENNA, 1908. FROM: EXHIB. CAT.



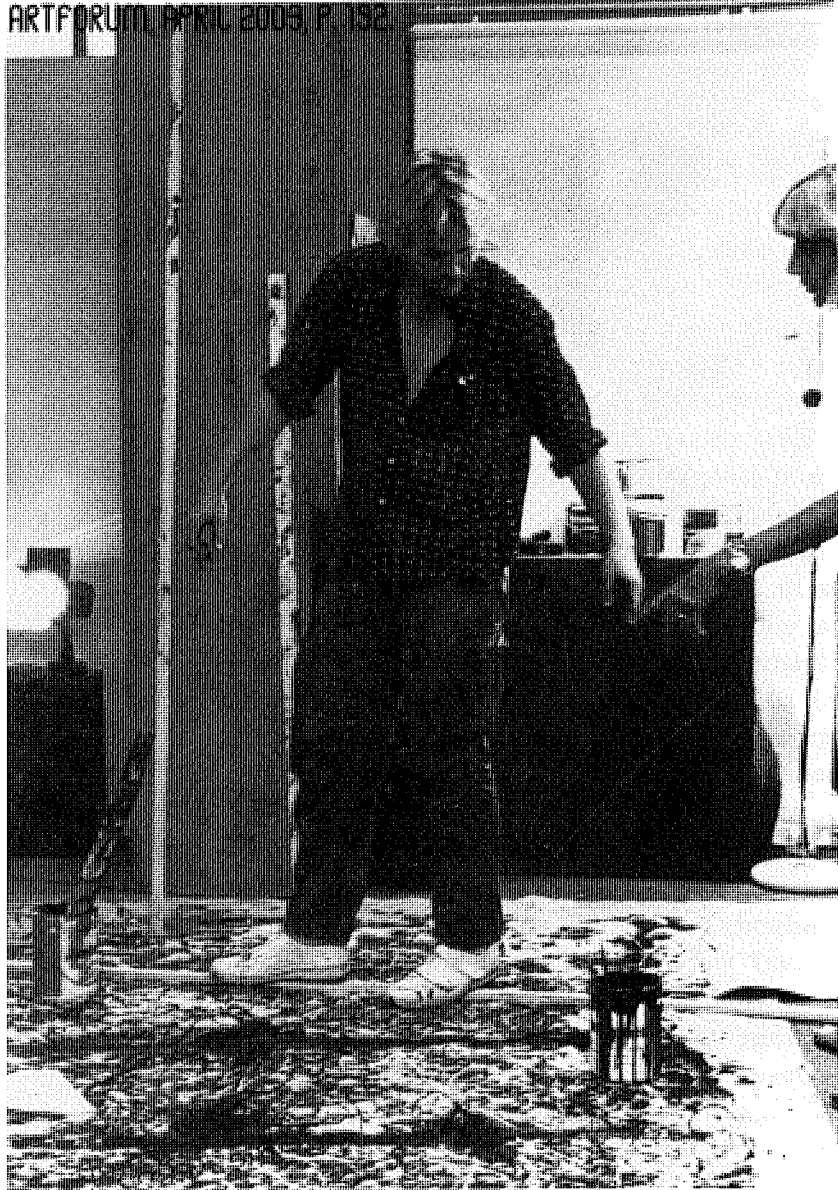
DER TRAUM VOM GLÜCK

background, such as a castle. A central aim was clearly to instill civic pride by celebrating local and – indirectly – national history; the pageant attempted to blend continuity and progress, tradition and the inevitable march of modernity. Parker's pageants were eagerly emulated in the United States; from 1910 onwards the USA were swept by a veritable reenactment craze. As in Europe, there had already been forms of historicist spectacle and festivity in the USA; at Fourth of July celebrations, veterans occasionally marched in historical costumes, and parades sometimes contained floats with *tableaux vivants* – sometimes inspired by history paintings. At a historical parade in Philadelphia in 1908, key roles were played by members of the city's elite; Benjamin Franklin was played by his own great-grandson.²³ Thus the ruling class used the historical parade to put forward a claim of ownership with regard to history; the new historical pageantry was also used in this manner. Others however tried to put the pageant to a different use: "progressive educators and playground workers viewed the new pageantry as a way to orchestrate the popular recreational features of celebrations so that the public would not only be exposed to history and art from the podium but also learn by doing through the medium of play. To them, historical pageantry was an elaborate ritual of democratic participation. . . ."²⁴

Compared to contemporary historical reenactments, pageants were less about individuals reenacting and more about a community being presented with an image of itself. If contemporary war reenactment is a kind of negative double of the performative imperative of postmodern capitalism, the pageant was community-oriented and opposed to the rising industry of cinema. Local participation was crucial. It was a (re)presentation for and by the people, yet most pageants were in fact directed by specialists imported for the occasion – the pageant directors, who often saw themselves as enlightened artists/educators. As in some historical parades of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there were essentially two experiences of the pageant – from the inside and from the outside. The reenactors taking part – often thousands of them for a single pageant – were, as members of the community, also part of the intended audience. The "passive" part of the audience watched the pageant as a large-scale play, a sumptuous spectacle; the

²³ Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, pp. 16–20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.



people in period costumes were the active part of the audience; inside the spectacle, living and participating in it, but always constrained by a script.

In this they were similar to extras on stage and in films, yet in these media the link between representation and community is severed; film exacerbates the gap between players and audience, severing spectacle's ties with the audience's life even more drastically than is the case with mainstream theater; it was only much later that spectacle would come to infiltrate daily life, as post-Fordist economical conditions made constant self-reinvention the norm and reality shows and web cams a logical consequence. Warhol, who combined admiration for the great film stars of Hollywood's golden age with the stated conviction that everybody could be a star, at least for fifteen minutes, is perhaps the figure who most clearly marks the transition to the new regime. The permanent happening at the Factory, with the constant recording of screen tests, was the testing ground for much that came later.



Representation and Immersion

Pageants tried to escape from the limitations of the stage into the countryside or some setting in the vicinity of the town that was celebrated in the pageant; the historical pageant is environmental theater that aims to merge with its context, representation that aims to blend into the represented community and its environment. The first plans for the Kaiser-Huldigungs-Festzug, organized in Vienna in 1908 to celebrate the emperor's sixty years of rule, still contained descriptions of floats with presentations of various dramatic scenes. However, the final concept of March 1908 did away with this device and concentrated on groups of people (often descendants of important families portraying their own ancestors, as in the Philadelphia parade of the same year) who march or ride on horseback or in carriages; rather than being paraded around in the form of tableaux, they move "naturally," more or less as they might have done in their respective eras, marching or riding along.²⁵ They are not on moving platforms, images at a remove; their feet, the horses' hooves, or the wheels of their carriages touch the street. Representation comes off the pedestal and out of the frame.

²⁵ Elisabeth Grossegger, *Der Kaiser-Huldigungs-Festzug, Wien 1908. Mit einem Vorwort von Margaret Dietrich*, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse, Sitzungsberichte, 585. Band (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992), pp. 30–36.

13 RONNIE CUTRONE/ANDY WARHOL, VICTOR HUGO URINATING, 1978.



Although the capitalist exploitation of cinema stood for the opposite of what the pageant movement wanted to achieve, pageant-master Thomas Wood Stevens observed that “pageant workers can gain much . . . from a study of moving pictures, in which, of course, the interest is held entirely by action. Think your pageant through in terms of moving pictures; filter out the talk and find out how much action remains.”²⁶ Soon historicism on the screen triumphed over live pageants, and it could be argued that twentieth-century cinema witnessed both the apotheosis and the autocritique of nineteenth-century artistic historicism. Mainstream cinema adopted nineteenth-century conventions both in narrative and visual respects in order to gain quick mass acceptance, shunning overt avant-garde elements at any rate. Historicism was thus able to thrive in a filmic form after it had become taboo in “serious” art. As in numerous nineteenth-century novels, the past was presented as exotic yet fundamentally compatible with twentieth-century sentiments and preconceptions; it was spectacularly present, but only as a background to stories that were variations of plots that could be set anywhere. By contrast, in films such as Max Ophüls’ *Lola Montez* (1955), Visconti’s *Ludwig* (1972) or Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975), historicism enacts a self-critical turn. For *Barry Lyndon*, Kubrick used the research material for his abandoned Napoleon film, which would have shown the destruction of the Ancien Régime by the French Revolution and the rise and fall of Napoleon’s Empire – a reenactment of Imperial Rome.

Contemporary hardcore reenactors are often critical of the ways in which history – especially military history – is portrayed in films, yet since the 1990s many reenactors have participated as extras in films such as *The Patriot* (2000), on the American revolutionary war, and *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Perhaps the criticism of films, while usually confining itself to details, also betrays a certain general distrust of the ability of flat, screen-based representations to give a real sense of the experience of war. Reenactors want to break through two-dimensional images into physical experience: historical reenactment as it has developed from the 1960s onwards is characterized by what one might call the emancipation of the reenactor. Publications on “the hobby” emphasize that hardcore reenactors have a negative opinion of “public” events, when – as in the pageants of old – they



have to conform to a central choreography for an audience.²⁷ Of course, these hardliners are only one faction within the reenactment hobby, and many are only too glad to perform a reenactment for a crowd of tourists. Nonetheless, the experience of the reenactor has become more important than it was in historical pageants; it is not so much a high-minded community affair as a hobby for groups of enthusiasts. Hence, it is not surprising that some prefer “private” reenactments, in which they can reenact historical battles strictly for themselves, without even a passive audience. Here, the active experience, the experience of acting – of reenacting – is everything. To make the experience more compelling, the battles are open-ended, which means that a reenactment of a historical battle that is known to have been won by the Germans can, in its reenacted form, be won by the British.²⁸

Although hardcore reenactors are obsessively perfectionist in their attentions to minute details of clothing and equipment, even banning modern glasses, in this regard they seem to allow themselves surprising freedom. But since the outcome of the original battle was not clear in advance either, an authentic war reenactment must contain the elements of surprise and chance, and have an open outcome. For hardcore reenactors, the reenactment must be as close to an authentic act as can be managed without real bullets and real dead. In some battle reenactments at least the experience of the performer becomes more important than the desire to have a certain effect on an audience. Compared to earlier forms of historicism-in-action, the contemporary reenactment puts greater emphasis not only on first-person experience but also on the most extreme act of all, namely fighting in a war. For an everyday life which has become a constant activity of self-performance and thus rather representational, this authentic act of war is substituted which is far removed from acting in the sense of play-acting. And yet it is still turned into a theatrical happening that seems to transpose the pressures of daily life into a form of play. As Tom Holert and Mark Terkessidis have noted, the metaphor of a soldier or a lone fighter is often used to describe contemporary neoliberal subjects – especially those in jobs related to the financial market.²⁹ Is a day in Wall Street not the ultimate battle reenactment? If many reenactors have more humble jobs than that of stockbroker or manager, this

²⁷ Thompson, *War Games*, pp. 95–116, 141–163.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 153–154.

²⁹ Tom Holert and Mark Terkessidis, *Entsichert. Krieg als Massenkultur im 21. Jahrhundert* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2002), pp. 104–116.

will only increase their sense of identification with the “common soldier.” Are they really reenacting themselves in the guise of some guy in the trenches?

Reenactment’s emphasis on an immersive experience can be related to the “alternative tradition” that Lev Manovich has contrasted with the dominant mode of representation in modern culture, that of screen-based representation. This alternative tradition “can be found whenever the scale of a representation is the same as the scale of our human world so that the two spaces are continuous. This is the tradition of simulation rather than that of representation bound to a screen”; it can be traced back to the fake villages which Potemkin allegedly constructed to give Catherine the Great the illusion that her peasants were prosperous.³⁰ It also includes attractions from the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as waxwork museums, and to a certain degree also the panorama and the phantasmagoria – the magic lantern ghost show whose name Marx turned into a synonym for the illusions of the commodity fetish, a term later adopted by Benjamin in his analysis of commodified nineteenth-century culture. Although shunned in art during the reign of modernism, this tradition of simulation never disappeared, and in recent decades it has steadily grown in strength – not only in all kinds of theme parks but also in virtual reality, for instance in flight simulators. The first company for the development of computerized flight simulators was formed in 1968; in later decades, the same technology was increasingly used to produce computer games for the consumer market.³¹

While an “egoshooter” game obviously offers a different experience from standing frostbitten in some field during a reenactment, there is a fundamental similarity in that both seek to draw one into an experience that is much more immersive and engaging than looking at a two-dimensional representation. Although the game technically takes place on a two-dimensional screen, the gamer has the illusion of traversing a space and acting in it. Films have also increasingly attempted to place the viewer in the middle of the action, immersing him or her in the situation, although this effect is usually created by frantic montage rather than by the “single take” effect of games. Paradoxically it was Kubrick, the master of static tableaux, who from the 1950s to the 1980s created war scenes with an unprecedented

sense of closeness and of the reality of battle. But while Kubrick may place the viewer in the trenches of World War I or in bewildering Vietnam battle scenes, his camera style remains detached and does not encourage any identification with characters. This is a crucial difference with more recent films, however much they may have been influenced by Kubrick’s camera-work – as in the case of Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*. Kubrick’s camera is an observer and does not suggest participation, no matter how mobile it is; by contrast, many recent war and actions films turn the viewer into a quasi-gamer.

The more hardcore reenactors go to great lengths to make the illusion as authentic as possible, from conceiving a character with a clear identity for their “impression” down to soaking buttons in urine to give them the right patina. Any modern equipment must be hidden in order to be completely “in period,” yet this does not prevent reenactors from using completely inauthentic photo and video cameras when in battle. In the end, it is vital that two-dimensional representations help to memorize the experience: like performance art, the reenactment gives rise to an almost endless procession of photographic representations, often displayed proudly on the websites of “regiments” or “units.” Such websites also have the function of attracting potential new re-enactors; the act of clicking one’s way through image galleries might lead to the desire to take part in reenactments. Screen-based representation and the “simulation” of the reenactment are interlinked and influence each other. In the case of moderate mainstream reenactors, the lure of fancy-looking Napoleonic or Civil War uniforms that make for nice images is probably a factor of some importance. If such a picturesque approach is despised by hardcore reenactors, they too want to re-experience their experiences again and again by poring over pictures; some even revive the old process of wet-plate photography in order to come up with “authentic” images. On the one hand today’s performative culture stresses subjective experience both in leisure and in the workplace, which can be transformed into a sphere of creativity and play if one’s attitude is right; on the other hand it emphasizes the appearance of the performer, the visual result – the image. While offering a momentary release from ordinary performance, war reenactments and living history attractions replicate this tension between the experience and

30 Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge MA/London: MIT Press, 2001), p. 112.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 276–277.

the image of the performance; it is this very tension that makes such theatrical forms compelling.

Writing about hardcore reenactors, Tony Horwitz has emphasized the notion of the “period rush,” a momentary illusion of actually being in the past.³² But although the reenactor wants this fiction to become (almost) painfully real, he is no more likely to completely forget that he is participating in a fiction than the gamer is. If some forms of performance art create uncertainty as to whether the artist maiming himself or herself has to be seen as a representation or as a very real act of self-mutilation that should be stopped, hardcore reenactments go less far in erasing the distinction between performing in a play and acting in the everyday life of spectacle. While some of the discomforts of a battle situation are momentarily felt, it is clear that it is a game and that no one is actually supposed to get killed. Historical performance art often mimicked ritualistic forms at any rate to suggest a transformative experience. In the case of war reenactment the ambition is more modest – to step out of daily life for a limited amount of time in order to return recharged but fundamentally unchanged. The idea is to reenact history so as to cope with the daily performative demands of the reenactment that is postmodern life.

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Now-Time and Time-Travel

Writing about a 1998 Gettysburg reenactment, Christopher Hitchens noted that “those who can’t forgive the past are condemned, not without pathos, to reenact it.”³³ This remark is obviously a variation of George Santayana’s famous phrase, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” These words are endlessly repeated on all kinds of commemorative occasions, especially in Germany. In a slightly modified version – “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it” – they were also the motto of cult leader Jim Jones, recently the subject of the *Jonestown Re-enactment* by artist Rod Dickinson. Hitchens’s substitution of “reenact” for “repeat” suggests that he sees the reenactment as denying history rather than really engaging with it. In this sense, it would be comparable to nineteenth-century culture, which according to Walter Benjamin no longer strove for the revolutionary

Jetztzeit (now-time) in which the French Revolution had revived, relived, reenacted ancient Rome.³⁴ The republican virtues of early Rome, with which the pre-revolutionary paintings of David and others had instilled the public, leapt from the canvas into social life and political action, changing dresses, ceremonies and political structures – before Republic turned into Empire under Napoleon, exchanging one Rome for another. As antiquarian as it may have been in architecture, letters, clothing, the French Revolution sought to revive antique virtues and political ideas in order to overthrow centuries of obscurantism, to break with the Ancien Régime through an act of radical anachronism.

Even though the Neoclassical culture of the late eighteenth century may have contained the seeds of historicism, in its most radical manifestations it used the old forms to shatter contemporary structures. If the revolution was a reenactment of Antiquity, it was one that used the past to transform the present, resulting in something unprecedented. Rather than reviving an earlier period in this way, historicism used historical styles to stabilize contemporary bourgeois society. If the revolutionary reenactment in a *Jetztzeit* shattered the Ancien Régime, the historicist reenactment of periods and styles reinforced the new status quo, clothing the ceaseless advance of modernization in forms that suggest continuity and a logical evolution. But while neo-styles were intimately linked to historicist notions of evolution and progress, stylistic historicism in the arts and in material culture also suggested a mythical, cyclic return. After all, as Benjamin argued, not only did the ideology of progress itself increasingly become an unquestioned modern myth, the nineteenth century also produced the theories of eternal repetition of Blanqui and Nietzsche. In Benjamin’s view, such theories were a *répétition du mythe* befitting a culture that enveloped itself in a dreamtime of sameness in order to cement the bourgeois ownership of history by reenacting past styles.³⁵ But if, as modern theorists maintain, myths are continually reenacted in rituals that make the mythic events genuinely present once more – thus creating a cyclic rather than a linear time –, modern *répétitions du mythe* have to deal with historical events rather than with “timeless” mythic events. Repetition thus comes to be a repetition of an “original” rather than one of many possible actualizations of a myth; this is the impoverished reproduction of a cyclic time

32 Tony Horwitz, *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 1998), a.o. p. 7.

33 Hitchens, quoted in Thompson, *War Games*, p. 284.

34 Walter Benjamin, “Über den Begriff der Geschichte” (1940), in *Gesammelte Schriften vol. I.2: Abhandlungen*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 701.

35 Benjamin, *Passagen-Werk*, pp. 169–178.

15 ROD DICKINSON, RECONSTRUCTION - JIM JONES SIGN: CIRCA 1970, JONESTOWN, GUYANA, THE JONESTOWN RE-ENACTMENT, 2002. DETAIL FROM THE INSTALLATION AT THE CENTRE FOR

THOSE WHO DO NOT
REMEMBER THE PAST
ARE CONDEMNED
TO REPEAT IT.

under modern, industrial conditions. But the original that is copied is perhaps all too much a product of the contemporary imagination, not allowing for complexity and difference to break through the status quo. For all the accuracy it may possess, this repetition is above all a historicizing reproduction of what is conservative about the present.

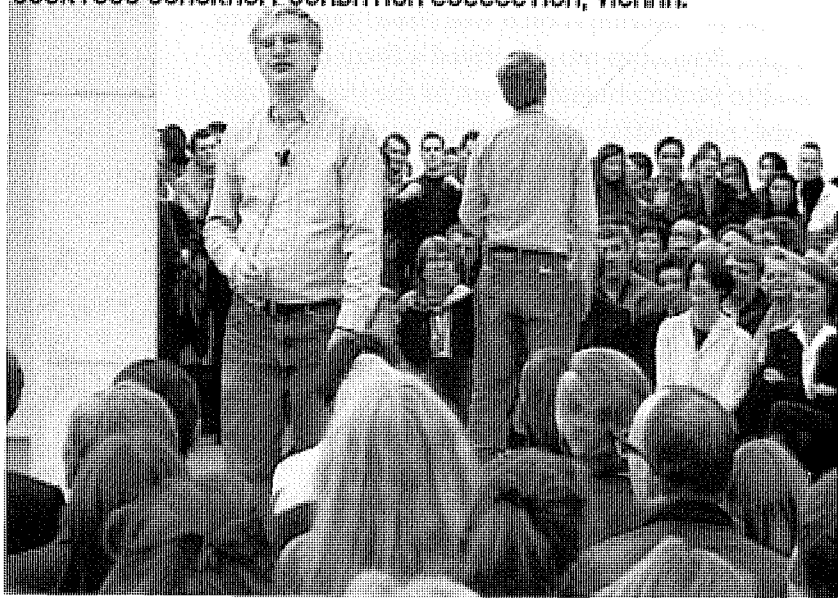
Although Benjamin read Nietzsche's theory of eternal return as an ideological expression of bourgeois historicism, Nietzsche himself criticized the historicism of his day for stultifying life with antiquarian learning, and Gilles Deleuze has argued that Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return was aimed *against* the reproduction of archetypes and of originals. Deleuze's Nietzsche wanted to replace such mythic repetition and its modern equivalent with a decentered, productive repetition that does not copy any models. "But is not repetition capable of breaking out of its own cycle and of 'leaping' beyond good and evil? It is repetition which ruins and degrades us, but it is repetition which can save us and allow us to escape from the other repetition . . . To the eternal return as reproduction of something always already-accomplished, is opposed the eternal return as resurrection, a new gift of the new, of the possible."³⁶ Although for Benjamin, Nietzsche's eternal return was "bad" rather than "good" repetition, Benjamin too theorized a form of repetition that refused to remain bogged down in the passive consumption of the past. After the bourgeoisie had gained power, it attempted to control the revolutionary forces it had itself unleashed; on the cultural level, this manifested itself in the bad repetition of historicist art, which naturalized bourgeois ideology and tranquilized rather than activated the public. By contrast, during the French Revolution, when the bourgeoisie was still a revolutionary class, it reactivated the Roman past in the revolutionary repetition of now-time – an explosion that breaks the circle of "reproductive" repetitions. Of course, the distinction between a revolutionary now-time and a conservative historicism is a simplification, useful though it is. It could well be argued that Victorian England and Louis Napoleon's Second Empire had their own imperial now-time, identifying with the later Roman Empire with an anguished passion that was still largely absent in Napoleon's "original" Empire, which never completely relinquished the dynamic now-time of the revolution. Films such as *Gladiator* and *Attack of the Clones*, with

36 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 131. For Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche's eternal return, see *Logique du sens* (Paris: PUF, 1968), p.121.

16 DAN GRAHAM, PERFORMER/AUDIENCE/MIRROR, 1975.
COURTESY GENERALI FOUNDATION COLLECTION, VIENNA.



17 DAN GRAHAM, VIDEO/ARCHITECTURE/PERFORMANCE, 1995
COURTESY GENERALI FOUNDATION COLLECTION, VIENNA.



its Roman references, suggest that the current American Empire is also seen as a rather problematical return of Imperial Rome even by its own culture industry.

The use of historical elements from past periods in contemporary culture is often seen as a superficial recycling of nostalgic signs, and is contrasted with the historical consciousness of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet – if we look at Steven Spielberg's output – the popcorn nostalgia of the Indiana Jones films coexists with endeavors such as *Schindler's List* (1993) and *Saving Private Ryan*, films that clearly aspire to being serious historical drama. One could argue that they are no less phantasmatic than the Indiana Jones adventures, and in this they resemble nineteenth-century historicism: historical detail adds to the ideological pull of the representation of World War II and the Holocaust. Something similar is the case with living history museums such as Plimoth Plantation or Colonial Williamsburg, in which the utopian beginnings of the USA are reenacted. On the one hand, a strange conservative now-time pervades these historicist environments/happenings – the early Pilgrim settlers and the (pre-)revolutionary period are seen as highly relevant to the contemporary situation. On the other hand, these periods in question are integrated into a grand historical narrative of America's destiny; the early Pilgrim settlers and the pre-revolutionary and revolutionary periods seem condemned to becoming an ideological justification for the contemporary American Empire. It is telling that the metaphor of time-travel is often applied to such attractions: one travels into the past as an historical tourist, only to return to the present unchanged; the theatrical equivalent of a time machine enables one to experience a distant period without experiencing any temporal disorientation, without any risk of the past disrupting the present. As in nineteenth-century historicist culture, a potentially disruptive now-time is thus grafted on a teleological narrative in order to create a watered-down, picturesque reenactment of the past that can indeed appear like a *répétition du mythe*. If Williamsburg constantly reenacts (the eve of) the American Revolution, it does so in order to conserve and freeze it – that is, to turn the revolution into a stabilizing factor for the present.

10 THE PAGEANT OF THE PATERSON STRIKE, MADISON SQUARE GARDEN, 1913. FROM: DAVID GLASSBERG, AMERICAN HISTORICAL PAGEANTRY, CHAPEL HILL/LONDON, 1990, P. 131.



Something similar can be said of, for instance Napoleonic reenactment in Europe. In a sense, this is a reenactment of nineteenth-century nationalism itself, as the rise of nationalism in European countries was greatly fuelled by Napoleon's wars. As *European events* however, these wars can also be seen as a kind of founding myth for a united Europe, while reassuringly displaying the picturesque qualities of the nations that constitute Europe. The American Civil War is a potentially more disruptive event: its reenactment seems to have a much stronger contemporary significance than Napoleonic reenactment. In the highly selective and idealized version of history in American historical pageants of the early twentieth century, the decline of Indian civilization after the arrival of the white settlers was usually presented as a historical necessity and the revolutionary war was presented in a highly romantic way. The more recent and traumatic Civil War was represented only indirectly, in the form of soldiers departing for the battlefield or returning after the conflict was over. Whereas the pageant emphasized community and continuity, today's historical reenactment is principally concerned with the common soldier and his experience of war, and in this context the Civil War becomes the war *par excellence*: the fact that Americans are fighting Americans adds to its tragedy. Not that both sides are equally attractive: in a climate of widespread suspicion of big government and the ruling elite, Confederates are considered much more tragic and noble than Union soldiers. If the common white male is presented as the heroic victim of history, women and black men meet with less empathy, and are sometimes discouraged from taking part on grounds of historical authenticity – and dubious sentiments may lurk behind such historical arguments. In the case of some World War II reenactors, there seems to be a disconcerting fascination for adopting the posture of SS *Herrenmenschen*. Far from the lunatic fringe, in a major film production such as *Der Untergang* (2004), there is an astonishing amount of empathy for Hitler, whose last days in the bunker are reenacted by Bruno Ganz as an all-too human tragedy.

In some cases, there have been (proposals for) reenactments that react against conservative and reactionary

19 HANS VON UND ZU AUFSESS, FOUNDER OF THE GERMANISCHES



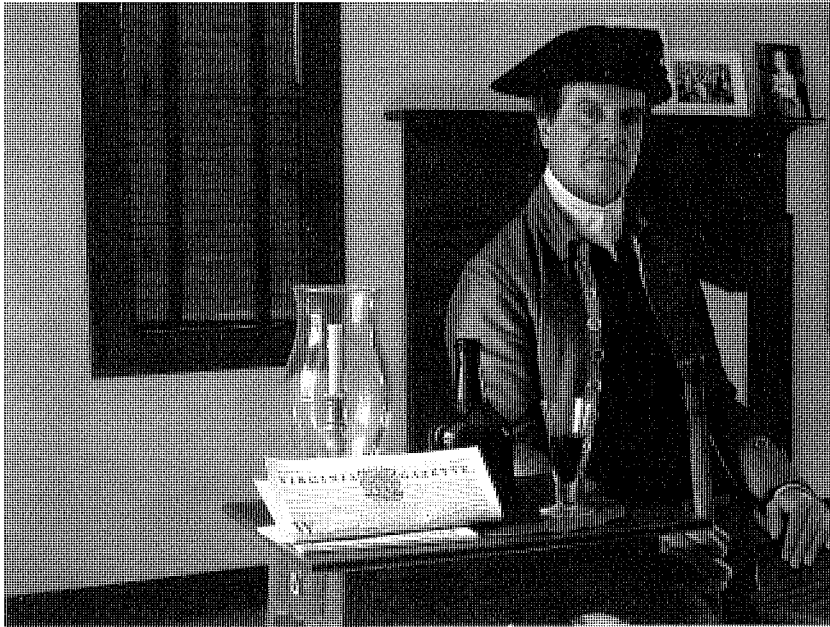
tendencies in reenactment. During the American pageant craze, the Industrial Workers of the World organized the Pageant of the Paterson Strike at Madison Square Garden, with John Reed directing striking workers from the Paterson mills who reenacted their picket-line and the violent confrontations with company agents.³⁷ This was the heyday of trade unionism; artist Jeremy Deller on the other hand recently returned to a moment that symbolizes the decline of workers' organizations with *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001), a reenactment of the violence encountered by the striking miners in Thatcher's Britain. If normal historical re-enactments present history as a series of wars and battles, Deller added a different kind of battle to the repertoire. The event resulted in a book and a film of the battle by Mike Figgis – once again flat, screen-based representation emerges as the destiny of the reenactment. Whereas Deller staged a professional event funded by an art organization, the web site of the "London Riot Re-enactment Society" opts for anarchist pranksterism, proposing to reenact historical London riots in London itself: "... there are inherent difficulties in asking, or even informing, the relevant bodies of our plans. For example, if we asked the Corporation of London if we could use the City for a week or so to re-enact the Gordon riot they might charge us some considerable sum of money, which we don't have, and there is really not much point in writing to Mercedes Benz about using their showroom as part of a June 18 re-enactment, or to the monarch about our desire to sack the Tower dressed as Wat Tyler's army. It may be best to just go ahead and re-enact. Hopefully no one will mind."³⁸

Such (proposals for) alternative reenactments pale in comparison with the French Revolution as a reenactment of ancient Rome in a state of revolutionary now-time; in its turn, the Russian Revolution – rather than the countless reenactments of the storming of the Bastille in France and elsewhere – could be seen as the real reenactment of the French Revolution. Here we are of course dealing with a type of reenactment beyond historicism, beyond faithfulness to details and a mythic submission to an original which is only perverted and debased in the act of copying. But the young Soviet Union also staged reenactments in a stricter sense of the word. The storming of the Winter Palace, a crucial event during the revolution, was later repeatedly reenacted for commemorative purposes – for the first time in

37 Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry*, p. 128.

38 "London Riot Re-enactment Society", <http://c8.com/anathematician/lrrs.htm> (accessed October 2004).

20 OMER FAST, GODVILLE, 2005. PRODUCTION STILL.



1920, three years after the event. Slavoj Žižek has described the significance of this reenactment as follows, “On 7 November 1920, on the third anniversary of the October Revolution, a re-enactment of the Storming of the Winter Palace was performed in Petrograd. Tens of thousands of workers, soldiers, students and artists had worked round the clock, living on kasha (tasteless porridge), tea and frozen apples, to prepare the performance, which took place just where the original event had occurred. Their work was coordinated by army officers, as well as avant-garde artists, musicians and directors, from Malevich to Meyerhold. Although this was theatre and not ‘reality’, the soldiers and sailors who took part played themselves. Many of them had not only participated in 1917, but were, at the time of the performance, fighting in the civil war – Petrograd was under siege in 1920 and suffering from severe food shortages. A contemporary commented: ‘The future historian will record how, throughout one of the bloodiest and most brutal revolutions, all of Russia was acting’; the Formalist theoretician Viktor Shklovsky noted that ‘some kind of elemental process is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into the theatrical.’ Such performances – particularly in comparison with Stalin’s celebratory Mayday parades – are evidence that the October Revolution was not a simple coup d’état carried out by a small group of Bolsheviks, but an event that unleashed a tremendous emancipatory potential.”³⁹

Regardless of one’s feelings about Žižek’s reenactment of revolutionary pathos, it is beyond doubt that such reenactments attempted to engage the people in a kind of participatory mass theater that was intended to be in total contrast with the consumerist spectacle of capitalism. The reenactment’s program emphasized that artistic freedom should be allowed to dominate over historical details, perhaps implying a criticism of Western historical pageants: “The tone of the historical events that serve as the raw material for the making of this spectacle is here reduced to a series of artistically simplified moments and stage situations. The directors of the current spectacle did not give any consideration to a precise reproduction of the events that took place in the square in front of the Winter Palace three years ago. They did not, and indeed could not, because theatre was never meant to serve as the minute-taker of history.”⁴⁰

39 Slavoj Žižek, “Seize the Day: Lenin’s Legacy,” *London Review of Books* 24, no. 14 (25 July 2002) at www.egs.edu/faculty/zizek/zizek-seize-the-day-lenins-legacy.html (accessed October 2004).

40 Program for the 1920 reenactment, quoted by Richard Taylor, www.bfi.org.uk/bookvid/books/catalogue/sample/text.php?bookid=349 (accessed October 2004).

21 BARBARA VISSER, A DAY IN HOLLAND/HOLLAND IN A DAY, 2001.
COURTESY ANNET GELINK GALLERY, AMSTERDAM.



This reenactment then was intended somehow to be a continuation of the revolution, activating the masses and giving history a forward impulse. Apart from 8.000 active participants, there was an audience of 100.000 – a quarter of the city's population. Just as the historical pageant competed with cinema, so the storming of the Winter Palace was restaged both in a live reenactment and on film. Eisenstein reenacted the event again for *October* (1927). The revolution ended up as cinema, yet this was to be a very different film from those produced in Hollywood or Berlin: one that reminds the people both of their achievements and of their historical mission. In the case of *October* too many of the reenactors taking part had been involved in the original storming. Later, and on a more modest scale, Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* was also in part performed by (former) miners who had taken part in the original event.

In 1976, when the Soviet Union was in lethargy and the backlash against the 1960s movements was beginning in the West, a group of art critics and theorists named their new journal *October* in a kind of symbolic and academic reenactment of the October Revolution and its filmic reenactment by Eisenstein: "We have named this journal in celebration of that moment in our century when revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique."⁴¹ One could see this statement of intent as a – written – speech act that tries to use language to *effect something* rather than to describe a state of affairs; in J.L. Austin's classification of linguistic utterances, this is language that wants to be performative rather than constative. But as Judith Butler – who has written extensively on the performativity of language – has noted, not all speech acts succeed.⁴² Has *October's*? One can hardly claim that the magazine has led once again to an exemplary combination of "revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation"; what it *has* succeeded in doing is to open up a sphere of discourse, of language that may be constative and performative in varying degrees. The creation of such a discourse has itself a performative quality. Cynics might claim that *October's* main effect so far has been as a career-boosting device for its editors, but one can also argue that this kind of success is indicative of a widely felt need for the practice proposed, though not realized, by *October*.

41 From the first *October* editorial, quoted in Roger L. Conover, "1–100: Some Particulars," *October*, no. 100 (Spring 2002): 229.

42 Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 16.

22 STILL FROM: ED HARRIS, POLLOCK, 2000. COPYRIGHT SONY



23 STILL FROM: ED HARRIS, POLLOCK, 2000. COPYRIGHT SONY
PICTURES CLASSICS



In art as elsewhere it is not always clear if something is “the eternal return as reproduction of something always already-accomplished,” or if instead it achieves “the eternal return as resurrection.” It is unlikely that an artistic reenactment will prove to be “an event that unleashes a tremendous emancipatory potential,” but what contemporary art *can* do is investigate the modalities of reenactment and the possibilities and problems inherent in them. The appropriation art of the late 1970s and 1980s is of crucial importance here. While Sherrie Levine rephotographed works by Walker Evans or Edward Weston, creating an infra-thin difference out of sameness, Mike Bidlo emphasized the performative aspect of appropriation in his Pollock works. Apart from producing paintings, Bidlo also made a remake of Hans Namuth’s Pollock film, and in the installation/performance *Jack the Dripper at Peg’s Place* (1982), Bidlo had an actor (and thereafter, a dummy) repeat an essential element of the Pollock myth, namely the artist urinating in Peggy Guggenheim’s fireplace. The episode also features in Ed Harris’s feature film *Pollock* (2000), for which Bidlo served as a consultant, teaching Harris how to paint like Pollock. The best sequence in *Pollock* is dedicated to the making of Hans Namuth’s film. Restaging Pollock’s traumatic encounter with the spectacularization of the Act, Harris gets a lot of amusement out of showing Namuth bullying Pollock and ordering him around.

Perhaps Warhol’s *Piss Paintings* with their queer take on the mythical Pollock and his macho acts are the ultimate Pollock reenactments. If language can take the form of performative speech acts, Warhol saw Pollock’s mute acts as discursive moves whose meaning could be manipulated, rather than as originals to be copied. Military reenactments and living history museums are usually pragmatic combinations of extreme literalness and license; the most successful artistic reenactments or reflections on reenactment upset the balance, disrupting the clichéd assemblage of detail and delirium that is as typical of contemporary historicism as it was of earlier forms. While some reenactments in contemporary art take the form of very free variations, others follow

24 BARBARA VISSER, ARS FUTURA, 1994.
COURTESY ANNET GELINK GALLERY, AMSTERDAM.



25 BARBARA VISSER, ARS FUTURA, 1994.
COURTESY ANNET GELINK GALLERY, AMSTERDAM.

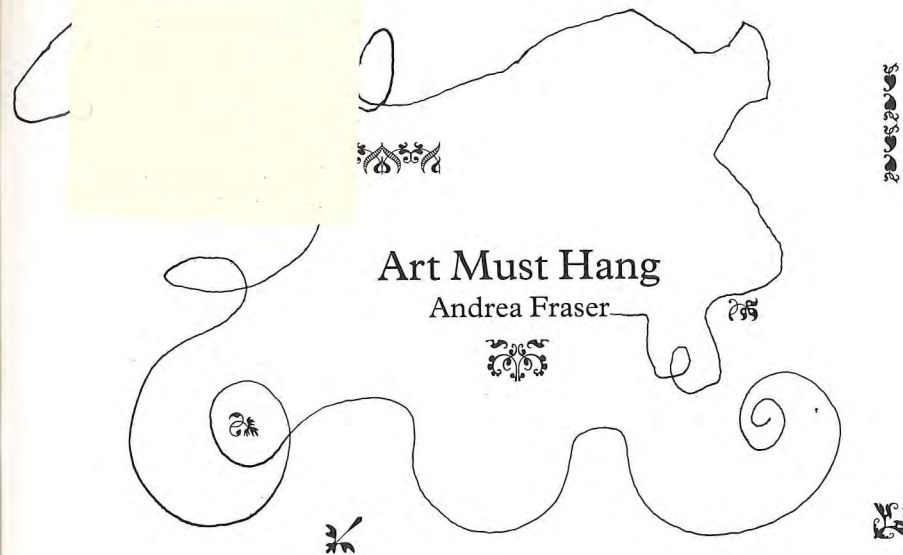


appropriation art in attempting to generate difference from extremely literal repetitions; apparently bad, slavish repetition is pushed to an extreme to show how the de- and re-contextualisation of a seemingly unchanged image is able to effect a profound change. Explicit reflection on reenactment and its complexities and contradictions is also an important element of artistic reenactment in art. Pierre Huyghe, for example, in his video installation *The Third Memory* (2000), provided the bank robber John Wojtowicz with the opportunity to reenact his own acts. He invited him to reenact the robbery in a film studio, so as to reclaim his history from the Hollywood version of events in *Dog Day Afternoon*, in which he was played by Al Pacino. The literalness with which Wojtowicz shows what happened becomes an act of liberation from the film image; yet the old man on the abstract studio set also looks very unreal, as if this reenactment is a dream – a dream created in part by himself and in part by Hollywood.

But what role can artistic reenactments play in a world that is increasingly shaped by neoconservatives and religious fundamentalists who impose their own dismal now-time on society and culture? Islamists try to reenact a phantasmatic “pure” Islam, which is largely a modern ideology, and, in spite of their aversion to images and modern media, they use spectacular effects, with 9/11 as the supreme example. The Taliban too were great anti-theatrical performers, who used the primitivist theme park into which they had turned Afghanistan to tremendous effect. Western neo-conservatives on the other hand try to recreate a pre-sixties modernity, in less violent ways and accepting of most modern technology. Some want to go beyond the fifties to the more distant time before the French Revolution; contemporary philosophy and politics have had their share of pathetic Edmund Burke reenactors. The situation is complex: George W. Bush’s infamous – and hastily retracted – use of the term *crusade* gave us a glimpse of the program of Christian fundamentalists in the United States, who would gladly return to the days of the Pilgrim Fathers or even to the time of the Crusades. Outside the Christian fundamentalist camp, most Western neoconservatives would probably be content with a somewhat neo-Victorian modernity, the restoration of a lost status quo. “Conservative revolutions” are restorations; if they reenact the past to change the

present, it is not at the service of creating something unprecedented, but at the service of restoring, of copying a hallowed model of order and “natural” inequality. The performative imperative of capitalism is often taken for granted, but the permanent happening must now be organized along more traditional lines; the excesses of contemporary self-performance – especially in leisure activities and the media – have to be curbed. The performative imperative is acceptable if we model ourselves on the Pilgrims or on the 1950s.

The left seems to have lost the initiative completely, and artistic acts – or theoretical speech acts – cannot be a substitute for a political force that is lacking. But space for reflection is also badly needed, and to a certain extent the art world can offer it. Art can examine and try out – under laboratory conditions, as it were – forms of repetition that break open history and the historicist returns of past periods; it can investigate historical moments or eras as potentials waiting to be reactivated, in forms that need not resemble anything. Operating within contemporary performative spectacle, if from a marginal position, art can stage small but significant acts of difference. From this perspective, historical reenactment and living history too may constitute a potential waiting to be activated. It is obvious that they are fatally implicated in the current conservative climate, as diversion and relaxing play that also performs an ideological justification for the state of things as they are. Yet everything is open to appropriation, and mainstream historical reenactment may provide impulses that go beyond its limits. It may lead to artistic acts that, while not instantly unleashing a “tremendous emancipatory potential,” create a space – a stage – for possible and as yet unthinkable performances.



Art Must Hang

Andrea Fraser

“Art Must Hang” is based on a transcript of a speech delivered by Martin Kippenberger on the occasion of an exhibition of work by Michel Würthle at Club an der Grenze, Burgenland, Austria, October 1995, as performed by Andrea Fraser at Galerie Christian Nagel, Cologne, Germany, June 2001.