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## The Reactivation of Time

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# The Reactivation of Time

Reappropriating, restaging, revisioning, remediating: at the crossroad of the new millennium, reenactment has undoubtedly emerged as a key issue in the field of artistic production, in theoretical discourse, and in the socio-political sphere. Taking an ever larger distance from notions of historical revival and 'Living History', current reenactments call into question whether the present can unpack, embody, or disentangle the past. Accordingly, to reenact is to experience the past by reactivating either a particular cultural heritage or unexplored utopias. If to reenact means not to restore but to challenge the past, history is thus turned into a possible and perpetual becoming, a site for invention and renewal.

Reenactment radically questions the idea of representation itself, together with the traditional notions of the subject and the object of knowledge. The idea of the uniqueness of truth, as well as the presumed connaturality between the human subject and a world accessible to epistemic procedures, came into question in the course of the twentieth century. Any representation of reality revealed itself to be de facto a remaking. Similarly, artistic creation is no longer thought of as a mimesis of reality, but the mimesis transforms itself into forms of critical re-presentations. Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida are — among others — the main philosophical references to rethink the relationship between history, subjectivity, and reality, where 'repetition' and its 'difference' are at stake.

The horizon in which reenactment has to be considered is no longer that of an original act and its successive representations, its copies, but the virtually infinite possibility of reactivating an event through its *simulacra* and *Doppelgänger*s — or even better — its translations and interpretations. Reenactment does not retrieve an essential and original truth of the past. It permits an explosion of sorts of the notion of truth in a multiple temporal scattering of events, not in order to invest into the supposed authenticity of history, but to create new forms of thinking and staging the relation to history itself.

The critical dimension is therefore essential to the notion of reenactment. Its conceptual and practical power does not reside in repositing the past, in repeating it, but in questioning and reactualizing this same past and its memorial value through the act of its restaging. There is no such thing as 'neutrality' in the reactivation of a past event. In every act of repetition, there is a critical potential conveyed by the gesture of repetition itself. This critical force can then arise from different aspects of the act of reenactment, such as the choice of specific archives and historical materials; the place in which reenactment takes place; the subjective experience of the event; the positions of both the interpreter and (active) spectator.

When artists decide to reenact past performances, for example, every concrete aspect of reenactment virtually opens a critical dialogue with the past that is meant to be reactivated. One could argue that this critical dimension of reenactment resides above all in a distortion of historical time. But the temporal orientation does not proceed from the present to a presumed past with the objective of unveiling its secret original truth or meaning. It goes instead from a present that demands a transformation to a future where openness and contingency become visible because of the reactivation of the past. Therefore, to establish a critical relationship with the past does not mean to make a historical judgment, but to have the possibility of showing — through its repetition — that history is open to multi-layered approaches, that it is a constant questioning of its assumptions, hierarchical positions, and values.

Through reenactment practices, authenticity, authorship, and originality lose their meaning as cornerstones of Western thought and arts. A whole 'regime of truth', to use a Foucauldian notion, is questioned and actively replaced by another, which is itself constantly shifting. As a consequence, the artistic gesture or work reveals itself to be a reenactment of a given cultural heritage, and every act is already contingent on an experience of the act itself, as well as on the various modes through which it is being remembered and historicized.

How do the arts rethink and reposition their role and value in this new 'regime of truth'? The process of creative repetition branches out into at least three directions: a manifold and asynchronous temporal dimension that entails the return/survival of the past understood

as generating meaning and values for both the present and potential future/s, in terms of what one could call a symbolic archaeology; an epistemological-axiological challenge to the traditional dichotomy between true and false, original and copy; a performative bodily practice that physically restages events.

At the same time, methodologically the notion of reenactment can also be approached from three main directions: the archive, the arts, museum and curatorial practices. The present volume, which stemmed from the international symposium organized at the ICI Berlin in November 2017 as part of the Institute's 2016–18 research project *ERRANS, in Time*, is organized following these different investigative paths in an attempt to consider both the conceptual foundations and practical aspects of reenactment.<sup>1</sup> Starting from a genealogy of the concept and a comparison with related terms and their meanings (revocation, reconstruction, replica, repair, rehabilitation, revision, revelation, reinvention, among others), the volume focuses on the close relationship between repetition and seriality on the one hand and the emergence of neo- and post- movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries on the other: from neo-realism to the neo-avant-garde, from the post-modern to 'retro-futurism'. But also, as Sven Lütticken brilliantly points out in his introduction, that special temporal shift 'from re- to pre- and back again', to quote the title of his contribution.<sup>2</sup>

The first part of the book, *Uncovering the Historical Past, Performing the Political Present*, examines how, from a physical space for documentation and conservation, through reenactment practices, the archive can turn into an apparatus of cultural repair and political activism. The 'archaeological' experience, inspired by Foucault's mobilization of archives, is here crucial inasmuch as it reveals how historical subjectivity and a more inclusive transmission of collective memory are produced.

The second part, *Aesthetic Forms of Rehabilitation*, more closely examines reenactment as an artistic and also literary and theatre practice. Using different media (film, photography, sculpture, perform-

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1 'Over and Over and Over Again: Re-Enactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory', symposium held at the ICI Berlin on 16–17 November, 2017 <<https://doi.org/10.25620/e171116>>.

2 See Sven Lütticken, 'From Re- to Pre- and Back Again', in [this volume](#).

ance, writing...), artists play with the idea of authorship, originality, and authenticity, and, as a result, blur the borders between reality and fiction and multiply the strategies of *re*-presentation. The focus is on the critical effects of these practices, and especially their potential to bring to light oppressive narratives of history and therefore to be an effective tool for feminist, post-colonial, queer, and gender politics.

The third part, *Resistance and Reconciliation in the Museum*, elaborates on the way in which reenactment has influenced curatorial practices and changed the modality in which exhibitions are organized and studied. The reconstruction and restaging of a pivotal or previously underestimated exhibition or artwork is proposed as a new approach to the making and rewriting of the history/histories of art, presenting an entire set of challenging issues, such as: the relationship with institutional contexts and socio-political frames; the selection of artworks to be reconstructed, which is related to the promises of survival and conservation but also to the risks of recommodification; the differences that arise in the adaptation/revision process; the crucial role of the participant audience.

As organizers of the symposium and editors of the volume, we would like once again to thank very much all the speakers who joined the conference at the ICI Berlin in 2017 and contributed to the stimulating discussion – including those whose papers do not appear in the volume: Natasha Adamou, Laura Almeida, Diana Baker Smith, Rosa Barba, Cory Browning, Filipa César, Kirill Chepurin, Leora Farber, Oleg Gelikman, Lieke Hettinga, Livia Monnet, Stefan Solomon, Edward A. Vazquez. Thanks also to the artists, museums, and image rights holders for their collaboration and availability. Our thanks go above all to the staff of the ICI Berlin, who supported us in all the different phases of this plurennial project. Thank you in particular to Christoph Holzhey, Manuele Gagnolati, and Claudia Peppel, without whom all this would not have been possible; and to Arnd Wedemeyer, for his great, never-ending advice and meticulous editing during the making of the volume.

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