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Re-Presenting Art History An Unfinished Process

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ABSTRACT: Can reenactment both as reactivation of images and re-staging of exhibitions be considered an alternative way of tackling the critical task to re-present art history (i.e., to present it anew) in the here and now, over and over and over again? The gesture of restoring visibility to something no longer present, reactivating or reembodying it as an object/image *in* and *for* the present, is here proposed as a (political) act of restitution and historical recontextualization. Examining the boundaries between past and present, original and copy (as well as originality and copyright), repetition and variation, authenticity and auraticity, presence and absence, canon and appropriation, *durée* and transience, the paper focuses on remediation, reinterpretation, and reconstruction as creative gestures and cultural promises in contemporary art practice, curatorship, and museology.

KEYWORDS: re-presentation; contemporary art; postmodernism; curatorship; art history; Aby Warburg; museology

Re-Presenting Art History

An Unfinished Process

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In recent years reconstructing and reenacting art history has become habitual for artists and curators alike. On the one hand, via restaged exhibitions and remakes of artworks, often temporary, unfinished, never to be completed, leaving room for new presentation and hence interpretation. On the other hand, performances that reembody gestures and impermanent objects, where the impermanence or unfinished state hints at a possible return.

From the 1970s onwards, as a postmodernist aesthetic principle,¹ the idea of 'different repetition' ran parallel with the output of artists engaged in Institutional Critique, exploding the (modernist) 'con' of art being authentic only when 'original'. Museums, historians, sometimes artists themselves had perpetrated that 'con' in their common endeavour to find and supply certification of originality — primarily

1 The reference is to the exhibition 'La ripetizione differente' (the title itself is a reference to Deleuze's famous 1968 *Difference and Repetition*) curated by the Italian art critic Renato Barilli at the Studio Marconi, Milan in 1974 and then repeated in 2014 by the same curator, in what has today become the Marconi Foundation. On the idea of repetition as a postmodernist art strategy, see, e.g., Andreas Huyssen, 'The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s', *New German Critique*, 22 (Winter 1981), pp. 23–40 and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art', *Artforum*, 21.1 (September 1982), pp. 43–56.

for business considerations. Thus, working backwards from classicism, one came to realize the copy as the ‘underlying condition of the original’.² This point has been hammered home in the last decade by a series of well-received exhibitions put on by the Prada Foundation in Milan and Venice: *The Small Utopia: Ars Multiplicata* (curated by Germano Celant, 2012), *Serial Classic* (curated by Salvatore Settis and Anna Anguissola, 2015) and *L’image volée* (curated by Thomas Demand, 2016).³ I mention these as typically exhaustive in their treatment, but they are far from the only instances.

Though long devalued until postmodernism, especially from Romanticism on, repetition has always been part of art practice. It is intrinsic to the very idea of originality — as argued by Rosalind Krauss and also Douglas Crimp in the early 1980s.⁴ For that matter, as early as the mid-1930s Walter Benjamin produced the insight that ‘in principle a work of art has always been reproducible’ (before photography, other techniques had enabled copies to be made, albeit more slowly).⁵ But instead of the fixation on the new and avant-garde at all costs, ‘repetition restores the possibility of what was, renders it possible anew’, creating a continuous dialogue with memory and the past. Not, as Giorgio Agamben puts it, that it ‘give[s] us back what was, as such: that would be hell. Instead memory restores possibility to the past’.⁶

Agamben’s note of clarification is fundamental (it comes in an essay on the cinema of Guy Debord that is close to Benjamin’s idea of messianic time). Repetition is rife nowadays in all that begins with ‘re-’: the digital media have spread and accelerated such contemporary

2 Cf. Rosalind Krauss, ‘The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Postmodernist Repetition’, *October*, 18 (Autumn 1981), pp. 47–66 (p. 58). See also Douglas Crimp, ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’, *October*, 15 (Winter 1980), pp. 91–101.

3 *The Small Utopia: Ars Multiplicata*, ed. by Germano Celant (Milan: Progetto Prada Arte, 2012); *Serial / Portable Classic: The Greek Canon and its Mutations*, ed. by Salvatore Settis, Anna Anguissola, and Davide Gasparotto (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2015); *L’image volée*, ed. by Thomas Demand (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2016).

4 Cf. references in footnote no. 2.

5 Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), pp. 217–51 (p. 218).

6 Giorgio Agamben, ‘Difference and Repetition: On Guy Debord’s Films’, trans. by Brian Holmes, in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*, ed. by Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), pp. 313–19 (p. 316).

practice to the point, one might say, of a proper ‘re-turn,’⁷ and this goes for artwork, curatorship, and hence also history and criticism. But such repetition is not to be seen as some (reactionary, revisionist) historicizing revival akin to ‘Living History’ or a sense of nostalgia. Nor is it the rebirth of some prior style, taste, or code, as one gets with movements beginning with ‘neo-’. No: the term ‘reenactment’ — here taken to embrace a miscellany of practices, though in the awareness that all such classifiers must be arbitrary —⁸ has nothing to do with harking back to the past, creative exhaustion, sterile quotation for quotation’s sake. It does of course have roots in a precise historiographic tradition (see Sven Lütticken’s preface to this book), but in this case the focus is on contemporary art and its idioms, first of which is performance.⁹

When one is confronted with present-day art practice picking up from the past or past tradition, one tends to resort to a lexical jungle hinging on the idea of copying.¹⁰ Thus one has ‘processes of quotation, excerptation, framing, and staging’ at the core of postmodern strategy — beginning with the Picture Generation as posited by Crimp, where the photograph stands as the intermedial idiom par excellence. Yet such a lexis, to an art historian or critic, does not imply the search for an origin or original. It is, rather, a mode of defining ‘structures of signification’, given that ‘underneath each picture there is always another picture’ (the noun ‘picture’ is here deliberately used because of its non-medium specificity).¹¹

7 My current research project focuses on the various ‘re-’ practices in the visual arts and the turning point they marked in image production, affording constant comparisons with the contemporary iconosphere and visual culture.

8 Cf. *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*, ed. by Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, and Juliane Tomann (London: Routledge, 2020).

9 Cf. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment*, ed. by Mark Franko (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

10 Salvatore Settis draws up a small but exhaustive list of the most frequently used terminology: “allusion”, “appropriation”, “citation”, “influence”, “inspiration”, “manipulation”, “pastiche”, “borrowing”, “reference”, “usage”. One might also add: “comparison”, “theft”, “spolium”, “homage”, “paraphrase”, “taking”, “resumption”, “transfer” and so on. See Salvatore Settis, *Incursioni: Arte contemporanea e tradizione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2020), p. 17 [translation of this passage by Ralph Nisbet].

11 Douglas Crimp, ‘Pictures’, *October*, 8 (Spring 1979), pp. 75–88 (p. 87 and 75). In another famous essay, published shortly thereafter, in which he outlines postmodernism in photography, Crimp states that ‘against the pluralism of originals, I want to speak of the plurality of copies’. See Crimp, ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’, p. 91.

So when one connects the concept of reenactment to art practice, as well as museum practice, curatorship, and art history — activities to do with producing, circulating, receiving, and preserving artworks and images —,¹² one is bound to acknowledge that this is an act of critical appraisal. An act that challenges a whole range of apparently ‘antithetical’ relations between past and present, original and copy (cf. originality, copyright), repetition and variation, authenticity and auraticity, presence and absence, canon and appropriation, *durée* and transience.

From the art critic/art historian’s angle, a distinct cultural value attaches to reconstructing and reactivating past artworks/images, gesture/action, events/shows in our present setting, ensuring they survive, are protected and known about for the future. Dieter Roelstraete gives a clear idea of the educational scope of this:

Both remake and re-enactment represent a type of renegade art history in action, anxious to keep in living memory that which is always in danger of being forgotten, marginalized, swept aside [...]. Remakes and reenactments, then, perform a reconstructive educational role that ensures the perpetuation of an ‘other’ art history outside the confines and constraints of canon and mainstream alike — one that truly is written by the (remaking, reenacting) artists firsthand.¹³

On such a view, the prefix ‘re-’ may provide a keystone for building a different relationship with the past, one that does not entail any preestablished art-historical or art-critical methodology. The reverse: that ‘re-’ tends to hover between *back* and *again*, giving rise to complex patterns in space and time that elicit some unexpected resonances and correlations.¹⁴ It serves as an effective tool decanonizing a certain mode of interpretation and provides new hermeneutic

12 In this regard, see my previous ‘Reenactment: Errant Images in Contemporary Art’, in *Re-: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2019), pp. 57–67, and the volume I am currently co-editing with Susanne Franco *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools* (Turin: Accademia University Press, forthcoming).

13 Dieter Roelstraete, ‘Make it Re-: The Eternally Returning Object’, in *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, ed. by Germano Celant (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2013), pp. 423–28 (p. 424).

14 Francesco Giusti, ‘Passionate Affinities: A Conversation with Rita Felski’, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 25 September 2019 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/passionate-affinities-a-conversation-with-rita-felski/>> [accessed 25 February 2021].

tools for what Nicolas Bourriaud called ‘altermodernity’, namely, ‘a modernity specific to the twenty-first century, a modernity to be constructed on a global scale, through cooperation among a multitude of cultural *semes* and through ongoing translation of singularities.’¹⁵ This is what the French philosopher and curator suggests in response to postmodernism and the contemporary overuse of the prefix ‘post-’ (e.g., post-history/human/conceptual/Internet...), which, according to him, has undermined the foundations of modernism without offering a true alternative in the present.

Although any prefix that historians or critics use to shake off a prior mode of interpretation inevitably sets up a new canon, the beauty of ‘re-’ is that it can be repeated again and again in a process of framing and unframing that leaves no room, or time, for conceptual closure.

This brings me to the core question of this essay, namely: can reenactment be like image reactivation — an art practice — or exhibition rebuilding — a curator’s practice — in that it can be seen as a viable critical approach or method of rereading art history by experiencing or reexperiencing a past object, gesture, or event in an ever-different here and now? Apart from anything else, such a method would imply the gesture of presenting anew instead of representing, where shortening the perceptual space-time distance enables the one experiencing or reexperiencing (be they interpreter or public) to take part in a ‘re-presencing’ (not so much rewriting) of art history.¹⁶ The gesture of restoring visibility to something no longer present — an absence —, reactivating or reembodying it as an object/image *in and for* the present, is a (political) act of restitution and historical recontextualization.

In reappraising the negative connotation Michael Fried gave to ‘presentness’ — and hence, from the late 1960s on, to the extending of typical theatre notions of temporality and presence to the world of visual arts (see the ‘theatricality’ of minimalist sculpture) — Crimp

15 Nicolas Bourriaud, *The Radicant*, trans. by James Cussen and Lili Porten (New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2009), p. 39.

16 Gabriella Giannachi, ‘At the Edge of the “Living Present”: Re-enactments and Re-interpretations as Strategies for the Preservation of Performance and New Media’, in *Histories of Performance Documentation: Museum, Artistic, and Scholarly Practices*, ed. by Gabriella Giannachi and Jonah Westerman (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 115–31 (p. 117).

commented that representation should not be seen as ‘re-presentation of that which is prior, but as the unavoidable condition of intelligibility of even that which is present.’¹⁷ Which makes presence tantamount to absence, in the sense of an ‘unbridgeable distance from the original, from even the possibility of an original.’¹⁸

At this point one may advance a first definition of reenactment as: (1) the act of (re)appropriation or *Aneignung*, in Paul Ricoeur’s words ‘the process by which one makes one’s own (*eigen*) what was initially other or alien (*fremd*)’;¹⁹ (2) an exercise of (re)interpretation in the sense of working-through or *Durcharbeitung* (from the verb *Durcharbeiten*), to use Freud’s famous expression, which Jean-François Lyotard later exhumed;²⁰ (3) a process of (re)construction, given that the event or object to be reactivated is often chosen precisely because it was left unfinished, or got lost or altered as an artefact or memory; (4) a gesture of (re)mediation in the sense of the term given by Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin,²¹ that is, reworking and transposing not just from one time and/or setting to another, but also from one support, idiom, or medium to another; (5) the act of (re)circulating images across time, space, the media, and later (re)contextualizing them.²²

What happens to images (nowadays that includes digital images) and their formal and semantic values when, more or less unawares, they migrate from place to place or culture to culture in our globalized

17 Crimp’s views particularly relate to photography and the Picture Generation. See Crimp, ‘Pictures’, p. 77.

18 See Crimp, ‘The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism’, p. 94. A bit later on in the text, Crimp insists on this point: ‘A group of young artists working with photography [i.e., the Picture Generation, C. B.] have addressed photography’s claims to originality, showing those claims for the fiction they are, showing photography to be always representation, always-already-seen. Their images are purloined, confiscated, appropriated, *stolen*. In their work, the original cannot be located, is always deferred; even the self which might have generated an original is shown to be itself a copy”. Ibid., p. 98.

19 Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action, Interpretation*, ed. and trans. by John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 140.

20 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby and Geoffrey Bennington (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), p. 26.

21 Jay D. Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

22 See my ‘Recirculation: The Wandering of Digital Images in Post-Internet Art’, in *Re: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2019), pp. 25–33.

world? Do they still stand as vectors of memory and ‘afterlives’ in the Warburgian sense (cf. his concept of *Nachleben*)?

As an artist’s or curator’s practice, reenactment entails a series of issues largely concerning the link with institutional contexts and the socio-political structures that artworks are situated in; the process of selecting them; the differences that occur between ‘original’ and copy in the process of repetition or adaptation/revising. Let me briefly try to summarize these issues.

The first might be formulated as: What kind of change is produced in the interval of time that separates the ‘original’ from its reenactment from a historical-critical, cognitive-perceptual, linguistic-formal, as well as exhibition display perspective? To elaborate on this point, it is important to consider that reenactment in itself is an anachronistic action, inasmuch as two different temporalities — past and present — coexist in it. Most of the time, the interval is a short period of time, which allows those who already saw or experienced the ‘original’ to experience it again in a new here and now. Whereas, for those who do not have any memory of the previous event (be it a gesture, work, or exhibition), it is a unique opportunity to see it in the present, although a replicated event cannot be the same anymore. Repetition always implies variation, which depends, first of all, on the different moment and context in which it takes place, and, secondly, on the act of interpretation that is part of the process of reenactment.

The second question runs as follows: What does reenactment mean for the historian, critic, curator, and artist who establish a comparison either with their own work or with the work of someone else? What does it mean for the collector or museum that owns and re-displays the work/exhibition, for the gallery that acts as a sponsor, and — last but not least — for the viewer?

And the third and last main question: What kind of relationship between oneself and one’s own history is revealed by the contemporary enthusiasm for replicas and replication processes, for appropriation and postproduction as artistic strategies, for the diffusion of notions such as repetition (vs. representation), double (vs. copy), and restaging (vs. interpretation)?

Though not an artwork or an art exhibition, one emblematic example here is the minute reconstruction — and later restaging, in

significantly different forms, at the ZKM–Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie, Karlsruhe in 2016 and at the HKW–Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin in 2020 — of the Warburg *Bilderatlas* on the part of an art historian, Roberto Ohrt, and an artist, Axel Heil, primarily because Aby Warburg’s cognitive method was based on the repetition and recurrence of archetypal images or *Pathosformeln*, from ancient to contemporary, high culture to low, and on the duplicability of images via photography. And additionally, Ohrt and Heil put so much effort into producing a formally and philologically exact copy of the *Bilderatlas*.²³ On a 1:1 scale, they reconstructed all the plates from the last version, which Warburg left unfinished in 1929, hunting down (in the field and in the extensive Warburg Institute archives) and rephotographing the thousand or so ‘original’ images he used, one by one. That is why they insisted on the originality of the undertaking — an insistence that might otherwise seem quite out of place.²⁴ It is emblematic both for Warburg’s intentions and methodology, and because the *Bilderatlas* remained a fragment of a much more extensive design and hence an unfinished work open to variation and interpretation: something to be viewed as an intellectual and research task, or at most a historical artefact, and definitely not an object for aesthetic contemplation. And again because, being based on reproductions of images, as a corpus it is hypothetically replicable without end — indeed was intended to be just that, since the form Warburg had wanted for its circulation was a printed atlas, i.e., a publication.

23 As many of the examples treated in this section of the book show, various kinds of reconstruction exist, especially in the case of exhibitions. By way of a tentative initial classification one might single out: philological reconstruction (as in the case of *Bilderatlas: The Original*, or *When Attitudes Become Form 1969/2013*, at the Venice Fondazione Prada, 2013); temporal extension (as with *The Pictures Generation, 1974–1984*, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 2009, which recently extended to *Pictures, Revisited*, 2020, or else *Other Primary Structures*, at the Jewish Museum, New York in 2014); archive reactivation (as with *Les Magiciens de la terre, retour sur une exposition légendaire*, at the Centre Pompidou, Paris in 2014, or the recent restaging of the Venice Biennale story via its archive, *The Disquieted Muses*, Central Pavilion, Venice Biennale, 2020). Archives are obviously a central tool in each of these forms of reconstruction and in the method of reenactment in general.

24 Aby Warburg, *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne: The Original*, ed. by Roberto Ohrt and Axel Heil, in cooperation with the Warburg Institute and Haus der Kulturen der Welt (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2020).

After an initial *damnatio memoriae* due to its complexity and the mishaps befalling Warburg's archive and library after his death, the *Bilderatlas* nonetheless continues to be studied nearly a century later and taken up with enthusiasm by art historians and image theoreticians, as well as artists. The reason certainly is that it paved the way for an alternative, inclusive cultural methodology quite distinct from hierarchies or canons that lay down a law. And equally because he chose images and image/photo-montage to be the tools of knowledge, anticipating the latest way of relating to, and 'surfing' among, images as practiced today. But above all because to Warburg, as Salvatore Settis neatly sums up:

'artistic tradition' dictates the historical and social space within which artworks of the past, reappreciated in a rhythmic sequence of deaths and rebirths, become agents of innovation, essential ingredients in experience that reflect ever-changing emotional horizons and cultural tensions. This goes for the artist's job, but also for that of the historian of art and culture; it involves a figurative gamut embracing all kinds of image (not necessarily 'artistic') that represent social memory. It implies an expressive mechanism whose core lies in the conventional expression ('formula') of an emotional content ('pathos'), and is transmitted historically in an intermittent process.²⁵

Such 'survivals' from artistic tradition, that ideal image store and concrete image repository upon which to draw, influence the artist's work and likewise that of the art historian, critic, and curator.

In thinking of reenactment as a curator's and historian's method, the greatest risk is that it be used for economic rather than cultural ends, making it into a way of turning out ersatz likenesses and multiples that fuel the production of consumer objects and collectors' pieces. This aspect has been spotlighted by two artists (clearly not unique of their kind) who are often deemed controversial: Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst. Their less-than-scrupulous repetition of pop culture has led, in the former, to kitsch sensationalism, and in the latter to an obsession with archaeology and necrosis. Hirst took this to extremes with *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, his 2017 exhibition at Venice's Palazzo Grassi, in which he used repetition and fakes to

25 Settis, *Incursioni*, p. 30 [translation of the passage by Ralph Nisbet].

‘throw’ the viewer, undermining the authentic, iconic, original quality (or aura) of the artwork, as well as the nature of the creative process itself. He thus rubs the viewer’s nose in the working of a particular system — that of globalized contemporary art with its often vacuous and pompous rhetoric — and likewise the West’s number-one cultural obsession: archiving and museumizing, which is to say lavishing care on one’s own memory and identity.²⁶

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN BY
RALPH NISBET AND THE AUTHOR

26 Cf. my essay ‘For the Future: The Archive as an Artistic Gesture of Resilience’, in *Present Archives: Reflections from a Collection of Prints*, ed. by Beatrice Zanelli and Ersilia Rossini (Foligno: Viaindustriae Publishing, 2019), pp. 53–58.

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