

Time Seems Pliable: Historical Strategies of Narration, Preservation, and Transmission

Susanne Franco, Sven Lütticken

Sven Lütticken (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Universiteit Leiden) and Susanne Franco (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia) discuss three key publications on the topic of re-enactment: *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (ed. by Sven Lütticken, 2005); *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field* (ed. by Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, and Juliane Tomann, 2020); and *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory* (ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, 2022). The conversation unravels the evolution of reenactment as a theorized term and the emergence of preenactment reflecting on the notion of prefixes (pre-, re-, no prefix). Lütticken and Franco also focus on the role of reenactment as a methodology and as an interdisciplinary “branded” field of study, and on the nuances between narration, preservation, transmission, repetition, and invention in relation to the past.

SUSANNE FRANCO: I suggest to discuss a series of recent publications on reenactment, and my first question to you concerns *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contem-*

porary Art,¹ the book you edited for the eponymous exhibition you curated in 2005 at Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam.² Both the exhibition and the book combined documented reenactments of performances with artistic reflections on historical reenactments outside the sphere of art. The aim of the publication – which contains essays by critics and theorists, as well as scripts and other writings by artists – was to incorporate textual and visual elements that go beyond mere illustration. You suggest in your essay that at that time, in contemporary art, the term reenactment was often used to refer to the repetition of seminal performances from the sixties and seventies, which were being canonized or were just undergoing canonization. The moment when the term reenactment migrated to the sphere of contemporary artistic production and contributed to raising questions about how to preserve or actualize impermanent artworks, you had dated to around the year 2000. It was less evident how historical performative works could be preserved and re-presented for contemporary audiences. When and why did you start to be interested in reenactment? And how have the concept and its practical outputs changed since you first theorised it?

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SVEN LÜTTICKEN: I think that for me, it was a matter of two strands of inquiry coming together in reenactment. On the one hand, I have a long-standing and ongoing interest in historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit* in German). This led me to take an interest in forms of historical reenactment outside of any established artistic context or sphere. I am referring to the various forms of historical reenactment, such as live reenactments, war reenactments, and also recorded reenactments basically from Hollywood films or other feature movies. On the other hand, I was also interested in performance, the historicity of performance art and its documentation and re-presentation. To me, these two lines of inquiry met up in a number of works by contemporary artists, such as Rod Dickinson, Jeremy Deller, Andrea Fraser, Omer

1. Sven Lütticken, ed., *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005).

2. See https://www.fkawdw.nl/en/our_program/exhibitions/life_once_more [accessed 6 September 2022].

Fast, and Eran Schaerf. Both the exhibition and the publication produced by the Witte de With – that, as a result of a decolonizing process, has been renamed Kunstinstituut Melly – were about the overlap between these two areas of interest. My curiosity in reenactment was also piqued in the late 1990s when I conducted a still unpublished (and probably lost) interview with Marina Abramovič. At that time, she was becoming very much focused on restaging her historical performances and pieces by other artists such as Chris Burden. She was adamant that each piece was like a musical score, like a musical composition that one can just play again, and again, and again, and that all performances are potentially equivalent. I thought that this point was to some extent questionable because these historical performances were mediated in the form of erratic black and white records, such as photographs, films, video recordings, and it was hard to deny their impact. I was intrigued by the tension between iterability and that certain historical performances gain an aura thanks to the documentation.

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SF: My second question concerns the collected volume *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, recently edited by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini.³ The book originates from a two-day international conference held at ICI Berlin in 2017. Since you were one of the first to theorize reenactment, the conference organizers and editors invited you to write the introduction of the book. Here you suggest that, when speaking about reenactment, we should also consider a concomitant term and practice that has come to the fore in recent years: the preenactment. We refer to a rehearsal for a future that may or may not be actualized by this term. By substituting the “re-” with the “pre-”, a new range of temporalities (therefore also of possibilities) linked to the action of enacting opens up. Could you elaborate further on the use of these prefixes and the conceptual shift they produce?

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SL: My interest in reenactment is ongoing, but at the same time, it is always focused on practices in which the term

3. Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, Arianna Sforzini, eds., *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory* (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022).

is explicitly or prominently used. Thinking of my recent works, for instance, I have dealt with forms of reconstruction and reenactment in Forensic Architecture's *Reconstruction of the Murder of Halit Yozgat*, commissioned by Unraveling the NSU Complex, a Germany-wide alliance of anti-racism activists. This investigation concerns the murder of the twenty-one years old Halit Yozgat in 2006 in Kassel, the ninth of a series of ten racist murders committed in Germany between 2000 and 2007 by a neo-Nazi group known as the National Socialist Underground (NSU). The inquiry became possible only at the end of 2015, when hundreds of documents from the local police – reports, witness depositions, photographs, computer and phone logs – were leaked. The most important document was a video of a police reenactment performed by Andreas Temme, a government agent. He was present in the internet café where Yozgat was murdered and claimed not to have noticed anything. In Forensic Architecture's three-channel video *77sqm_9:26min*, Temme's testimony was shown to be highly untrustworthy, raising a series of disturbing questions regarding the involvement of German state agencies with radical right-wing groups.

For the video, Forensic Architecture physically reenacted the murder of Halit Yozgat in a reconstruction of the internet café at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt by using a three-dimensional digital model. One can also regard the result as a preenactment, because Forensic Architecture's video and written report constitute a "counter event": in the context of the tribunal, they represent a fundamental reckoning that is impossible in the present, as it is blocked by state agencies and the judiciary.

I have also used the term preenactment to discuss the practice of Milo Rau and his project, *The Congo Tribunal* (2017). Rau himself employs the term preenactment, referring to an early use by Céline Kaiser, who was in turn informed by psychotherapy. Using the affordances and institutions of art, Rau stages tribunals as preenactments of future justice or justice to come. Rau calls it "the foreshadowing of a future in which this symbolic would be normal, so to speak" [*das Vorleuchten einer Zukunft, in der dieses Symbolische gewissermassen normal wäre*], acting as a prefiguration of a potential future. Rau speculates that this imaginary

prefiguration can gain a degree of performative efficacy through the power of publicity.

SF: I arrived at a similar point with my research work on the repertoire of ethnic dances presented as a daily program at the Bomas of Kenya, a cultural centre located just outside Nairobi that is part of the network of National Museums of Kenya. The centre, which is described as the “official custodian of Kenya’s tangible and intangible heritage”, offers a series of reenactments of the so-called “ethnic” or “cultural” dances. The program consists of a repertoire of dances of many (but not all) ethnic groups based in Kenya that are selected to re-present the harmonious coexistence of different cultural traditions under the auspices of the nation. The aim is to minimise the profound divisions that continue to trouble Kenya more than fifty years after its independence in 1963. Additionally, the Bomas adapted these dances to the auditorium space according to the expectations of the tourists, and, last but not least, the needs of the schools that organise frequent visits with students of different classes and ages. In other words, although ethnic affiliation resulting from the “entanglement” between a colonial past and the present is still the key criterion that determines citizen’s opportunities in the real life, the Bomas continues to promote an ideal of national unity expressed by the official motto *Harambee* (also the name of this dance company), which in Swahili means “all pulling together”. Kenya has not been able yet to produce a shared historical narrative because historiography still represents something potentially subversive, if used to question the legitimacy of the past and present leaderships. With this series of reenactments, the Bomas uses dance to promote a state-stipulated narrative of an idealised national unity and make performances meaningful for the younger generations and the outsiders (tourists). The video recordings of these reenacted dances are now part of the Bomas’ archive that stores something that never happened in the real world. In *Reenacting Heritage at Bomas of Kenya: Dancing the Postcolony*,⁴ I suggest seeing

4. Susanne Franco, “Reenacting Heritage at Bomas of Kenya: Dancing the Postcolony”. *Dance Research Journal*, 47, no. 2 (August 2015): 5-21; <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767715000170> [accessed 18 March 2022].

it as a “post-archive” that results from an entirely proleptic strategy. In other words, it offers a representation of an idealised past and a dreamed future of the postcolonial state, one that still strives to be a nation. Here, dance reenactment is a tool for representing what has yet to happen.

SL: Right, they are invented traditions.

SF: Exactly, and in this case, as for the ones you just discussed, using the prefix “post-” or “pre-” it is something that completely changes the temporal perception of the work itself. Here, something that never existed is staged, transmitted, and preserved in its invented form. What is important to stress is that by following the traces of reenactment, we can cast new light on the historical strategies of narration, preservation, and transmission.⁵

SL: You are right, and what these cases have in common is the production of a simulacrum that is created through what is ostensibly a repetition, a reiteration of a historical model. This sort of invention of traditions was part of the project of the nineteenth-century Romantic cultural nationalism, and we still live with its consequences. Andrea Fraser’s notion of “enactment” – without any prefix – could prove useful when it comes to intervening in the transmission and ongoing instrumentalization of invented traditions. Drawing on psychoanalysis and psychotherapy, she considers enactments “structures of relationships that are being produced and reproduced in all forms of activity”. We are constantly enacting forms of investment – like psychological or economic – and perpetuating hierarchies and structures through our interrelationships. Perhaps what we need is not so much reenactment studies as enactment studies.

SF: My third question concerns the growth of Reenactment Studies, which are gaining more and more disciplinary recognition. The recent publication of *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies*, edited by Vanessa Agnew,

5. Andrea Fraser, “Performance or Enactment”, in *Performing the Sentence*, ed. Carola Dertnig and Felicitas Thun-Hoheinstein (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014): 127.

Jonathan Lamb, and Juliane Tomann,⁶ seems to pre-figure a new disciplinary field, although its institutionalisation is still at an early stage. This handbook provides the first overview of significant concepts within reenactment studies, and it is organised in a series of key entries written by leading scholars from Europe, North America, and Australia. Reenactment has undoubtedly attracted the attention of scholars in a range of disciplines, such as art history, history, musicology, anthropology, archaeology, new media, performing arts, museology, heritage, and memory studies. Students, scholars and artists are increasingly interested in exploring these concepts and acquiring new tools to engage with reenactment. How do you consider this shift from a form of inter- and trans-disciplinary research into a new quasi-discipline? Should reenactment be also a subject of its own tailored “studies” or would it be more fruitful to see it as a constantly changing methodology?

SL: One might say that there are these competing imperatives in contemporary academia: on the one hand, we are all supposed to be inter- and trans-disciplinary; and on the other hand, there is also an actual financial, economic, political demand for specific areas of expertise. Reenactment could function as a sort of transdisciplinary and transversal configuration that people enter and approach from different angles, but there is a clear incentive for many to claim it as theirs, in order to survive in neoliberal academia. Reenactment is supposedly one of my areas of expertise as a scholar. Still, I think that there is a fundamental contradiction here, a conflict between “expert knowledge” and the possessiveness that comes with it, and the need for speculative and collaborative intellectual labour. This is a structural conflict that we all keep enacting and reenacting. I am sceptical about branding reenactment as a new field of studies. Of course, it makes sense to pool resources and it is handy to have compendiums, but we need to reflect on the mechanisms that kick into gear when a transdisciplinary area of investigation becomes a quasi-discipline. Without getting

6. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

too involved in all this carving out of fiefdoms and micro-fields, what interests me are the methodological implications of reenactment for scholars, theorists, and various kinds of practitioners. During the first lockdown in 2020, I worked on a text about the notion of “prolepsis”, which you have already invoked, and which in linguistic terms is a kind of anticipation of a future event. I analysed many practices from the sixties and seventies, including some works by Alexander Kluge, Straub-Huillet, and Peter Weiss. In *The Aesthetics of Resistance*⁷ by Peter Weiss, for instance, there are all these proleptic moments when the narrator reflects on the fact that their story is going to end badly or they are going to be abandoned by the Soviet Union. Weiss opens the novel’s first volume with a scene where the protagonist – the narrator – and some of his comrades visit the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. While discussing the famous frieze sculpted in high relief on the Altar that represents the battle between the Giants and the Olympian gods, they interpret it as an allegory of a racialized class struggle. They see history as a permanent Pergamon or an ongoing battle that oppressors from ancient to modern and capitalistic times keep reiterating.

While I was wrapping up this text, it turned out that a German vegan chef (Attila Hildmann), who has become a kind of neofascist, an antisemitic conspiracy theorist, was using his Telegram account to spread the idea that Pergamon Altar is the throne of Satan, and that Angela Merkel and the congregation of international elite figures were organizing nocturnal rituals, on the museum altar – rituals which of course involve children being sacrificed and eaten. This guy has about one hundred thousand followers on telegram who read these insane thoughts, and some of them appear to have vandalised artworks in the museum.

This example feels like an uncanny historical return to me: while I was reflecting on Peter Weiss’s use of Pergamon Altar as a symbol of historical continuities, the same object

7. Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume I: A Novel*. trans. Joachim Neugroschel. With a foreword by Fredric Jameson and a glossary by Robert Cohen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); *The Aesthetics of Resistance, Volume II: A Novel*. trans. Joel Scott. Afterword to the New Berlin Edition by Jürgen Schütte (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020).

was used as a projection screen for an insane ideology. In response to all of this, I keep returning to the idea of organising gatherings in the Pergamon Museum as a reenactment of the meeting narrated by Peter Weiss; critically (re)enacting Weiss's story in the present. Since the conversation in Weiss's novel is obviously clandestine, a contemporary performative intervention would not need permission from the museum and could pass unnoticed; contemporary audio equipment for museum tours provides some interesting possibilities in this respect. However, organising something like this would still require some support and infrastructure in Berlin, which I do not feel I have.

SF: I did not know these facts, which are frightening though they are also fascinating examples of how history can be experienced, relived and narrated. I also think that in this phase of development of the reenactment theories it is crucial to gain new methodological approaches precisely by discussing those applied and verified in disciplines other than the one we are directly engaged in. The development of a theoretical arsenal suitable to better understand reenactment (and preenactment, of course) cannot be unrelated to the sense of time we are experiencing personally and collectively at this historical juncture. My impression is that in the last two years, we have been stuck (and almost hunted) in an expanded present, and we started feeling the pre-pandemic past as the "normal era" that is now further away than ever. At the same time, we are almost mythologizing the future that seems an unreachable, if not unimaginable dimension. In other words, this pandemic has profoundly affected how we perceive time and reflect upon it. This situation is not only determined by the fact that we alternate between a highly expanded and an overcompressed sensation of time in our private, professional and social lives. On the contrary, it is shaped by our interconnection at a global level, which is unprecedented in history. The massive use of technological devices also affects how we will remember this historical moment and these sensations (and these uses) of time. In *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and*

Reenactment,⁸ Mark Franko suggests that in the post-ephemeral era, reenactments unsettle what we have assumed to be a linear and progressive organisation of time and the implicit notions of periodicity and centre versus periphery. Reenactment further advocates for an engagement with a rather critical and philosophical reflection on temporality (and for dance also on spatiality) concerning the past. For these reasons, I would not be surprised if the current tendency of dance reenactments to “presentify” the past (to present the past by bringing it into the present), through a series of dramaturgical and choreographic strategies, will reveal even more neglected aspects of our relationship with time in the post-pandemic era. This might be one of the topics we will discuss in the near future.

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SL: Yes, definitely. On an anecdotal level: I just saw a 2020 work by Boudry and Lorenz, *(No) Time*, in an exhibition at BAK in Utrecht. The video shows dancers in a space defined by sliding doors and Venetian blinds – complemented by real Venetian blinds in the exhibition space, going up and down. The dancers respond to each other’s moves and gestures in a variety of dance styles. Time seems pliable, with movements going into slow motion at some points. The piece comes out of Boudry and Lorenz’s interest in notions such as temporal drag, queer time and anti-chrononormativity. You can read this in the artists’ statements and think: fine, sure, okay, but their work makes the theoretical patter come alive. Experiencing this piece after so many months of sensory deprivation felt like a release from Zoom hell and platform time into movements and intervals that are bewilderingly and wonderfully out of joint.

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SF: It was really nice meeting you and discussing these topics. I hope we can meet again and in person soon.

8. Mark Franko, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): 5.