


Re-: An Errant Glossary, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 57–67

CRISTINA BALDACCI 

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Errant Images in Contemporary Art

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ABSTRACT: By distancing it from historical revival (i.e., 'Living History'), reenactment is here understood as artistic strategy as well as curatorial practice, and therefore as critical method. As artistic strategy it implies the reactivation (over time) and remediation (on different supports) of images stemming from a vast visual repertoire that artists — especially those working with time-based media (film, video, performance) — appropriate in order to give them new meanings. As curatorial practice and critical method, reenactment regards the remaking of impermanent artworks and the restaging of temporary exhibitions to possibly offer an understanding of (art) history that gives preference to a visual and performative, sometimes immersive, approach.

Reenactment

Errant Images in Contemporary Art

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The following remarks are intended to serve as an introduction to *reenactment*, which was the topic of an international symposium I co-organized at the ICI Berlin in November 2017.¹

By ‘visual errancy’ I mean the wandering of certain images — also intended as forms and gestures — over time, which contemporary artists appropriate from the archives *tout court*, but also from the archive understood in a broader sense, as a heterotopic space where all cultural images potentially converge and remain in a state of

1 The symposium ‘Over and Over and Over Again: Re-enactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory’ <<https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/over-and-over>> [accessed 18 December 2018], organized together with Clio Nicastro and Arianna Sforzini, aimed at following and retracing the notion of reenactment along three parallel approaches: the archive, the arts, and curatorial practice. The proceedings of the conference will be published in the same book series as the current volume, ‘Cultural Inquiry’.

flux. This appropriation is then followed by a reactivation, which usually also undergoes a process of manipulation and/or migration from one medium to another, and by recirculation that gives the images new values, meanings, and configurations.²

As special creators of images, willingly or not, artists have to deal with a collective visual tradition that relates to a timeless or at least multi-layered and anachronic time. They have in fact always been engaged with what came before; with the gesture of a more or less conscious appropriation, with the repetition, as a synonym for reinterpretation and renewal, of a visual heritage made of ‘originals’,³ whose attribution or provenance is mostly not declared (and not necessarily relevant). No matter how they have been called throughout the twentieth century, based on their different connotations and contexts — be it archetypes (Jung), *Pathosformeln* (Warburg), or reproductions (Benjamin) — in the end they are all recurrent images that emerge again and travel across time.⁴

It is hardly news that art does not come out of a void,

2 See *Dear Aby Warburg, What Can Be Done with Images?*, ed. by Ines Rüttinger and Eva Schmidt (Heidelberg: Kehrer, 2012); and *Les Artistes iconographes/Artists as Iconographers*, ed. by Garance Chabert and Aurélien Mole (Paris: Empire Books-Villa du Parc, 2018).

3 On this topic see, among others, Sylviane Agacinski, ‘Anachronisms of Art: Style and Medium’, in *Time Passing: Modernity and Nostalgia*, trans. by Jody Gladding (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 105–36, especially p. 111; and ‘Images of Images: The Survival and Repetition of Forms. A Conversation between Massimiliano Gioni and Andrea Pinotti’, in *To Write an Image*, ed. by Vincenzo de Bellis (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2015), pp. 17–27.

4 The image’s wandering has to be understood not only as an external motion but also, as Giorgio Agamben suggests, as an internal one, since ‘every image is animated by an antinomial polarity’ that breaks the myth of its fixity. See Giorgio Agamben, ‘Notes on Gesture’, in *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 133–40 (p. 139).

since it has always been produced in reference to already existing images, mixing different temporalities and codes. As Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin highlight in their book on remediation — by quoting Stanley Cavell's study on the ontology of cinema (*The World Viewed*, 1979) —, despite the obsession historians and critics have had for novelty, the task of the (modern) artist has always been 'one of creating not a new instance of his art, but a new medium in it'. That implies, of course, that the 'novelty' resembles a reinvention or rearrangement of what already exists more than a total revolution.⁵

And here we come to reenactment, a term that I would like to introduce as a possible substitute for 'remake', which for me also has a closer affinity with the meaning Bolter and Grusin attribute to remediation as the act of 'refashioning'; especially — but not only — when dealing with (digital) images and time-based art, that is, film, video, and performance.

Where does the word reenactment, so often used today, come from? And how did it happen that, from historical discourse⁶ and the relationship with the archive and with time,⁷ it has now entered both the artistic and the curatorial practice?

5 Cf. Jay D. Bolter and Richard A. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 270.

6 Cf. especially Robin G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946); William H. Dray, *History as Re-enactment: R. G. Collingwood's Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Vanessa Agnew, 'History's Affective Turn: Historical Reenactment and Its Work in the Present', *Rethinking History*, 11.3 (2007), pp. 299–312.

7 From this perspective, as Wolfgang Ernst argues in his writings, it seems that even digital technologies have accustomed us to a continuous reenactment. See Wolfgang Ernst, *The Delayed Present: Media-Induced Tempor(e)alities & Techno-Traumatic Irritations of 'the Contemporary'* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), pp. 9–10.

As a verb and derivative of the Middle English ‘enacten’, it has been used since the seventeenth century. Over time, ‘to re-enact’ has taken on different connotations depending on the specific context of its use. To name two of the most relevant: it can mean ‘to repeat the actions (of an earlier event or incident)’ as well as ‘to act or perform again.’⁸ The first definition is less interesting for my argument because it mainly relates to the trend of ‘Living History’, that is, to historical revival as a form of entertainment and collective memory constructed through the act of ‘making experience.’⁹ The second definition is related to the former one but goes directly to the heart of the matter. It does indeed relate to the performing arts, where the noun reenactment originated — yet within a wider perspective and an increasing persistence from the 1990s onwards —, connecting it to other artistic idioms. Although in both cases it constitutes an attempt to bring history back to life (or to the present), unlike the act of restaging related to ‘Living History’, which implies the idea of replicating as faithfully as possible the original event, reenactment as an art form is an interpretative gesture that never produces a true repetition. As is well known, it was Antonin Artaud who once said that a gesture in theatre can ‘never be made the same way twice.’¹⁰

8 ‘Reenact’, *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reenact>> [accessed 18 December 2018].

9 See, for instance, Marvin Carlson, ‘Living History, Re-enactment’, in *Performance Studies: Key Words, Concepts and Theories*, ed. by Bryan Reynolds (London: Palgrave, 2014), pp. 84–90.

10 Artaud quoted in Amelia Jones, ‘The Now and the Has Been: Paradoxes of Live Art in History’, in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, ed. by Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), p. 11.

One of the most interesting aspects of reenactment as reappropriation and reembodyment is the role of the artist's body as a medium that gives form and substance, not only to actions by other performers — as it happened in *Seven Easy Pieces*, the most celebrated as well as criticized work that Marina Abramović staged at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2005 —,¹¹ but also to artworks that come from different eras, contexts, and languages.¹²

By staging and embodying anew existing images that the artist-performer can, from time to time, take either from his/her own repertoire and the repertoire of others, or from art history and the visual imaginary, cultural traditions are reactivated and travel over time in the form of ritualized behaviours or even scores — where score, taken from the musical domain, is to be understood in a broader sense as code, namely a system of signs.¹³ In this way, the body becomes similar to an 'atlas of gestures',¹⁴

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- 11 *Seven Easy Pieces* included reenactments of two of Abramović's previous performances as well as five actions by Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, VALIE EXPORT, Bruce Nauman, and Gina Pane. Cf. Amelia Jones, "'The Artist Is Present': Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 55.1 (2011), pp. 16–45, especially p. 18.
 - 12 Seen from Hans Belting's anthropological perspective, the body is here at the same time the locus and the medium (through which it becomes picture) of the image. Cf. Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. by Thomas Dunlap (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).
 - 13 Cf., among others, Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); André Lepecki, 'The Body as Archive: Will to Re-enact and the Afterlives of Dances', *Dance Research Journal*, 42.2 (2010), pp. 28–48; and *Recréer/Scripter. Mémoires et transmissions des œuvres performatives et chorégraphiques contemporaines*, ed. by Anne Bénichou (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2015).
 - 14 See, to name but a few, Virgilio Sieni's choreographies, from which this expression comes, Tino Sehgal's 'constructed situations', and Alexandra Pirici's and Manuel Pelmuş' *Immaterial Retrospective* (2013) and *Public Collection* (2015).

that is, an archive of movements, experiences, and forms with a strong symbolic charge; a place for the *Nachleben* (survival) that challenges the traditional idea of heritage and at the same time renews the modalities of conservation, presentation/representation, and of the circulation of knowledge.

This is the case, for instance, in Alexandra Pirici's choreographed 'ongoing actions', where the performers' bodies become media that translate and transmit cultural memory and visual history as living images or counter-narratives. The artist started being noticed in the art scene in 2011, when a group of performers embodied specific historical monuments in public spaces to highlight issues of memory and politics, partly echoing Joseph Beuys' 'social sculpture'.¹⁵ Her breakthrough happened when she participated, together with Manuel Pelmuş, in the 55th Venice Biennale (2013) presenting *An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale* in the Romanian pavilion. On that occasion, Pirici and Pelmuş demonstrated that history, and especially the history of art, can be recollected by transforming the actual object-document (here a selection of artworks made with different media and shown at the Biennale since its foundation in 1895) into an action, as an immaterial testimony. The fact that a work of art, usually fetishized as a monument or commodity, can be turned into an image-gesture, thus freed from any specific substance and stable shape, becomes here a guarantee for its afterlife. Currently, Pirici's actions (e.g., *Delicate Instruments of Engagement*, 2017) have come to criticize canonical fixations, data sovereignty, and filter mechanisms

15 Another important point of reference for Pirici is the French choreographer Jérôme Bel, who is known for his 'non-dance'.

within the digital realm by remixing a repertoire of images, situations, and even Internet memes.

Apart from the body, the rehabilitation of images and histories — especially the ones that have been forgotten, never written, censored or are largely lacking testimonies — occurs through the reconstruction of artworks and exhibitions, and especially through the questioning and setting in motion of the archive. In the specific case of exhibitions and artworks, the more they are left incomplete, transient, or ‘immaterial’, the more their reenactment is effective, both because it leaves room for a freer translation/interpretation, and because, in an unfinished or unfinishable object, there is always something unexplored to be brought to light.¹⁶

Furthermore, when archives are interrogated in a work of research and reconstruction, the recovery of the past and reenactment of already existing images take place through a montage/display of heterogeneous materials. This process is comparable to a ‘dramaturgy of information’, an expression John Rajchman has used for the historical revaluation that occurs through a particular kind of philosophical exhibition, his main example being Jean-François Lyotard’s *Les Immatériaux* (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1985), where the task of expressing ideas is entrusted exclusively to images;¹⁷ or better, to ‘chains of images’,

16 See John Rajchman, ‘*Les Immatériaux* or How to Construct the History of Exhibitions’, *Tate Papers*, 12 (2009) <<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/12/les-immateriaux-or-how-to-construct-the-history-of-exhibitions>> [accessed 18 December 2018]; and Cristina Baldacci and Clío Nicastro, ‘Il Bilderatlas Mnemosyne ri-visitato: una mostra e un convegno a Karlsruhe’, *La rivista di Engramma*, 142 (2017) <http://www.egramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3086> [accessed 18 December 2018].

17 Rajchman, ‘*Les Immatériaux*’, n. p.

that is, dynamic and operative structures, similar to constellations or clusters, which presuppose a set of interdependent narrative instances (pre-production, production, post-production).¹⁸

When artists instead deal with images that re-emerge 'mute' from either the archive or an indefinite time and context, one of their first concerns is usually to understand how those images can be effectively reactivated and resignified without betraying them. In most cases, the reenactment of mainly archival materials is a unique opportunity to put history in motion through original counter-narratives.¹⁹ History, then, is transformed from a succession of supposedly universally significant facts, which usually produce and reiterate a dominant cultural narrative, into a counter-history where archival documents are revived or, if necessary, recreated *ex novo* (through fiction) as witnesses and personal devices of memory and resistance. At the heart of this, there is the desire to initiate a rewriting and deinstitutionalizing or decolonizing process that starts right from the images, and that presents, more than a remembering technique, a 'working through' [*Durcharbeitung*], as Lyotard wrote quoting Freud.²⁰

18 Philippe Parreno's exhibitions, which cannot be examined here, are emblematic of this attitude. Cf. *Philippe Parreno: H{n}ypn(y)osis/Hypothesis*, ed. by Andrea Lissoni (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2017).

19 See, in particular, Sven Lütticken, *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013); and Cristina Baldacci, 'Re-enactment e altre storie. Dall'archivio alla contro-narrazione per immagini nell'arte contemporanea', *La rivista di Engramma*, 150 (2017), pp. 41–48 <http://www.engramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=3215> [accessed 18 December 2018].

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

This additional narrative guides the viewer when looking at images and is also a way of reflecting on two central aspects of the archival and historical reenactment: Firstly, who accesses the archive, and, in particular, who ‘recovers’ archival images? Secondly, how can artists make those images accessible again, overcoming the tricky questions of authoriality, property, and legitimacy of the (photographic) image as a document that, in theory, should present reality instead of representing it through different modes of interpretation?²¹ This is particularly evident in the case of time-based art that ‘continuously remodels and modulates history — for instance by actualizing the historical record in the form of images that in turn help to shape the on-going production of new history in today’s temporal economy.’²²

Alongside the restaging of performances by artists, actors, and dancers as homage to or dialogue with their precursors, in recent years another form of reenactment has been emerging as a decisive procedure of contemporary art at large: the reconstruction of works and exhibitions of the twentieth century.²³ This tendency can be interpreted as a consequence of postconceptual art and — in Peter Osborne’s words — its ‘process of ontological homogenization’, for which ‘the artistic materiality of the work

21 For Allan Sekula, ‘the archive constitutes the paradigm or iconic system from which photographic “statements” are constructed.’ Cf. Allan Sekula, ‘Reading an Archive: Photography Between Labour and Capital’, in *The Photography Reader*, ed. by Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 443–52 (p. 445).

22 Lütticken, *History in Motion*, p. 26.

23 The endeavour undertaken by the Fondazione Prada in Venice with the reenactment of the legendary *When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) in 2013 is one of the main examples — even if not the first — of this trend and has set its standard. See *When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013*, ed. by Germano Celant (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2013).

and its documentary function are combined', as well as 'a growing indifference between the artwork and its documentation, at the level of the collection' and therefore of archival and curatorial practices.²⁴ But it also reveals the desire to restore concreteness to what is impermanent or has survived only as a ghost-image, on one side, and to give a place in art history to those events that have remained outside the predominant cultural tradition, on the other. The absence or incompleteness of the preexisting artefact hence becomes a prophecy and a condition of its rebirth.

That's why this meta-reflexive and historiographic approach, which stems also from the fear of elusiveness and loss of thingliness and sometimes takes on tautological aspects, must not be mistaken for an academic or reactionary exercise — an association Boris Groys has made in relation to art documentation and specifically to installation.²⁵ It should rather be considered as an invitation to look further and envisage a multifaceted art history that moves away from the restrictively Western gaze and from conventional categories, opening up to transculturation.

Inside the museum and other art spaces, reenacting specific exhibitions and artworks is a way to create history through a direct comparison of the 're-habilitated' object-image with the present to offer a possible understanding of the past that gives preference to a visual and performative, sometimes immersive, approach.²⁶

24 See Peter Osborne, 'Archive as Afterlife and Life of Art', in *WERE IT AS IF: Beyond an Institution that Is*, ed. by Bik van der Pol and Defne Ayas (Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 2017), pp. 49–53 (p. 52).

25 See Boris Groys, 'Art in the Age of Biopolitics: From Artwork to Art Documentation', in *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), pp. 53–65.

26 This attitude often goes together with two different practices: first, the search for original documentation and its gathering in archives newly

There remains, of course, a latent risk in this practice: any repeatability can easily result in a seriality that produces empty simulacra and multiples. Thus, far from presenting a guarantee of continuity in time,²⁷ reenactment can degenerate into a market strategy of fetishization that merely seeks to satisfy the collectors' desire for possession.

constituted; second, the publication of voluminous catalogues or entire series dedicated to the study of one single artwork or exhibition. See for instance the book series 'One Work' and 'Exhibition Histories' published by Afterall Books.

27 Cf. *Serial/Portable Classic: The Greek Canon and its Mutations*, ed. by Salvatore Settis (Milan: Fondazione Prada, 2015).

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