

# Is the “Re” in Re-enactment the “Re” in Re-performance?

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Fig. 15  
Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001.

In his political manifesto “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance,” Slavoj Žižek urges a taking up anew of Leninist politics, with much attention paid to the justification of repetition in art and life. And so he closes his proposal with a summing up of just this potential:

To repeat Lenin does not mean to return to Lenin. To repeat Lenin is to accept that Lenin is dead, that his particular solution failed, even failed monstrously, but that there was a utopian spark in it worth saving [...]. To repeat Lenin is not to repeat what Lenin *did*, but what he *failed to do*, his *missed opportunities*.<sup>1</sup>

What he means by the “utopian spark” in repetition is illustrated through a performance. The storming of the Winter Palace in Petersburg during the October Revolution of 1917 was restaged with the help of “army officers” and “artists” three years later, supposedly including many initial revolutionaries. Less firmly, Žižek asserts that some re-enactors were involved in the defense of Petersburg taking place around them (though Petersburg had been under attack a year earlier, in October 1919). The purpose of this claim, however forced, is clear: a context of maximal authenticity, with past *and* present revolutionaries re-enacting themselves. Rather rhetorically, Žižek asks if the restaging is not proof of more than a “coup d’état” by some, of a “tremendous emancipatory potential.”<sup>2</sup> In these terms, re-enactment is not just the political orchestration of “living memory,” but a justification of what came before, the fulfillment of missed opportunities. Past, present, and future are strangely intertwined in this idea, suggesting that performers, in restaging themselves, are somehow marked by “authenticity” going beyond historical truth to change the meaning of the past itself in an evolving aesthetic and social process.

In the debates about contemporary re-enactments in artistic contexts, this idea of the authentic, tied to claims of personal identity of the agents, plays a central role. It is most prominent in the interpretation of Jeremy Deller’s *The Battle of Orgreave*, the 2001 filmed re-enactment of a 1984 clash between workers threatened by the closing of Yorkshire mines and police forces intervening on Margaret Thatcher’s command.<sup>3</sup> Critics and theorists have stressed

1 Slavoj Žižek, “A Plea for Leninist Intolerance,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 566. Despite its outspoken, self-consciously provocative quality (Žižek also quotes Stalin with approval), the approach resembles that suggested for Robespierre’s party in Patrice Higonnet, *Goodness beyond Virtue: Jacobins during the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). For more on the French Revolution, see below.

2 *Ibid.*, 560.

3 See Wolfgang Brückle, “Jeremy Deller’s Battle of Orgreave,” in *Authentizität und Wiederholung: Künstlerische und kulturelle Manifestationen eines Paradoxes*, ed. Uta Daur (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013), 121–46. For first-person reflections by a strike leader, highlighting the complexity of the negotiations and the clash, see Arthur Scargill, “We could Surrender—Or Stand and Fight,” *The Guardian*, March 7, 2009.

the fact that several former policemen and miners participated, and were thus re-enacting themselves, despite the fact that a large number of the eight hundred people present were hired through professional re-enactment organizations with fantasy-laden names like The Vikings, The War of the Roses, and The Sealed Knot.<sup>4</sup> In any case, whether new or returning to Orgreave, participants had the opportunity to take sides anew, and the two opposing parties now cooperated in a mutual, controlled chaos (stage blood was used, cuss words rehearsed), enabling an emotional grappling with history that visually and bodily resembled its subject. It seems to me that this staged nature of the event, the fact that it was not "real" yet precisely calibrated to what was thought to have occurred (not that miners and authorities agreed about the casualties, or the police aggression), was a prime factor in enabling a reflective, estranged, certainly *new* connection to what came before.

"Re-," the Latin prefix meaning "again," whether attached to "enactment," "making," or "performance," marks the most recent and perhaps significant shift in performance practice and theory. If we can theorize re-enactment as the staging of the historical, we have difficulties applying the term to "live art"—which used to be defined as a one-time encounter between artist and audience, unrepeatable, non-theatrical, not for sale, immaterial—in terms of repetition, staging, and history. Yet the last two decades have seen the emergence of re-performance, the restaging of performances by an artist decades after the fact, be it the original artist, a contemporary, or the representative of a younger generation, eager to "live through" their heritage. This new work is retrospective, even where it is most politically topical: as when Yoko Ono once again performed her *Cut Piece* of 1964–66 (filmed at Carnegie Hall in 1965), in Paris in 2003, as a protest against the second Iraq War (cameras were again present).<sup>5</sup> Is re-enactment of a historical event at all comparable to re-performance, which involves the return of past art? After all, Ono was not in 2003 simulating 1960s audiences in London, Tokyo, or New York. In fact, it is striking that she chose a new and apparently neutral city—since the French refused to join the expeditionary force. Yet the violence she opposed, and her act of courage in exposing her aging body to nakedness and scissors, would hardly have come into focus without memories of the quiet, long-haired young woman, and of the repressed, aggressive, unpredictable behavior of participants and the press four decades earlier. In this way, re-performance, like re-enactment, both defies and relies on the passage of time.

History and memory, then, are the common denominators of re-enactment and re-performance, whatever their differences. Indeed, no one will confuse Ono or Deller with an American Civil War enthusiast—but the practical question of whether re-enactment and re-performance are the same phenomenon, and the corresponding theoretical question of whether a past moment or a

historically flexible act is being reconstructed—are urgent, whatever direction contemporary art will take in these matters. To answer them, I aim to show how experience is formed in the entanglement of past and present in an aesthetic context: what we might call the "monumentalization" or fixation of a possibly fictional interpretation of history through physical reconstruction in the present, a reconstruction that in turn is often so thoroughly documented as to make possible a continuous point of reference in opposition to the often fragmentary or sparsely documented original. This is not, to be clear, to say that the "original" could thus come to be excluded from a temporal unfolding of meaning relying entirely on simulated bodies, props, and documents. On the contrary, the acts and images of re-enactment and re-performance evince a reference to the past as forceful as that of any photographic or otherwise indexical document, which itself is usually a reconstruction insofar as only the master negative, and not the working prints or display copies that are used in exhibition and publication, bear any temporal continuity relation with the past event being documented. To put it bluntly, documents are already re-enactments. They may have functions that theatrical re-enactments don't (such as fixing the content for a re-enactment visually and performatively—by determining what speech acts were performed), but their mechanical reference to the past is transmitted to the actor's interest in getting the past right, within the historical framework by which all re-enactment is implicitly judged. The act of repetition, far from erasing all difference between an event and its later instances, is a marker that allows us to see this difference more clearly, often creating new meaning, formally and contextually, which can only be understood in the light of the distance to the reference work or event.

This historicity, especially in re-performance, runs against some of the claims of performance artists, who adopt the rhetoric of a reactivation of "authentic encounters" between artist and audience, a kind of subjective time travel, which they often contrast favorably to the static image in documentation. Marina Abramović is the most prominent advocate of such claims. Her *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) consisted of seven evenings at the Guggenheim in which Abramović redid classic works of performance by colleagues of the 1960s and '70s: Joseph Beuys, Bruce Nauman, VALIE EXPORT, Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, and herself (*Lips of Thomas*, which in 1975 was called *Thomas Lips*). Famously, Chris Burden declined permission; the series ended with a new work whose monumental scale (Abramović as the Statue of Liberty?) gave a memorial tenor to the whole event. *Seven Easy Pieces* served to bring back

4 The groups, all of which have a web presence, are dedicated to re-enactment of the era suggested by their names—in the case of The Sealed Knot, named after a Royalist secret society of the Interregnum, the very name of the organization is a re-enactment of sorts.

5 On the history of this work, see Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*. From Text to Performance and Back Again," *PAJ. A Journal of Performance and Art* 30, no. 3 (September 2008): 81–93.

the body to performances that she, and most of us, knew only from pictures.<sup>6</sup> Since 2005, Abramović has been attacked for her insistence on charismatic "presence," in which some see only a capitalist star system, coupled with her more recent practice of training young performers to redo her own earlier work. This delegation of the re-performance to other bodies was mobilized most famously for her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 2010, entitled "The Artist is Present" (under the same name, Abramović carried out a new and exhausting performance for the duration of the show). Much debate concerned the working conditions and exploitation of these young performers. However justified these claims may be, it seems that the shock over their presence in lieu of Abramović was just as much dissatisfaction that they were not Abramović: an indicator that perhaps audiences of performance are more wedded to a neutral reappearance (in which the change of context that always occurs is repressed) than the artist.<sup>7</sup> Abramović is fascinating in this context because the tensions inherent in her attempts to revitalize performances of the past through bodily presence show that the body "brought back" can only constitute a past body imaginatively, for an audience informed in advance by historical documents. Re-performance cannot ensure an authentic return to an event independent of time, since time is constitutive of events; but history, stored and ever-changing in documents, memories, narratives, and other media by ever new layers of audience, holds bodily presence in tension between an irretrievable past event, a monument constituted in the act of remembering, and a new work in the present, itself liable to later reconstruction.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 16  
Eleanor Antin, *The Death of Petronius*, 2001.

The implications of re-performance and re-enactment for broader areas of art and life have not gone unnoticed in the literature. In her 2011 book *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider ranges widely across disciplines in pursuit of the complex relation of body and history: she discusses not just performance, but military re-enactment, dance, theater, and academic research. What Schneider sees is a complicated, cyclical time of displaced presences and

ghostly returns. This is not to say, with those critics proclaiming "the death of presence" at the hands of documentation and re-enactment, that live acts don't matter.<sup>9</sup> Rather, there is mutual entanglement: "[...] live art and media of mechanical and technological reproduction, such as photography, cross-identify, and, more radically, cross-constitute, and 'improvise' each other."<sup>10</sup> So photography and performance both depend on each other, but is the whole world then a tissue of social construction? Not quite. According to Schneider, there is a past—it is just that we access it in the present, through bodily acts or performances, whether that is on a Civil War battlefield in period costume, drumming our fingers across a lending desk at the archive, or just sitting down with a book: "[...] one *performs* a mode of access in the archive; one *performs* a mode of access at a theatre; one *performs* a mode of access on the dance floor; one *performs* a mode of access on the battlefield."<sup>11</sup> To this we may add what Schneider is very conscious of: one performs a certain access to history as a working scholar, bringing certain aspects of the past into the discussion and occluding others.

In this view, then, re-performance takes place not just on battlefields and in art museums, but everywhere. All our acts of thinking and talking about the past fit the bill. This might almost sound like a postmodern echo of the modernist fusion of art and life, and in both cases, it should worry us that there is no way to distinguish overt re-enactment from the kind we perform without

6 See Mechtild Widrich, "Can Photographs Make It So? Repeated Outbreaks of VALIE EXPORT's *Genital Panic*," in *Perform, Repeat, Record* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 89–103, (a revision of a 2008 article first presented orally at Harvard University in April 2007), and the interview with Abramović by Amelia Jones in the same book: "The Live Artist As Archaeologist," 543–66.

7 The show was discussed in two essays in *Artforum*: Carrie Lambert-Beatty, "Against Performance Art," *Artforum* 48, no. 9 (May 2010): 208–12; Caroline Jones, "Staged Presence," (ibid., 214–9). Amelia Jones wrote a highly critical (and disappointed) article on the impossibility of presence in recent performance art: Amelia Jones, "'The Artist is Present.' Artistic Reenactments and the Impossibility of Presence," *TDR. The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 16–45. See also my article "Präsenz--Schichtung--Wahrnehmung. Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* und die Geschichtlichkeit von Performance," in *Authentizität und Wiederholung*, ed. Uta Daur (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013), 147–67.

8 I am not committed to "three things" in re-performance or re-enactment, but the past, a relation to it, and the present act of commemoration seem importantly distinct aspects.

9 On authenticity, the supposed original event, and its reappearance in performance art, see Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *PAJ. A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006); Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 11–18; Jane Blocker, "Repetition. A Skin Which Unravels," in *Perform Repeat Record*, 199–208, and my article in the same volume. This is not to say there is consensus: Peggy Phelan accepts a Derridean metaphysics of presence while excluding performance from the effects of repetition because it does not consist of arbitrary signs. See her *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

10 Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 7.

11 Ibid., 104.

knowing it. To name some concrete questions: Does it matter that the same or another person performs again, that the *site* or *objects* or *script* or co-performers were there before? One wants to ask such questions of the Winter Palace and of Yoko Ono, but they cannot be answered if the whole world is to some degree re-performance. When Eleanor Antin photographs, films, and writes herself into the saga of Eleonora Antinova, nostalgic black ballerina of the *Ballets russes*, what precisely is being re-enacted?<sup>12</sup> A life that never was? Is the relationship different when she stages photographically the death of the Roman poet Petronius (*The Last Days of Pompeii*, 2001), in sumptuous period costume, by a California swimming pool?<sup>13</sup> Often enough, it is in commemorating impossible states of affairs—but also *real* history paintings by Nicolas Poussin and Thomas Couture—that Antin's work reveals its humor and incisiveness, and its link to more literal forms of re-enactment.

To clarify my position, I do not wish to dispute Schneider's suggestion that re-enactment and re-performance exist on a range (fairly continuous, but not uniformly populated) from scholarly history to parodic appropriation and hobby; what I insist on, and hope she would not object to, is that the asymmetrical relation between past and present is central to the understanding of the role of performers as opposed to audiences in such events. The audience of a war re-enactment, a strike re-enactment, *Hamlet*, and my act of going to the library are radically different, not just empirically, but in how they relate to and in some cases participate in the action.

This can be seen best in historical perspective. Going back beyond Žižek and the October Revolution, it is worth recalling that the French Revolution of 1789 invented revolutionary festivals as a comprehensive attempt to collectivize memory and political opinion through participation. There, as in the Russian Revolution, which re-enacted so many aspects of the French, scholars have put emphasis on the performers being the same persons who carried out the revolution, not in order to "work through" trauma and master it, as contemporary memory culture might ask of Deller's piece, but to make manifest the "People" or revolutionary collective of a new state order. As Mona Ozouf aphoristically puts it: "For the legislator makes the laws for the people, but it is the festival that makes the people for the laws."<sup>14</sup> By the time of the Terror, this dream of government for, by, and of the people had turned into a farce, even as the rhythm of festivals intensified. For the re-enactors of the Civil War, the point is another entirely: often staged from a conservative point of view, these events offer the thrill of seeing oneself at a time before the decisive historical outcome, able to hope or imagine that the South will win—that it has won.<sup>15</sup>

Let me sum up these differing and to a certain extent contrasting approaches, intentions, and temporalities: there is re-enactment, the restaging of a historical

event, sometimes for educational reasons, to experience the past, to redraw it, to become part of history as an individual or member of a collective or even to overcome a trauma. And there is re-performance, done by the same artist in a new context, or by another, be it as reverence, revision, or with a historical end in view: to point to the fact that the world has changed around the performance. For this purpose, paradoxically, the most accurate performance would seem the best marker of change—in audience expectations and reactions. But just as often, there is something about the past act, not just about the past, that we want to keep or repeat—even if we must change the performance to retrieve it. Thus British artist Carey Young, for example, restages interactions with the built and natural environment by VALIE EXPORT, Kirsten Justesen, Richard Long, Bruce Nauman, and others, on site in Dubai and Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates, shifting the phenomenological concerns of the 1960s to a discussion of global economics, labor, and their visible effects on the built environment.<sup>16</sup> The reference to earlier performance in re-performance is thus a means to make us aware that times have indeed changed, not to recreate experience, but to allow for the tension between that which seems familiar (the bodily gesture) and the jolting difference not just in the setting of performance (the ongoing construction of corporate architecture in the desert) but in its meaning. Can an artist analyze these environments by acting in them as artists have done before?

In raising these complicated questions related to temporality, what re-performance and re-enactment in all its kaleidoscopic options share is that we, no matter if we are part of the audience, ourselves re-enacting, or watching someone else re-perform a piece we once did, refer back in time and

12 *Recollections of My Life with Diaghilev, 1919–1929*, was photographed between 1974 and 1979 and first shown at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, in 1980 (a better-known exhibition at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1981 is sometimes given as the exhibition date). See Eleanor Antin, "Eleonora Antinova's Journal," *High Performance* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1981): 48–57, and the book form of the series Eleanor Antin, *Being Antinova* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1983). There is a rare early portfolio, *Recollections of My Life with Diaghilev* (San Francisco: Black Stone Press, 1978).

13 The work is well-reproduced and discussed in Eleanor Antin, *Historical Takes* (Munich: Prestel, 2008). The Romans did have pools, which, as Augustine comments, are called *piscina* although no fish live in them. See Augustine, *De dialectica*, trans. B. Darrell Jackson (Dordrecht: D. Riedel, 1975), 95.

14 Mona Ozouf, *La Fête révolutionnaire, 1789–1799* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 16, translated by Alan Sheridan as *Festivals and the French Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 9. The surrounding discussion is interesting for its insight into how festivals reshape Enlightenment individualism: "Men were individuals, in theory all identical, all equal, but solitary. It was now the task of the legislator to connect them [...] the festival was an indispensable complement to the legislative system, for although the legislator makes the laws for the people, festivals make the people for the laws."

15 Schneider recounts on various occasions in her book that she had this impression in some re-enactments she visited. The attraction of changing the past is of course central to time travel narratives in many arts.

16 The series is entitled *Body Techniques*.

simultaneously forward, that we construct an imaginary performance the markers of which (inferred original, documents, narration, new event) meld with our own being in time and that which we want to convey to the future. "Ever-new waters flow on those who step into the same river," as pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus observed two and a half millennia ago. But this is not all: we may never be the same ourselves, and it is in this possibility that the "utopian spark" can unfold.

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