



Review: Re-enactments, Judith Wilkinson, DHC/ ART, Montreal, February - May 2008

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Re-enactments

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In his introductory essay to the exhibition *Life, once more* (Witte de With, 2005), Sven Lütticken identifies the potential for artistic strategies of re-enactment to provoke new readings of important historical and cultural events. He champions contemporary art's ability "to fight repetition with repetition, to break open and activate the past."

Contemporary art certainly seems willing to take on Lütticken's challenge, as re-animated historical figures, revisited failed utopias and recontextualized archival images increasingly populate exhibition spaces. This current moment of re-enactment in art arguably assumes two related but distinct forms.

One set of explorations confronts popular obsessions with reconstituting

the past, reckoning with a prevailing culture of recurrence. For example, the meticulous reconstruction of American Civil War battles by US military enthusiasts has recently been examined in the quasi-realistic images of artist Robert Longo and the phenomenon of the Hollywood remake has been interrogated in the work of Candice Breitz, Pierre Huyghe and Douglas Gordon among others.

The other strand self-reflexively re-interprets the sphere of art itself, relying on the work of previous generations of painters, performers and filmmakers for inspiration. The Whitechapel's ongoing exhibition series *A Short history of performance*, along with Marina Abramovic's recent restaging of several classic pieces by Joseph Beuys, Vito Acconci and Bruce

Nauman, completely reconfigure our understanding of the importance of individual artistic authorship, and undermine the authenticity of original experience in the history of performance. These events also raise questions concerning the reliability and purpose of documentation, leftover images and footage that serve as a collective means to access past actions but are also an undeniably valuable commercial commodity.

Re-enactments, the latest exhibition at DHC/ ART in Montreal, places itself within this broader cultural debate while offering a particular perspective on art's current fascination with images and forms of the past.

Curated by John Zeppetelli, the show features works by Stan Douglas, Nancy Davenport, Kerry Tribe, Paul Pfeiffer, Harun Farocki and Ann Lislegaard, and focuses on media as “a source for collective memory.” Included here are Pfeiffer’s restaging of Michael Jackson’s infamous denial of molestation charges recited by a chorus of 80 children, entitled *Live from Neverland* (2007), and Farocki’s multi-screen installation *Deep play* (2007), in which he exposes the dynamics of live television editing in the 2006 World Cup football final.

This highlighting of art’s indebtedness to and inheritance of film and television spectacles would seem to place the exhibition neatly within the popular culture stream mentioned earlier. Yet the show’s most engaging works effectively blur the line between these two re-enactment camps by drawing from film sources that are perched somewhere between the realms of popular culture and art.

Douglas’s *Inconsolable memories* (2005) takes as its point of reference the Third Cinema classic *Memories of underdevelopment* (1968) by Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. Part of his ongoing series of ‘recombinant’ film projections, Douglas reshoots Alea’s depiction of a bourgeois aspiring writer remaining in Cuba after the Bay of Pigs invasion despite the

emigration to Miami of his wife and friends. Thrusting the storyline into 1980, the year of the Mariel boat exodus when Fidel Castro permitted thousands of Cubans to escape to Florida, Douglas also reinterprets the fragmented narrative of the original, playing out the events on two synchronized and alternating 16mm film loops of unequal lengths. Through this technique, the individual scenes of Douglas’s portrayal recombine into seemingly endless permutations. Despite Alea’s claim that his film was an indictment of the lack of revolutionary commitment on the part of his intellectual protagonist, Douglas’s re-presentation foregrounds the political ambiguities of the original.

One of two artists in the exhibition paying tribute to Jean Luc Godard, Kerry Tribe draws from the great film auteur’s lesser-known television work. Tribe revisits the tele-series *France/ tour/ détour/ deux/ enfants* (1978), in which an off-camera Godard engages French schoolchildren in lengthy interviews of a highly philosophical and probing nature. “Space...do you know what that is? And time? You know that too? What about the night? Is it space or time?” In Tribe’s *Here and elsewhere* (2002), British film theorist Peter Wollen has replaced Godard and it is his 11-year-old daughter who is the recipient of a similar line of questioning. While often repeated verbatim, Godard’s

queries elicit a notably different response in Tribe’s sequence. Filmed in their LA home, Wollen’s daughter Audrey appears far more assured in both her responses and screen presence than her French counterparts. Through this second iteration, Tribe illustrates the heightened image-awareness of children exposed to the current age of media spectacle.

DHC/ ART Foundation for Contemporary Art opened its official gallery space in the autumn of 2007, after sponsoring and co-producing several off-site projects, including Canada’s celebrated contribution to last year’s *Venice Biennale*, David Altmejd’s *The Index*. This latest exhibition remains faithful to the organization’s mandate of bringing international media art to the city of Montreal. DHC/ ART’s *Reenactments* taps into an emergent cultural phenomenon that is both present in contemporary art production and implicit in the workings of the popular media.

Judith Wilkinson is an independent curator and PhD candidate at Goldsmiths College.

[this page and opposite]
Kerry Tribe
Here and elsewhere, 2002
video stills
courtesy DHC/ ART

