

Curatorially speaking, the arrangement of objects hanging on the inside of the fridge door is as interesting as the magnetized "hang" of pictures and recipes on the outside. Likewise, the battery of camouflaged men pressed against the cold shelf of a snowy hill, feigning death in a benign "war," are the ingredients of a kitchen-table culture as rich in interpretative rewards as a bunch of artists reenacting David Bowie's last gig as Ziggy Stardust. The combined appreciation of

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**Once More . . .  
With Feeling:  
Reenactment in  
Contemporary Art and  
Culture**

these charades points to a growing flexibility in our palette of tastes between contemporary culture and art. It is where these circumstantial boundaries have persistently overlapped in the curious phenomenon of reenactment that I have focused this essay and attempted to unbraid the strands of performance, history, and memory that bind this practice.

As a curator of both contemporary art and culture, I am interested in researching and displaying the dependency between these two sprawling disciplines. My curiosity about reenactment developed from this commitment three years ago, when I curated the exhibition *We Could Have Invited Everyone*. This group show centered on artists and self-made monarchs who have created their own countries. Filled with the flags, national anthems, passports, constitutions, crowns, and other symbols of sovereignty from these countries, the exhibition, which included a naturalization station where you could create and join your own country, was infused with a spirit of independence and activism.<sup>1</sup>

Few of the men and women who had started their own countries or “micronations,” as they are formally known, were satisfied with the political status quo of their home states or respective immigration options. And these creative practitioners decided that rather than fight against the grain of an established political system, they would create their own instead. This empowering and frequently alienating decision often left them legally and geographically isolated from friends and relations. Ultimately, however, their uncompromising will for personal liberty and political autonomy, as evidenced by the micronational treasures on display, was a liberating and humbling experience.

The birth of a nation, regardless of its political orientation or population, is often coupled with a shrewd self-awareness and the desire to document and historicize its creation. I was surprised to find that many micronations are also eager to assimilate their radical progress into historical tropes of conventional nationhood, such as documenting the signing of important papers or charting the country’s founding through a lineage of battles either bureaucratic or bloody. The extreme regalia imposed on these occasions by micronations are often, I think, a form of preemptive compensation for the lack of a dotting national citizenry that typically enshrines such events in patriotic folklore over successive generations. With more of an audience than a population, many micronations’ urgency for the *appearance* of a historical occasion results in a conceptual collapse between a country’s *creation* and the creation of its “history.”

To invert this developing curatorial study, I began to research a vein of activity that, at the time, I appreciated as the direct opposite of making history. Reenactment seemed to provide this contrast—from creating history to copying it. This treadmill of an exercise, literally covering the same ground with little cause or circumstance beyond the enclaves of fastidious men devoted to the pastime, was an activity I knew little about. As my research into this historical phenomenon grew (I shouldn’t have been surprised to learn there is a history of reenactment), my initial assumptive appraisal was continually and creatively proven wrong. The reversal was caused not only by the varied ways in which contemporary means of reenactment are packaged and interpreted as art forms, hobbies, musical genres, religious traditions, scientific methodologies, or trades, but also by the distinct emancipatory agency of reenactment in comparison to its kin of simulation, reproduction, and repetition, with which it is often confused. Reenactment is distinctive in that it invites transformation through memory, theory, and history to generate unique and resonating results. As Sven Lütticken concludes in his lucid essay “An Arena in Which to Reenact,” reenactment “may lead to artistic acts that, while not instantly unleashing a ‘tremendous emancipatory potential,’ create a space—a stage—for possible and as yet unthinkable performances.”<sup>2</sup>



**Coronation of Morten Holmeffjord, Viceroy of Fusa, 2003 (photograph © Knut Egil Wang)**

On June 21, 2003, the Norwegian government declared its own Fusa County a kingdom. To rule this kingdom, Morten Holmeffjord, a leader in the arts community of Norway, was crowned His Excellency the viceroy. As was his royal duty, the Viceroy designated a Fusian viceregal hymn, minted a state seal, designed a flag, and with support from the Council of Elders, penned a Fusian constitution.

On September 12, 2005, a people’s election coinciding with the Norwegian national elections decided the future of the Fusian monarchy. A majority vote in favor of the viceroy would have made him a sovereign and permanent leader of the Kingdom of Fusa. However, the viceroy lost the election, the Kingdom of Fusa dissolved, and Holmeffjord is living under political asylum in an undisclosed location in South America.

1. *We Could Have Invited Everyone* originated at Reg Vardy Gallery (Sunderland, United Kingdom) in 2004 and toured to Andrew Kreps Gallery (New York) in 2005, where it was cocurated with Peter Coffin.

2. Sven Lütticken, “An Arena in Which to Reenact,” in *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art*, ed. Sven Lütticken (Rotterdam: Witte de With, 2005), 60.



**Mark Goddard, "Great Britain's Best Elvis"**  
(photograph provided by Mark Goddard)

Elvis Presley can be described as America's first pop star and he has inspired literally hundreds of imitators. Elvis impersonators (or tribute artists, as they prefer to be known) were around and competing for titles such as "Oklahoma's Best Elvis" even before the King's death. It is a longstanding story among Elvis enthusiasts that in 1975 Elvis was so flattered and curious about these men and women devoted to his persona that he decided to watch an Elvis-impersonation tournament in person. Impulsively, and under the pseudonym Tommy Hogg, Elvis entered the contest. Two hours and countless versions of *Suspicious Minds* later, Tommy Hogg came in second.

3. The exhibition originated at Reg Vardy Gallery (Sunderland, United Kingdom) in 2005 and subsequently toured to Millais Gallery (Southampton, UK), the Changing Room (Stirling, UK), and Herbert Read Gallery (Canterbury, UK).

4. Shimon Naveh, *Cabinet 22* (Summer 2006): 80.

5. David Levi Strauss, "Magic & Images/Images & Magic," *The Brooklyn Rail* (July–August 2006), available online at [www.brooklynrail.org/2006-07/film/magic-and-images](http://www.brooklynrail.org/2006-07/film/magic-and-images).

6. I am thankful to Dr. Sarah Cook for articulating this distinction.

7. Jenny Thompson, *War Games: Inside the World of 20th-Century War Reenactors* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2004), 153.

8. Alun Munslow, preface to *Re-thinking History* by Keith Jenkins (1991; London: Routledge, 2002), xiv.

9. According to a 1970 survey by Dr. Elizabeth Loftus, 84 percent of psychologists agreed with the statement, "Everything we learn is permanently stored in the mind, although some details are not accessible." Philip J. Hills, *Memory's Ghost*

This liberating trait of reenactment is its signature quality and is what draws both practitioners and audiences to it again and again. This quality and its relationship to both history and memory shaped the curatorial premise for the exhibition *Once More . . . With Feeling: Reenactment in Contemporary Art and Culture* and also forms the connecting thread to which I will return throughout this essay.<sup>3</sup> However, as a matter of housekeeping, I feel it is first necessary to provide a more thorough delineation of reenactment, simulation, repetition, and reproduction by way of their individual merits.

Simulation, although similar to reenactment, differs in that it is an artificial and prescribed projection often constructed to facilitate the prediction of a future conclusion. In this way, simulation can be appreciated as a practice in service to theory. Lunar landing simulations and the Israeli-built urban warfare training sites such as "Chicago," the largest fabricated Oriental city since the 1959 filming of *Ben-Hur*, are examples. "Chicago" was used in training for the evacuation of the Gaza settlements, complete with actors barricading themselves in the makeshift houses.<sup>4</sup>

Repetition is an exercise often stuck in the present. Its anticipatory action lends itself to habit and is rarely intended to inspire a keener sense of awareness or personal agency. For these reasons, all reenactments are repetitions, but few repetitions become reenactments. A curious example of this is the repetitive and often obscene gesticulations of a baseball pitcher's wind-up. This choreography is scrupulously performed in the superstitious hope that it will reap the same success as an earlier pitch.

To create a reproduction is to make an image of the original. "Image is straight from the Latin 'imago,' related through the root to *imitari*, 'to imitate,' so an image is an imitation . . ." <sup>5</sup> Imitations and reproductions are stand-ins, empty shirts rarely afforded a purpose or motivation beyond the limits of the original. Reproductions such as the 1927 re-creation of Thomas Edison's first recording of a human voice in 1887 (singing "Mary Had a Little Lamb") onto a tinfoil cylinder often require the human mimicry of an earlier action. However, the resonance of the project is embedded more in the dumb object than the act that reproduced it.

Drawing personal motivation from either your past or historical references is the conventional element necessary to construct a reenactment. The degree to which performers empower themselves through layers of authenticity is secondary to their willingness to allow personal interpretation rather than verisimilitude to influence their actions.<sup>6</sup> This openness to interpretation lends itself to another signature and often overlooked characteristic of reenactment: once undertaken, it need not follow the path provided by historical evidence. Many reenactments embrace a "free-flowing" or "open-ended" style in which, for example, countries vanquished in war can rise victoriously in the reenactment of that war.<sup>7</sup> This shift in responsibility toward personal preference and away from prescriptions of the past continually shapes our regard for reenactment.

The possibility for interpretation and interaction with a past (whose past?) is often a recurring and confusing issue when reenactment is discussed. The confusion stems from a lack of agreement as to what the past can signify. In his book *Re-thinking History*, Keith Jenkins determines that the past is not history. Jenkins's treatise, first published in 1991, was informed by theories of history that have been discussed previously in regard to art, architecture, sociology, and philosophy. However, this polemical work is particularly significant for its persistent relevance to the construction of history and the terms by which it is defined. In a discussion of reenactment it is important to uphold Jenkins's separation of past and history. He maintains the former is a necessary "construction site" of facts on which the latter is built. Jenkins believes that facts impose no meaning in and of themselves. According to Alun Munslow in his preface to Jenkins's book, creation of "the past as history" is only possible with the aid of what Roland Barthes has coined the "reality effect," a representation of the past through the form (history) we give to its reality.<sup>8</sup> This construct, as we know, is a useful fiction written by historians for a variety of purposes. Significantly, for the purposes of this essay, Jenkins's separation of the past and history extends an unspoken epistemological agency to art and memory so that these creative practices might use the past to build and replay their own constructed histories.



Shopping center (photograph © the author)

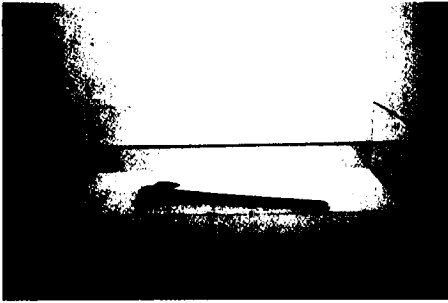
"Lost in the Mall" was a false-memory experiment devised and carried out by Dr. Elizabeth Loftus and her students from the University of Washington. Her findings, published in 1993, charted the implantation of false memories in twenty-four individuals. To create the experiment, Loftus made a booklet for each of the participants. Inside the booklets were four descriptions of memories; three of the stories were of real childhood memories provided by the participants' families, and the fourth was a false memory of being lost in a mall. After the participants were invited to the lab to read their respective booklets, they were asked to elaborate on the memories with their own recollections, and if they had none, to simply write, "I don't remember this." What was perhaps more surprising than the statistically significant figures culled from the experiment was the degree of detail with which the false memory was confabulated.\*

\* Lauren Slater, *Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the 20th Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 187.

(New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 209.

10. For a detailed account of memory's place in legal testimony, see the chapter "Legally Live" in Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 112–57.

11. Lauren Slater, *Opening Skinner's Box: Great Psychological Experiments of the 20th Century* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 182.



Tomahawk peace pipe (photograph © 2tone Creative Photography; provided by Peyton Clark)

To honor the bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark expedition, a group of reenactors named Discovery Expedition, led by Peyton “Bud” Clark (the great-great-great-grandson of William Clark), is retracing the historic journey. However, they have been stopped numerous times by Native American tribes. These tribes claim that the reenactment is disrespectful to the plight of Native Americans struggling to reclaim their land rights. The Lewis and Clark reenactors brought with them a Tomahawk Peace Pipe in hopes that the tribes might smoke it with the reenactors and call a truce from their protesting. The Native Americans refused.

Both of the artworks described below place the emotional and psychological determination of the participating individuals in the foreground of the reenactments. The reliance on personal memories and the history they invariably create is antithetical to some forms of conventional reenactments that attempt to surrender the baggage of individual identity to better reflect an impersonal history. This shift, although perhaps not immediately intended as therapeutic, resembles the work of the clinical neurologist Oliver Sacks. Sacks’s illuminating work in redefining case histories argues that a patient’s personal history is just as integral as the disease with which he or she is afflicted, if not more so. As he writes in his preface to *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, “Such histories [of the afflicting disease] are a form of natural history—but they tell us nothing about the individual and his history; they convey nothing of the person, and the experience of the person as he faces, and struggles to survive, his disease. . . . We must deepen a case history to a narrative or tale: only then do we have a ‘who’ as well as a ‘what,’ a real person . . . in relation to disease—in relation to the physical.”<sup>12</sup>

In 2001 Jeremy Deller, with the support of the London-based public-art agency Artangel, reenacted a period from the 1984–85 British miners’ strike and in so doing created a poignant perspective between personal and political histories. The episode Deller selected to reenact was a violent and largely misconstrued clash between mounted police officers and striking miners. Significant to this reenactment is the fact that Deller, in large, relied on memories from both miners and police officers to re-create the battle scene, rather than the copious quantities of biased newspaper articles that initially reported the story.<sup>13</sup> By allowing personal memory to direct the course of the reenactment, rather than the newspaper accounts, Deller’s work, *The Battle of Orgreave*, and the Mike Figgis film that documented the performance were effectively righting old wrongs.

Specific to a discussion of Deller’s reenactment is the emancipatory role it may have played in the community life of the northern English villages involved. The end of the miners’ strike was typified by a vilification of the miners by the media. The miners and their unions were blamed not only for disorderly conduct toward the police force sent by the Thatcher government to quell “the enemy within,” but also for crippling the energy economy of Britain by refusing to work. The repercussions for the mining unions’ perceived defiance of the government led to the closure of the majority of British mines, thus denying a generational and vast labor force its trade and income. Twenty years on, the debilitating and stagnant effects of the “pit closures” are omnipresent in northern England.

12. Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (Suffolk: Picador, 1985), x.

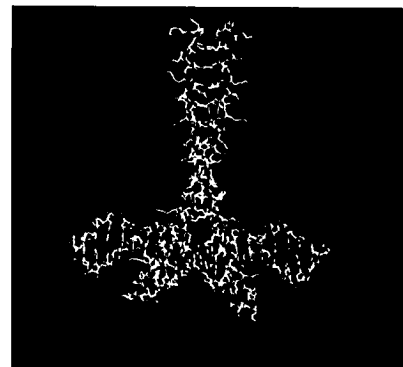
13. A small proportion of the participants in this artwork were miners and police officers from the original battle.

The English author George Orwell wrote in his novel 1984 that “those who control the present control the past and those who control the past control the future.” By allowing the miners’ memories to control the course of the reenactment, Deller’s performance provided languishing mining communities a way to act outside the historical script determined for them by the government and media. Thus the artwork “became a part of [the strike’s] own history, an epilogue to the experience.”<sup>14</sup>

Omer Fast’s 2003 video *Spielberg’s List* merges similar notions of memories with history. The sixty-five-minute work centers on a winter journey to Krakow. Interspersed with contemporary shots of the original concentration camps is footage from the neighboring, snowy remains of concentration-camp sets left over from the filming of Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* (1993). For the viewer of this double video projection, untangling which of the camps were built by the Nazis and which by Hollywood is nearly impossible. The disorientation is heightened by interviews interspersed with scenes of inhabitants from the region. Some of the interviews are with survivors of the Holocaust who reenacted their traumatic experiences, as extras in Spielberg’s film. As the interviews develop, their harrowing stories of survival can seamlessly weave into accounts of meeting the actor Liam Neeson, and the viewer’s preconceptions of witnessing and fictionalizing begin to overlap.

The haunting film set constructed for *Schindler’s List* has become a site of pilgrimage for tourists, predominantly American.<sup>15</sup> The popularity of this fabrication is testament not only to the power of Spielberg’s film but, perhaps more important, to the uncanny effect that representations of traumatic experiences hold over a vicarious audience. The British artist Rod Dickinson, who has staged many reenactments, explains, “Re-enactment seems, as a form of representation, strangely well equipped to address moments of collective trauma and anxiety. . . . Almost as if, taking a Debordian turn, that the re-enactment operates as the uncanny of the spectacle. A live image, in real space and real time, but simultaneously displaced.”<sup>16</sup> The displacement created by the abstracted representation of a traumatic history can be dramatically similar to that of memorials.

Some reenactments, like those of the battle of Gettysburg and of life in Colonial Williamsburg, are performed almost daily and are essentially moving memorials. The purpose of these theatrical performances, like that of their sculptural equivalents, is to instill general audiences with a dramatic sense of empathy and even reverence for historical or antiquated acts. These heritage-center-esque charades often leave the impression of reenactment as a trapped medium, fundamentally conservative and preoccupied with image.



**CREB protein structure Phosphodiesterase-4 (image provided by Tim Tully, professor, Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory)**

Our ability to remember and therefore to reenact previous experiences is thanks to the protein structure CREB (cAMP-response element binding protein) that is found in the nucleus of every brain cell. Since the discovery of this protein in 1963, medical science has been experimenting with ways in which CREB might be enhanced or repressed. Phosphodiesterase-4 is a CREB enhancer that, in the future, might be prescribed to offset and reverse the memory loss suffered by patients with Alzheimer’s disease. Conversely, CREB repressors are currently being tested that will block or “erase” traumatic memories.

14. Tom Morton, “Mining for Gold,” *Frieze* 72 (January–February 2003): 73.

15. Lütticken, 125.

16. Rod Dickinson, “Re: Re-enactment: ‘Live Art’ and Mediatization” (December 8, 2005), available online at the New Media–Curating Discussion List, [www.crumbweb.org](http://www.crumbweb.org).



**Office of McKim, Mead, & White, architects, *Perspective of the Proposed Library of J. Pierpont Morgan, ca. 1905, watercolor.* Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York. (Artwork in the public domain; photograph provided by the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York)**

Concurrent with the trend of historicism came the opening of many personal collections of art and artifacts as public museums. The grandest American donor memorial was the neoclassical Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Morgan, it is largely assumed, considered the library his personal (and public) memorial and wanted it built to last. "The most notable fact about its structure is that the marble blocks that form its supporting walls are, like ancient Greek temples, precision cut to fit together without mortar. . . . As one of his biographers wrote: 'It would put him one up on the Medicis, the Sforzas, the builders of Mont Saint Michel and Chartres, and far beyond the local grandees with their Fifth Avenue palaces all bonded with concrete.'"<sup>17</sup>\*

\* Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 93.

17. Lütticken, 29.

18. Callum G. Brown, *Up-helly-aa: Custom, Culture and Community in Shetland* (Manchester: Mandolin, 1998), 49–50.

19. *Ibid.*, 50.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, 33.

Numerous publications cite these and other easily digestible forms of heritage, such as pageants, memorials, another sailing of the *Mayflower*, reconstructed castles, etc., as a bourgeois political confection that began in nineteenth-century Europe and America. During this time most bourgeois cultural production was centered on creating an antiquated hodgepodge of appropriated styles of cooking, music, literature, art, and architecture. By integrating elements from these historic periods (for example neo-Gothic architecture) into the contemporary, the culture was appreciated to gain significance and therefore a greater purpose.<sup>17</sup> Forming in tandem with this amalgamation of historical cultures was the budding Industrial Revolution. An inevitable side effect of this migration from a rural base to the city was the slow rot of agrarian rights and calendar customs such as gleaning and harvest home. To supplant the loss, the new working class invented customary rights and holidays as a form of quasi-social protest reinstating their value and relationship to the ruling class. An example of this was the (short-lived) weekly holiday St. Monday.<sup>18</sup>

To curb the "rough" invented and imported culture of the working classes, the bourgeoisie and the Victorian state in England began a culling of local holidays and traditional activities through legislation. "Culture and pastimes were judged according to their usefulness in educational, spiritual, and economic terms."<sup>19</sup> This enforced legislation effectively felled the maypole, and in its place have grown "national public holidays" such as (in the United States) Thanksgiving, Independence Day, and Memorial Day, each of which serves to strengthen an increasingly commercialized narrative of a country's history and identity. In nineteenth-century Britain, this veiled form of social control created histories not only for social classes, but also for entire countries such as Scotland, where the invention of "Highlandism," complete with kilts and myths of savage warriors, created a national character now perpetuated by Hollywood and a rabid tourist industry.<sup>20</sup>

From this tug-of-war between Victorian sensibilities, curbing the "rough" customs of the working classes and a defiance by these same classes to retain the identity formed by their customs, a number of reenactments began whose origins remain contested between the opposing factions. An example is the annual tradition of Up-helly-aa. This reenactment/festival, steeped in Norse folklore, takes place in the Shetland islands of Scotland. Shetland is nearly equidistant from Norway and Scotland and is thought to have been a Viking stronghold in medieval times. The term Up-helly-aa is most likely derived from "ouphalliday," a Lowland Scot term for the first day after the termination of the Christmas holidays. What is interesting about such an etymology is that the seat of Scottish authority, Edinburgh, is in the lowlands—therefore giving more credence to the theory that the festival was conceived and planted, as it were, from a central governmental source.<sup>21</sup> However, the people of Shetland, whose financial security is often dependent on the transient sources of fishing and oil drilling, have since embraced the festival and immersed themselves in a symbolism of Norse mythology actively cultivated and reenacted with increasing splendor as a calendar custom with few Christian influences.

Lerwick, meaning “mud bay” in Norse, is the island capital of Shetland and the historical seat of Up-helly-aa. Since the 1870s the last Tuesday night of January in this, the most northerly and isolated community of the British Isles, has been lit with torches carried by hundreds of bearded Shetland men parading through the streets dressed as Vikings. Reminiscent of the working class’s insolence toward governing authority, each Up-helly-aa begins with the reading of “The Bill.” Posted in the town square of Lerwick, the public bill is a derogatory summation of the town leaders’ deeds throughout the past year. This town-crier-esque tradition is written annually by a “joke committee” but signed by the character of Guizer Jarl (pronounced “yarl”) with the catchphrase “We axe for what we want.”<sup>22</sup> Guizer Jarl is the annually elected leader of Up-helly-aa. He is adorned in a lavish Viking costume that includes a helmet of plumed wings, a long axe, and a shield, weighty gear handed down from generations of previous Jarls. Only resident men born in Shetland or who have lived in the community for fifteen years may fill the role of the Guizer Jarl.<sup>23</sup> The other male residents of Shetland participating in the festival are charged with the annual responsibility of creating their own costumes; the outfits may not be worn more than once. This highly theatrical and atavistic ode to a doubtful Norwegian past culminates in the parading of the Vikings to a thirty-foot galley “moored” in the park outside Lerwick town hall. Every year a new longboat is magnificently carved and ornately painted, complete with oars and hand-stitched sails, in sacrificial preparation. Led by the commands of Guizer Jarl, the hundreds of masquerading Vikings hurl their flaming torches into the hull and the pyre is set. The night, however, is far from over, as the Vikings, followed by a steadily growing tourist trade, set off singing songs of Norse gods and legend.<sup>24</sup>



**Moai of Easter Island (photograph by Federico Quilodran © AP/Empics)**

I once wrote or read (I can’t remember which) that in 1994 a German firm specializing in geological archaeology set out to prove that the monolithic Easter Island figures known as *moai* came from neighboring Peru. To demonstrate this claim the Germans constructed a Kon-Tiki-esque raft using materials and methods available only to ancient Polynesian craftsmen and ferried a three-ton concrete *moai* they had sculpted from the Peruvian mainland to Easter Island. However, due to choppy surf the Germans lost their load mid-journey. Undaunted, they attempted to dredge the sunken freight with the aid of a mini-sub. They discovered, buried in the silt of the ocean floor, their concrete sculpture among sixty-three ancient sunken *moai* figures.

22. *Ibid.*, 2.

23. This rule was made to exclude the transient oil-rig and fishery workers in Shetland. The Guizer Jarl is elected at the beginning of the year. He enacts the role throughout the year in preparation for the following January’s Up-helly-aa. Holders of the office incur considerable and growing costs, and it is not uncommon for the Jarl’s family to take out extra loans or mortgages to offset the costs.

24. Brown, 6–32.





**Assorted V-mail letters (photograph © 2tone Creative Photography, provided by Mike Pumphrey, Fourth Infantry Division Military Police Platoon)**

Mail calls were a welcome reprieve for soldiers serving overseas during World War II. These letters (known as V-mail) were one of the only regular forms of personal communication between the front and civilian life back home; consequently these letters were often read and censored by the government for security purposes before being delivered to their rightful owners. Despite this intrusion the soldiers usually relished the mail, which could range from outstanding bills to love letters and care packages.

To faithfully re-create the personal experiences of those serving in WWII, reenactors often meticulously create their own V-mail and send it to themselves. These fictional letters are then distributed and opened at mail calls during reenactment weekends.

A poignant use of this reenactment device to bridge the potential emotional gap between a reenactment and the real world was highlighted in Jenny Thompson's book *War Games*. She describes how a father encouraged his children to write him V-mail. They responded with emotional letters that included messages like "I miss you, Daddy," and "I love you." These messages, which were rarely articulated at home, brought the father to tears.

One of the many curious facts about Up-helly-aa is that what most likely originated as a top-down, authoritarian pageant has now been inverted and subsequently "ruled" by an entire (male) population, which from it derives if not invents a localized "memory" of heritage. This transformation and eventual usurpation of power by the masses is a gradual form of political revolution aided by a pageantry of symbols.

Soviet reenactments of the 1917 October Revolution shared a similar and evolving political purpose. The episode of the revolution that was predominantly staged was the "Storming of the Winter Palace" in Petrograd. Conceived as a popular festival for the masses, the theatrical production directed by Nikolai Evreinov in 1920 was designed so that the communist audience of one hundred thousand (a quarter of the city's population) huddled directly in the Palace Square in the center of the action.<sup>25</sup> The purpose of this dissolve between viewer and participant was to inspire a sense of historic achievement directly in the viewers, so that through their proximity, both physically and politically, they became, in the words of Robespierre, "a spectacle unto themselves." This propagandistic reenactment was coordinated through the work of eight thousand soldiers and artists, including Kazimir Malevich and Vsevolod Meyerhold. The production and the Sergei Eisenstein film that followed, *October* (1927), were each conceived in artistic rather than documentary terms. Evreinov closed his scenario for the reenactment with the observation that "theater was never meant to serve as the minute-taker of history." To celebrate and spread the Soviet state's appeal, the "Storming of the Winter Palace" became an annual reenactment, increasingly twisted and tweaked by the government to shift the roots of its history as necessary to complement current communist agendas.

The tendency to construct history to legitimize one's actions is typified by the current US administration, which has styled many domestic and foreign policies with a presumptive air of the same alleged grandeur and supreme domination of previous historic conquests. One is reminded of George W. Bush's own likening of the "war on terror" to a "crusade."<sup>26</sup> Or, as one anonymous advisor to the current Bush administration revealed, "We're an empire now," and anyone who doesn't agree is "in what we call the reality-based community. We are history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do."<sup>27</sup> According to this view, members of the "reality-based community," reenactors among them, are powerless to alter the past. Knowing this, I doubt the majority of reenactors—hobbyists and artists—perform to relive history. Rather, their private and public reenactments fulfill many of the needs that go unmet in the lives of our "reality-based community," providing us with a (however fleeting) sense of agency and purpose predominantly associated with "history's actors."<sup>28</sup>

"Reformations of recollection," like the annually amended "Storming of the Winter Palace," are practiced by most state-sponsored reenactments and memorials to provoke new collective memories of a country's history, culture, or both.<sup>29</sup> As the historian Mike Wallace has observed, "Memories fade and cultures step in and take over."<sup>30</sup> However, the overlap of the two, in the no-man's-land between where memories end and histories (or cultures) begin, has caused the art critic Jonathan Jones to lament, "We don't have a critical grasp of history; instead we have replaced it with a cavalcade of collective memory. . . . Memory has become the most sacred and at the same time the most empty value in our culture."<sup>31</sup> Jones was writing about the omnipresent sense of guilt imposed by maudlin yet modern memorials, such as the one sculpted by Brian Catling and commissioned by the Tower of London in 2006, which commemorates ten people executed on that site hundreds of years ago. However, Jones just as easily could have been responding to the recent pardoning of Grace Sherwood three hundred years after she became Virginia's only convicted witch. An annual reenactment of Sherwood's trial and subsequent dunking has kept her memory alive and was credited with prompting the pardon. At the time of this writing, it is not certain whether reenactments of her fate will continue now that the pardon has been granted.

An attainable "critical grasp of history" is part of the myth of history itself. Even its origins as outlined by Herodotus, the Greek father of Western history (as recognized by Cicero), purposefully intertwined history with the vagaries of memory. He made it significantly clear in the initial pages of *The Histories* that the words and deeds of man should not be forgotten. Herodotus asserted that recording the deeds was not enough. He implored that these deeds be remembered, for our memories are what inspire us to action and shape our future. Herodotus's hope was to pen a live document—a text that would activate rather than pacify, and through this activation the deeds of the past would alter the future. Reenactment recognizes and "performs" this forked tongue of history, at once implying authorial insertion through personal experience and conversely reinstating its determined objectivity with empirical information (or facts).

The braiding of memory, history, and performance has inspired a number of exhibitions in the past five years, including: *A Little Bit of History Repeated* at Kunst-Werke Berlin (2001), *A Short History of Performance* at the Whitechapel (2002, ongoing), *Experience, Memory, Reenactment* at the Piet Zwart Institute (2004), *Life, Once More* at Witte de With (2005), *Once More . . . With Feeling* at Reg Vardy Gallery (2005); *Ahistoric Occasion: Artists Making History* at Mass MOCA (2006), *Now Again the Past: Rewind, Replay, Resound* at Carnegie Art Center (2006), and *Playback\_ Simulated Realities* at Edith Russ House (2006). Inevitably, each of these exhibitions sang from the same hymnal and catered to roughly the same roster of contemporary artists. However, the artist's intention in each artwork is strikingly unique and often deeply personal. These differences help to unbalance and challenge notions of the past, history, simulation, reproduction, and repetition that have been used to curatorially bind these works.<sup>32</sup>



**Protests in Paris following a demonstration, 2006 (photograph by Francois Mori, © AP/Empics)**

In 2006 French president Jacques Chirac was battling a law that required a standardized portrayal of its colonial past in school textbooks. The purpose of this groomed history is to emphasize the "positive role" France played in its North African colonies. In the wake of racial violence, stirred largely by youths of African origin in France demanding equal rights, Chirac countered that "It is not up to the law to write history." He instead called on the National Assembly to recommend a text that would "unite and appease minds."

25. This and the following references to the pageant are from Richard Taylor, *October: Contents*, available online at [www.bfi.org.uk/booksvideo/books/catalogue/text.php?bookid=349](http://www.bfi.org.uk/booksvideo/books/catalogue/text.php?bookid=349).

26. Lütticken, 59.

27. Quoted in Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, 44.

28. See Thompson, 278.

29. Taylor (see n. 25).

30. Mike Wallace, quoted in Spencer R. Crew and James E. Sims, "Locating Authenticity: Fragments of a Dialogue," in *Exhibiting Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine (Washington: Smithsonian, 1991), 162.

31. Jonathan Jones, "Raising the Dead," *The Guardian*, G2, July 27, 2006, 18.

32. This diversity of artistic intentions and approaches to reenactment is also what dissociates them from being considered as a formal movement or genre in contemporary art. Steve Rushton, in "Tweedledum and Tweedledee Resolved to Have a Battle," his preface to the catalogue *Experience, Memory, Reenactment*, cites Martine Kopsa's article "Reenactment as a New Phenomenon," published in *Metropolis M*, with making this claim. In the three-hundredth issue of *Art Monthly* magazine, the writer Adam E. Mendelsohn in his essay "Be Here Now" labels numerous works under a nondistinct umbrella of "reenactment art."



**Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, 1965 performance at Carnegie Recital Hall, New York (artwork © Yoko Ono; photograph provided by Lenono Photo Archive)**

In 1965 Yoko Ono performed *Cut Piece* at Carnegie Hall as a largely unknown artist in the Fluxus movement. Looking back at the Maysles Brothers' documentary film of the performance and the degrading way in which many of the men viciously engaged in the piece, she subsequently said that she performed the work with anger in her heart. Her feelings toward *Cut Piece* changed, however, and in a 2003 reenactment of the performance, staged at the Ranelagh Theatre in Paris, she altered the work to signify a gesture of world peace in the aftermath of 9/11. Each of the two hundred audience members was invited onstage to cut a piece from Ono's clothes no larger than a postcard and mail it to a friend as a show of peace. The element of public offering introduced by this new version of *Cut Piece* not only allowed the artist's intention to change, further developing the work, it stretched to allow contemporary historical events to alter its meaning for both the artist and its audience-participants.

An artist often cited in these exhibitions and their respective catalogues is Rod Dickinson. His influential work in the genre of reenactment includes the construction of an imagined nineteenth-century torture contraption (*The Air Loom: A Human Influencing Machine*, 2002); submitting an audience of over one hundred-fifty people to a barrage of the same high-decibel noises (including Nancy Sinatra's "These Boots Are Made for Walking") used in 1993 by the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team to assault David Koresh and his fellow Branch Davidians (*Nocturne: The Waco Reenactment*, 2004); and a reenactment of Jim Jones's final sermon in Jonestown, Guyana (*The Jonestown Reenactment*, 2002). Each of these works reflects a sense of the power and tragedy of the historical events to his audience. His 2002 reenactment of Stanley Milgram's obedience experiments (1960–63) exemplifies this trait. Milgram's research, in the shadow of the Nuremberg trials, where Nazi defendants often pleaded they were only following orders, was designed to test whether or not civilians would torture innocent people for the benefit of science. All of the roles in Dickinson's *The Milgram Reenactment* (including the assistants who administered electric shocks and who were the guinea pigs in the original Milgram experiment) were performed by actors in strict adherence to the experiment's transcripts. In this sense, Dickinson was not reenacting the experiment's thesis; he was instead performing a flattened image, in real time, of Milgram's findings.

More often than not, Dickinson has chosen to reenact historical incidents that, in their day, were saturated with press and media coverage. By selecting such incidents, Dickinson insures that the layers of mediatization surrounding the original event undercut his audience's conceptual experience of the contemporary reenactment. Through the reenactment of mediated events in staged, live performance, Dickinson's intention is to "defer and displace" historical incidents. These reenactments might then shift the status of the original and cause reflection of the mediatization processes that were used to construct and form the event.<sup>33</sup>

The connection that Dickinson's work makes between mediatized events and the reenactment of these events was extended by Marina Abramović's 2005 performance series *Seven Easy Pieces*.<sup>34</sup> In this series, hosted by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York over seven consecutive nights, Abramović reenacted five seminal performances from the 1960s and 1970s that she never witnessed, although they proved extremely influential to her artistic practice.<sup>35</sup> She performed the works, such as Valie Export's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) and Vito Acconci's *Seedbed* (1972), by relying on oral history, eyewitness accounts, and the ubiquitous grainy black-and-white images that have come to signify them in art history. Further complicating the fidelity of these reenactments was the standardized length of seven hours (5:00 PM to midnight) that Abramović imposed on each of the reenactments, regardless of the length of the original performance.

33. Dickinson (see n. 16).

34. *Seven Easy Pieces* was scheduled in conjunction with Performa 05, a festival of performance art in New York City curated by RoseLee

Since the 1980s Abramović has often reperformed or initiated reconstructions of her own works. In the summer of 2005 she invited the stage director Michael Laub to shuffle and edit her concentrated compilation of performance works entitled *The Biography*. The resultant multimedia performance, *Biography Remix*, rearranges the lineage of Abramović's oeuvre, edits political content, and introduces cross-generational references by inviting Juriaan Löwensteyn (the son of her previous collaborator Ulay) to reenact works in the place of his father.

*Seven Easy Pieces* continues in a vein similar to *Biography Remix*, challenging and reassigning the authorial agency of the (re)performed works. Additionally, Abramović has taken steps to potentially eclipse the works she reenacted in *Seven Easy Pieces* by meticulously documenting each of her performances. By not "repeating the mistakes of the 1970s," characterized as a lack of adequate documentation, Abramović has spawned (with the help of the famed documentary director Babette Mangolte and her crew) slick color films that could potentially step in the place of the original works.<sup>36</sup>

The close, almost cannibalistic relationship between live art and mediated reproduction is ever present in *Seven Easy Pieces*. This binary is also the subject of Philip Auslander's theoretical study *Liveness*, in which the author claims that mediation and liveness are mutually dependent.<sup>37</sup> Their dependency, Auslander argues, was caused by the invention of recording that, in turn, begot the concept of a live event. Auslander also suggests that the "apparatus of reproduction and its attendant phenomenology are inscribed within our experience of the live."<sup>38</sup> This phenomenon, it can be argued, is what causes witnesses of horrific events to comment that "it was just like seeing it in the movies." The impression is echoed by the critic Johanna Burton, who likened *Seven Easy Pieces* to watching "live images."<sup>39</sup> Important for a discussion of *Seven Easy Pieces*, *Liveness* bucks against many of the theories in Peggy Phelan's essay "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction," ideas that have been used to conceptually unpack Abramović's series of reenactments. Phelan maintains that "To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. . . . Performance is the attempt to value that which is nonreproductive, nonmetaphorical."<sup>40</sup> Through Abramović's determined reliance on images to choreograph the reenactments and her meticulous efforts to record the performances so that they become images (a fact emphasized by the replaying of the previous nights' reenactments on flat-screen monitors behind the stage of *Seven Easy Pieces*), this cumulative work increasingly rejected Phelan's theories and echoed many of Auslander's assertions.

Although I tend to champion *Seven Easy Pieces* for the probing interpretations it has initiated into furthering the innovative use of reenactment in contemporary art, this appraisal seems out of step with Abramović's own intentions for the performances. In response to Aaron Moulton's question regarding how her fragmented understanding of the works she intended to reenact might affect her performance, she replied, "My version will be exactly as the piece was, but as a very long duration piece."<sup>41</sup> The words from Alan Bennett's play *History Boys* do more to further a nuanced interpretation of reenactment: "History nowadays is not a matter of conviction. It's a performance."



**Guagua crucifixion, 2003 (photograph by Mullit Marquez © AP/Empics)**

Since 1946 zealous Roman Catholic Filipinos have been crucifying themselves as atonement for their sins during the holy week of Easter in a bloody imitation of the death of Jesus Christ. In 2005 eighteen volunteers participated in one communal crucifixion at the town center of Guagua (120 miles north of Manila). This reenactment begins with a parade through the streets by those about to be crucified. They are then flogged with bamboo whips, as Jesus allegedly was, and finally nailed to crosses. The Guagua crucifixions are one of the largest annual tourist attractions in the Philippines. No one has, as yet, died from these reenactments.

Goldberg. One of Goldberg's stated aims was "to bring history into the live."

35. The other two works comprising the seven of the title were Abramović's own works.

36. The films from *Seven Easy Pieces* were exhibited at Kunsthalle Fridericianum in May 2006 with an accompanying symposium, "How to Perform: Reenactment and Documentation in Performance Art"; the subtitle suggests that Abramović's performances could be interpreted as either or both.

37. Auslander, 51 (see n. 10).

38. Auslander, quoted in Alina Hoyne, "Reenactment: 'Live Art' and Mediatization" (December 7, 2005), available online at the New Media-Curating Discussion List, [www.crumbweb.org](http://www.crumbweb.org).

39. Johanna Burton, "Repeat Performance," *Artforum* (January 2006), 55–56.

40. Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction," in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146–52.

41. Aaron Moulton, "Marina Abramović, Re: Performance," *Flash Art* 38, no. 244 (October 2005): 89.



**Peter Richards, *Live, Live Art Histories*, 2004, pinhole photograph of live collaborative action, duration 6 min., approx. 13 ft. 8 in. x 7 ft. 4 in. (420 x 220 cm), Cornerhouse, Manchester, United Kingdom (artwork © Peter Richards)**

In 2004, the artist Peter Richards created *Live, Live Art Histories*, a work that ingeniously illustrated a relationship between documentation and the performative act. Exploiting the fact that both pinhole cameras and performance art are “time-based media,” Richards created a roomsize camera obscura. The audience of the “performance” was invited inside the camera, and its actions and impromptu performances were emblazoned on a wallsize sheet of photographic paper. This documentation of the human performance (compounded by the performativity of the gradual photographic-development process) was then installed in the gallery.

*Seven Easy Pieces*' loose translation of eyewitness memory and historical documentation raises important questions about the possibilities for and acceptance of reenactments that intentionally differ from their sources. This possibility for difference encourages reenactment, regardless of its context, to sample from various models of constructing history. Rather than a repetitive struggle of maintaining appearances, reenactment is a creative act, and no definition of the genre should omit this element of artistic inspiration. Reenactments and their means such as V-mail, CREB enhancers, and the aborted truce of the Discovery Expedition are for better or for worse slowly eroding the need for accountability to an original source and relying instead on the efficacy of the performance or the reproduction of that performance as an emotional and interpretive link between the past and our imperfect present. The myriad ways the past can be maneuvered to create the possibility for new experiences and histories to emerge also carry the potential to inspire as-yet-unthought-of reenactments of these new histories. I envision this situation like the young Orson Welles in *The Lady from Shanghai* standing in the fun-house hall of mirrors and seeing his reflection repeat infinitely in front and in back of himself. In 1991 the critic Stuart Morgan wrote an essay entitled “Homage to the Half-Truth.” Throughout the writing of the present essay I have been reminded of Morgan's admiration for the critic William Empson's first book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, in which Empson returns again and again to the same Shakespeare sonnet—each time with a different interpretation, “like a conjuror pulling rabbits out of a hat.”<sup>42</sup> Empson's seemingly limitless study attempted to provoke an unfixed correlation to a central text. When Empson was shown, after the book was published, that he had misquoted the sonnet and therefore created interpretations that Shakespeare never intended, he merely wrote a footnote in the second edition calling attention to the fact and made no further change to his text: at once disregarding the rhetoric of authenticity and championing the autonomy of interpretation.

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42. Stuart Morgan, “Homage to the Half-Truth,” in *What the Butler Saw*, ed. Ian Hunt (London: Durian, 1996), 234.