

## History Will Repeat Itself

### Strategies of Re-enactment in Contemporary (Media) Art and Performance

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Is there repetition or is there insistence.  
I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition.  
And really how can there be.  
(Gertrude Stein, “Portraits and Repetition”,  
*Lectures in America*, pp. 166–169)

A little more than a century ago, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud wrote that hypnosis makes it possible for a patient to fulfil “one of the most fervent wishes of humankind”, namely, “to experience something twice”.<sup>1</sup> The main character in Tom McCarthy’s novel *Remainder* (2005)<sup>2</sup> fulfils precisely this wish — not through hypnosis, but through ‘re-enactments’. The novel’s protagonist is disabled after an accident but is very wealthy as he received a lot of money as compensation. He has banal scenes from his own life, and later also spectacular events that were hyped by the media, re-enacted in public spaces and in apartment blocks bought specifically for this purpose. Through these re-enactments, in which the protagonist is always the main actor, he hopes to recapture a particular, but diffuse, feeling again that he has only felt very vaguely since his accident. The re-enactments, which are staged with an absurd amount of work and an enormous number of helpers, allow the protagonist to experience the repeated situation in full consciousness (of his own role), and at the same time to observe events from the centre yet from a distance.

### Historical Re-enactment as a Practice of Popular Culture

In general, a so-called re-enactment is a historically correct re-creation of socially relevant events, such as battles (for example, the Battle of Hastings or the Battle of Gettysburg).<sup>3</sup> It is the “best possible, detailed repetition of how an event occurred, historical or modern; where possible, it is staged at the location where the original event took place, and under the same conditions as when it occurred.”<sup>4</sup> Criminology, for example, uses re-enactments to reconstruct a crime. Re-enactments are often part of experimental archaeology<sup>5</sup> when testing working techniques of the past through experiments (for example, Thor Heyerdahl’s *Kon-Tiki* expedition in 1947). In numerous countries, many very different re-enactment groups exist in which there are people who do it for a hobby, but also professionals who devote themselves to specific subjects, epochs, or events.

For our particular enquiry here, both the parallels and the differences to similar practices are of interest. For example, re-enactments are very different to pop-cultural practices such as

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<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, Über den psychischen Mechanismus hysterischer Phänomene, in: *Gesammelte Werke in achtzehn Bänden mit einem Nachtragsband. Nachtragsband*. Frankfurt a.M. 1987, p. 193, cited in: Sylvia Sasse, *Gift im Ohr. Zur Philosophie des Beichtens und Gestehens in der russischen Literatur*, habilitation thesis, Freie Universität Berlin 2006, in press.

<sup>2</sup> In this catalogue, an excerpt from Tom McCarthy’s novel *Remainder* (Chapter 18) is published in German for the first time, with kind permission by Alessandro Gallenzi.

<sup>3</sup> This definition is taken from German Wikipedia, <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reenactment>, 11.1.2007

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Experimentelle\\_Archäologie](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Experimentelle_Archäologie), 30.3.2007

‘living history’ and ‘live action role-playing’. Living history,<sup>6</sup> for example, does not take a concrete, historical event, but rather seeks to re-create the life style and realities of life in past epochs (for example, the late Middle Ages, the late fifteenth century, the Napoleonic Wars, or the American Civil War). And live action role-playing<sup>7</sup> is role-playing games in which the actors also physically play their character. In contrast to re-enactments and living history, which both refer to historical events, live action role-playing is entirely *fictional*.<sup>8</sup> What all three forms — re-enactment, living history, and live action role-playing — have in common, is that they allow access to history, or histories, through immersion, personification, and empathy in a way that history books cannot.

### Re-enactment as an Artistic Strategy

In recent years, the strategy of re-enactment is increasingly found in contemporary art, especially media art and performance. Historical re-enactments, such as the ones mentioned above, are about imagining oneself away into another time and have nothing (or little) to do with the present, such as playing a totally different role that has nothing (or little) to do with our own reality (for example, as a Viking or a daughter of a medieval lord of a castle). Artistic re-enactments, however, do exactly the opposite. The difference to pop-cultural re-enactments such as the re-creation of historic battles, for example, is that artistic re-enactments are not performative re-staging of historic situations and events that occurred a long time ago; events (often traumatic ones) are re-enacted that are viewed as very important for the present. Here the reference to the past is not history for history’s sake; it is about *the relevance of what happened in the past for the here and now*. Thus one can say that artistic re-enactments are not an affirmative confirmation of the past; rather, they are *questionings of the present* through reaching back to historical events that have etched themselves indelibly into the collective memory. “To be sure”, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben*, “we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it (...). That is, we need it for life and action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and action, or merely for glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act.”<sup>9</sup>

In contemporary (media) art of recent years there are an increasing number of artistic re-enactments, that is, the re-staging of historical situations and events. One reason for this rather uncanny desire for performative repetition seems to reside in the fact that experience of the world, whether historical or contemporary, is based less and less on direct observation and today operates almost exclusively via media; that is, through images or other kinds of recordings of (historical) events.<sup>10</sup> History appears to be present at all times and in all places; at the same time, however, this permanent availability of media representation renders all forms of authenticity increasingly remote. In the current situation of intensified spectacles, there is a growing feeling of insecurity about what the images actually mean. In this situation artistic re-enactments do not ask the naïve question about what really happened outside of the

<sup>6</sup> [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Living\\_History](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Living_History), 11.1.2007

<sup>7</sup> <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liverollenspiel>, 11.1.2007

<sup>8</sup> War simulations also belong in this category. These can be computer simulations, but also, for example, simulations of the US-led war in Iraq with German actors in the Bavarian woods; see “Sie lernen zu töten”, Interview by Jan Pfaff with the director Teresina Moscattiello, in: *Die Zeit*, 22 February 2007, p. 66. The Austrian artist Oliver Ressler treats a similar subject in his video *The Fittest Survive*, 2006, 23:00 min.

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (in: *Unzeitgemäße Betrachtungen*), in: Friedrich Nietzsche: *Werke in vier Bänden*, vol. III, ed. Gerhard Stenzel, Salzburg 1985, p. 29. English translation: [www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/history.htm?200719](http://www.geocities.com/thenietzschechannel/history.htm?200719)

<sup>10</sup> This does not mean that communicating history has never utilised media: the decisive difference today, however, is the total and permanent availability of images, where any image at any given time can become it’s own simulacrum.

history represented in the media — the ‘authenticity’ beyond the images — instead, they ask what the images we see might mean concretely to us, if we were to experience these situations personally. In this way the artistic re-enactment confronts the general feeling of insecurity about the meaning of images by using a paradoxical approach: through erasing distance to the images and at the same time distancing itself from the images.

## A Proposed Typology

Before I go into more detail about the paradox of at once erasing and creating distance, I would first like to give a rough overview of the broad range of artistic re-enactments by citing a few examples.

### Drama, Audience, and Witnesses

In 2002, the *Milgram Re-enactment* was shown for the first time at the CCA in Glasgow. It is a re-enactment of one of the twentieth century’s most controversial experiments in social psychology.

In 1961, Stanley Milgram, a 27-year-old assistant professor at Yale University, conducted the so-called Milgram Experiment, which aimed to analyse the crimes of National Socialism from a social-psychological perspective. The experiment tested the obedience of individuals towards people in authority and also the willingness of ordinary people to follow orders, even when the orders contradict their conscience. The *Milgram Re-enactment* (2002) by the British artist Rod Dickinson, is an exact reconstruction of parts of the original experiment. In detailed reconstructions of the original rooms, actors played the protocols of the experiments as though they were a stage play. The audience watched the four-hour performance through one-way glass windows, which were set into the walls. In this way the spectators became actual witnesses of a (repeated) historical event.

Although this was just a dramatic performance, how it would run was predetermined, and the result was known to most of the audience, its effect was nevertheless special: The spectators’ position as ‘observers’ made an experience possible for them that differed greatly from what is experienced when looking at photographs or reading the write-up of the experiment. By becoming witnesses of an (obviously mediated because repeated) event, which is normally only accessible as an event communicated by media, the observers were able to ask themselves: “How far would I have gone, how many shocks would I have administered? You then question the degree to which you resist authority in your daily life. Should you feel reassured that, in the original experiment, 60% of the people were prepared to kill their subject if instructed to do so? (...) are you sure you would resist authority?”<sup>11</sup>

This is reminiscent of the observer’s position that Hannah Arendt describes in her lectures on Immanuel Kant.<sup>12</sup> The observer is, in Linda Zerilli’s words, someone “who — through using their imagination — can reflect upon the whole thing in a disinterested way; this means in a way that is not merely free of private interest, but free of interest in general, including any measure of usefulness.”<sup>13</sup> The ability to reflect upon the whole in a disinterested fashion — without any kind of (personal) interest — was for Kant the proof of a “moral disposition” in humankind, namely, the ability to sympathise. *Über die Französische Revolution* (1798) Kant

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<sup>11</sup> Vivienne Gaskin, Subjects in Search of an Author, in: *The Milgram Re-enactment*, ed. Steve Rushton, Maastricht 2003, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Vom Leben des Geistes*, Munich, Zurich 1998; Hannah Arendt, *Das Urteilen*, Munich 1998

<sup>13</sup> Linda M.G. Zerilli, “Wir fühlen unsere Freiheit”. Einbildungskraft und Urteil im Denken Hannah Arendts, in: *eipcp, transversal*, 06/2004, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0605/zerilli/de>

wrote in far away Königsberg; he himself was a disinterested observer of the French Revolution: “The revolution which we have seen taking place in our own times in a nation of gifted people may succeed, or it may fail. It may be so filled with misery and atrocities that no right-thinking man would ever decide to make the same experiment again at such a price, even if he could hope to carry it out successfully at the second attempt. But I maintain that this revolution has aroused in the hearts and desires of all spectators who are not themselves caught up in it a sympathy which borders almost on enthusiasm, although the very utterance of this sympathy was fraught with danger. It cannot therefore have been caused by anything other than a moral disposition within the human race.”<sup>14</sup>

### Witnessing as *Participation*

Like Rod Dickinson, Jeremy Deller returns in his sole (but very famous) re-enactment project *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001) to the place of the trauma. By making people who had actually been there *observers* who replay their personal memories, this project goes much further than Dickinson’s aim in the *Milgram Re-enactment* to make the past into a ‘stage-play’.<sup>15</sup> The recollections of the participants, which are replayed out in *The Battle of Orgreave*, are significantly different to what was reported in the mass media about the original event.

Supported by Artangel, a London-based agency for art in public spaces, in 2001 Jeremy Deller staged a re-enactment of an episode that took place during the British miners’ strike of 1984–1985, and by so doing so “created a poignant perspective between personal and political histories.”<sup>16</sup> The event, which Deller selected for the re-enactment, was a “violent and largely misconstrued clash between mounted police officers and striking miners. Significant to this re-enactment”, Robert Blackson continues, “is the fact that Deller, in large, relied on memories from both miners and police officers to recreate the battle scene rather than the copious quantities of biased and misinformed newspaper articles that initially reported the story. By allowing personal memory to direct the course of the re-enactment rather than the evidence provided by historical newspaper accounts, Deller’s work *The Battle of Orgreave* and the Mike Figgis film that documented the performance were effectively righting old wrongs.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, specific to this project is the *emancipatory role* that Deller’s re-enactment played in the village communities involved. On this, another quotation from Robert Blackson: “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 towards the police force (...) but also for crippling the economy of Britain by refusing to work. (...) 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 re-enactment, the performance provided languishing mining communities with a way for their actions to act outside of the historical script that was determined for them by the government and the media. Thus the artwork ‘... became a part of (the strike’s) own history, an epilogue to the experience.’ (Tom Morton).”<sup>18</sup> Adam Mendelsohn describes *The Battle of Orgreave* as “cathartic, interactive theatre”, “in which the

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<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (1798), cited in; Eberhard Barth, Afterword to: *Was ist Aufklärung? Thesen und Definitionen*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1974, p. 76. English translation: Immanuel Kant, *The Contest of Faculties*, in Hans Reiss, ed., *Kant: Political Writings*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 182–183. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press; <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/564/>

<sup>15</sup> Adam E. Mendelsohn, *Be Here Now*, in: *Art Monthly* 300, 10/2006, p. 13

<sup>16</sup> Robert Blackson: *Once more ... with feeling: Re-enactment in contemporary art and culture*, in: *Art Journal* New York: College Art Association, April 2007, in press.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Blackson, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

participants were given a deeper insight into what took place through their participation in the re-enactment.”<sup>19</sup>

## The Second Storming of the Winter Palace

In addition to critical re-enactments, which have the goal to instruct and inform or emancipate (like those of Jeremy Deller and Rod Dickinson), there are equally fascinating examples of propagandistic re-enactments that are used specifically to create identification with ideological objectives. This is “not so much about recalling the past”, as Steve Rushton accurately pointed out, “but more about *restructuring the past for the needs of (a contemporary) audience*”.<sup>20</sup> Probably most famous example in this connection is the re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace, the “biggest mass spectacle of all time”:<sup>21</sup> in 1920, on the third anniversary of the October Revolution in Petrograd, at least six thousand people took part.

This Proletkult mass spectacle was staged by Nikolai Evreinov (1879–1953). The director’s aim was not exact repetition (the original event in 1917 was not really spectacular), but to create an interpretation with the means of the theatre: for example, the depiction of the bourgeoisie and the provisional government on the ‘white stage’ was very satirical. The audience of around 100,000 people, which at the time was around one quarter of Petrograd’s population, were not just spectators but represented the revolutionary masses. The purpose of the spectacle in general, according to Anatoly Lunacharsky, who was People’s Commissar for Enlightenment at the time, was to promote and enhance the awareness of the revolutionary masses: “In order to acquire a sense of self the masses must outwardly manifest themselves, and this is possible only when, in Robespierre’s words, they become a spectacle unto themselves.”<sup>22</sup>

“Festivals like this”, wrote Richard Taylor in 2002, “were designed to create a sense of identification between the audience and the event re-enacted through the spectacle itself and the act of collective memory that it both embodied and provoked.”<sup>23</sup> The images that we associate today with the 1917 Russian Revolution are not images of the ‘real’ event (neither photographs nor film footage exist), they are usually from the film *October* (1927) by the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, which was made to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. As only few photographs existed (one can be seen in this exhibition) of the 1920 re-enactment, Eisenstein repeated it seven years later for his film.

This example illustrates how much we refer to history through media images, and also that history itself is a construct — not in the sense that the media image is a simulation or a fake (as in the example just described) — but in the sense that certain images very quickly become stereotypical place markers of history.

## An Uncanny Return

The photograph series *Positives* (begun in 2003) by Zbigniew Libera is exactly that — positive. At first glance, we think we are looking at the famous, Pulitzer Prize-winning press

<sup>19</sup> Adam E. Mendelsohn, op. cit., p. 15. This also describes how the film *La Commune* (1999) by the British director Peter Watkins functions.

<sup>20</sup> Steve Rushton, Tweedledum and Tweedledee resolved to have a battle (Preface one), in: *Experience, Memory, Re-enactment*, Rotterdam/Frankfurt a.M. 2005, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Katerina Clark, *Petersburg. Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press 1996, p. 122.

<sup>22</sup> Anatoly Lunacharsky, cited in Richard Taylor, *October*, London: British Film Institute 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Richard Taylor, op. cit., citation at <http://www.bfi.org.uk/booksvideo/books/catalogue/text.php?bookid=349>.

photo that Nick Ut took during the Vietnam War. It shows a screaming and naked Vietnamese girl fleeing from her destroyed and napalmed village and running towards the photographer. This photo, which in the 1970s played a significant role in the development of the international protest movements against the Vietnam War, has become a twentieth-century icon. However, if we take a closer look at Zbigniew Libera's photograph, our immediate, initial recognition becomes increasingly irritated: not a single element of the photograph is horrible, all is pretty and positive. The Vietnamese girl is actually a young European woman, elated and running towards the photographer. The people in the background are not American soldiers; they are harmless tourists, who have just been parachuting. The title of the picture, which has obviously been taken at a beach, is *Nepal* (2003). A further photograph from this series is called *Inhabitants* and shows concentration camp prisoners standing behind the barbed wire of the camp's fence. Here, too, one recognises the original immediately. In this case as well, Libera's version of the image is deeply disturbing: The *inhabitants* are smiling amiably at the observer. What we see here is a *highly uncanny return to the place of trauma*. What first sight appears to be familiar and horrific dissolves the next moment into separate, positive elements.

Another disturbing return to the place of trauma is found in Omer Fast's video installation *Spielberg's List* (2003). In both videos we see shots of the concentration camp in Plaszow — first the ruins of the real concentration camp, then the ruins of the recreated Plaszow concentration camp that was built for Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List*, which are falling into disrepair directly next to it. A direct analogy to the images are the interviews, which Fast conducted with extras who were in the original film: They talk about their experiences in Plaszow concentration camp; however, it remains unclear whether their reminiscences are of the shooting of *Schindler's List*, or of genuine experiences during World War II. "Here again the past folds into the present, as our memory of Auschwitz is mediated by our memories of the film and from the reports of the individuals who appeared in it."<sup>24</sup> For the viewer of *Spielberg's List*, it is very difficult to distinguish between real and fictional eye-witness accounts. Fast's project does not aim to relativise or question authentic reports about the Holocaust. Rather, he raises questions about a very pressing and complex theme: When the last eye-witnesses of the Holocaust have gone, who can tell us about what happened, how will our relationship to this part of our history change? Will something change in this relationship when, aside from documentaries and history books, the Holocaust is only recounted in feature films like *Schindler's List*?

### Look-alikes and Doubles

Now for my last two examples, *The Eternal Frame* (1975) by T.R. Uthco and Ant Farm and *Auditions for a Revolution* (2006) by Irina Botea. Both projects pursue a radical deconstruction of the 'historic event' through meticulously precise reconstruction of media images. These projects do not attempt to uncover what 'really' occurred; instead, they are devoted to the exact reconstruction of existing television images. As they try to copy exactly all traces of the original media qualities (colour, camera settings, image and sound quality), one can speak here of repeats, which, similar to Pierre Ménard's *Quixote*<sup>25</sup> carry the consciousness of mediation through media as an idea within themselves. They are images of the event and at the same time meta-comments about their pure mediality.

*The Eternal Frame* documents a performance of the video and performance groups Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, which was a re-enactment of the assassination of John F. Kennedy. The

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<sup>24</sup> Steve Rushton, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, Pierre Menard, Autor des Quijote, in: *Fiktionen. Erzählungen 1939–1944*, Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer 1992.

performance took place on Dealey Plaza, the place where Kennedy was shot in an open car in 1963. The performance of 1975 was not only a live re-creation of the assassination of the American president, it was also a simulation of the amateur video, which the hobby filmmaker Abraham Zapruder filmed on November 22<sup>nd</sup> in 1963 and which came to be known as the Zapruder film. “The re-creation dissects representation,” writes Patricia Mellencamp, “moving from the grainy film image imprinted in our memory as Greek tragedy, through the copy of the actors’ preparations, rehearsals, and performance, to a model—the videotape. Thus it shifts from film to television without a Real, except for the Zapruder film of the assassination which it takes on its own terms (it does not incorporate the point of view of the assassin, nor is it framed by the commentary and presence of network news reporters). The ‘bad’ copy matches the ‘bad’ original which is only an image — an indelible one. *That historical, silent image — along with the spectatorial mechanisms of disavowal or suspension of disbelief (reception) — is the mystery, not who killed Kennedy and how, the usual concerns brought to bear on the Zapruder footage.*”<sup>26</sup>

### **Incidentally, the Revolution Will Be Televised<sup>27</sup>**

In *Auditions for a Revolution* (2006) the Romanian artist Irina Botea also analyses an event that was almost exclusively broadcast and disseminated via television.<sup>28</sup> In Chicago, December 2005, Botea invited drama students to “audition for a revolution”. She had the young Americans replay the images of the first revolution to be broadcast on television: the Romanian revolution of 1989. The difficulties that arose because of actors speaking the dialogues in Romanian, a language they did not speak a word of, are an impressive metaphor for the difficulties of reading history.

Similar to Daniela Comani’s *It was me. Diary 1900–1999*, Botea’s *Auditions for a Revolution* can be understood as an attempt to re-insert herself into the endless sequences of images and events that comprise history; as an attempt to re-live a specific historic situation which is only indirectly accessible to us, or conveyed only by media images, in order to develop a feeling of empathy for the voluntary or involuntary protagonists of history.

In addition to the paradigmatically introduced works mentioned above, the exhibition *History Will Repeat Itself* presents further artists and features a total of 23 artworks. Heike Gallmeier (*War & Peace Show*, 2004) and Robert Longo (*Seeing the Elephant*, 2002), for example, engage with the historical re-enactment as pop-cultural practice. Collier Schorr photographed youths in their home town of Schwäbisch Gmünd in SS and Wehrmacht uniforms, creating a highly irritating simultaneity of history and the present. Pierre Huyghe, Frédéric Moser and Philippe Schwinger, and Guy Ben-Ner ask how much ‘theatrical content’ there is in reality: To what extent is that which we perceive as reality already structured and determined by certain role clichés and fiction? How do certain models from films determine our behaviour in reality, and what happens when this behaviour then serves as a model for a Hollywood film (as in Pierre Huyghe’s *The Third Memory*, 1999)? Frédéric Moser and Philippe Schwinger take the protagonists of the Clinton-Lewinsky affair and place them in the setting of a magnificently illuminated peep-show stage, thus emphasising the artificiality of the media’s

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<sup>26</sup> Patricia Mellencamp, Video Politics: Guerrilla TV, Ant Farm, Eternal Frame (Originally published in *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* X.2, Spring/Summer 1988: pp. 78–100), <http://www.bavc.org/preservation/dvd/resources/extras/mellencamp2.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> “Incidentally the revolution will be televised / With one head for business and another for good looks / Until they started arriving with their rubber aprons and their butcher’s hooks”, Elvis Costello, Invasion Hit Parade, in: *Mighty Like a Rose* (1991). This is actually one of the many variations of Gil Scott-Heron’s line “The revolution will not be televised”, from his 1970 album *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf.: *Von der Bürokratie zur Telekratie. Rumänien im Fernsehen*, ed. Keiko Sei, Merve vol. 57, Berlin 1990.

intimate chamber-drama genre (*Unexpected Rules*, 2004). In *Moby Dick* (2000), Guy Ben-Ner goes on a hunt for the white whale with his small daughter in their kitchen at home. C-Level brings in a totally different aspect with *Waco Resurrection* (2003): What does it mean, in a first-person shooter game, to take the role of the sect leader David Koresh, whose followers were besieged for ninety days in 1993 by the FBI on a ranch in Waco and all shot dead in the end? And what does it mean to wear a helmet in the form of Koresh's head as an interface in the game? And then there is the outrageous and almost unbearable story of Józef Tarnawa, which Artur Zmijewski tells in his very own way (*80064*, 2004). Evil Knievel and Walter Benjamin are two very singular characters, who both extend and enrich the project in their own special ways. The lecture by Walter Benjamin (*Mondrian '63–'96*, 1987) and the artwork by Kerry Tribe (*Here & Elsewhere*, 2002) should be understood as two very different meta-commentaries on the theme of the exhibition.

### **From Representation to Embodiment**

Let us return to the paradox of the re-enactment: erasure and simultaneous creation of distance are two key mechanisms in the contemporary practice of artistic re-enactments, which often co-exist in one and the same artwork. Initially it is about the elimination of safe distance. The viewers or the readers become immediate *witnesses* of a (repeated historical) event, which unfolds in front of their eyes, or they become *participants* in an action, in which they actively participate.<sup>29</sup> Re-enactments eliminate the distance, construed as safe, between the historical event represented by the media and the present, between performers and audience. The re-enactment transforms representation into embodiment, distanced indirect involvement into — sometimes unpleasant — direct involvement, and through this turns the passive reader or observer into an active witness or participant. The witnesses or participants replace their existing collective knowledge of the past with direct and often also physical (living, in person) experience of history. Artworks that utilise strategies of re-enactments attempt to (re-)create a connection with history, which is increasingly based on media images. The short-circuiting of the present with the past makes it possible to experience the past in the present — actually, an impossible view of history. This is an attempt to feel sympathy for the subjects of bygone events by imagining oneself in their position. By eliminating the safe distance between abstract knowledge and personal experience, between then and now, between the others and oneself, re-enactments make personal experience of abstract history possible.

### **Creating Distance: Re-enactment as the Uncanny of the Spectacle**

Artistic re-enactments, however, do not stop at the elimination of distance, at the partial or total identification with the historical subjects (like many pop-cultural re-enactments). The second, not less important step is the creation of distance. In re-enactments one finds, as Steve Rushton puts it, a “complex and in-depth reflection of the *mediation of memory* — which can be even described as *the core subject of re-enactment as an art form*. This tendency asks how memory is an entity which is continuously being restructured — not only by filmmakers and re-enactors but also by us personally, as mediating and mediated subjects.”<sup>30</sup> Rod Dickinson said about the role of re-enactment in his works: “I have very consciously focused on events

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<sup>29</sup> “Some of the work made in recent years may (...) be seen as an attenuation of the anxiety displayed by historical re-enactment groups — the desire to feed the hunger for some connection with the past and to provide an embodied continuity with the people of the past, and the belief, in an increasingly mediatized world, that this is objectively possible.” Steve Rushton, op. cit., p. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Steve Rushton, op. cit., p. 10

that were heavily mediated in their original form. My hope with these pieces is that the audience's direct experience of the live performance is constantly undercut by their knowledge of the layers of mediation that are at play in both the original historical event and my double of it. I hope with pieces such as these that rather than making 'history' 'real' (often the declared aim of re-enactments found in other cultural spaces, such as TV or hobbyist recreations) history is actually experienced by the audience as deferred and displaced, but through the apparently immediate and direct lens of live performance."<sup>31</sup> It is in this sense that Dickinson writes about *The Eternal Frame* (1975), which is for him a key work in the context of re-enactments: "From its beginning *The Eternal Frame* situates JFK's death as a real death and as an image death, critiquing the powerful hold that the images as history have on our memory and emotions. (...) *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>32</sup>

Sigmund Freud defined the uncanny<sup>33</sup> as something that is actually known but has been repressed, from whence it returns. This definition maps surprisingly well onto the practice of the re-enactment. *If it happened only once it's as if it never happened*<sup>34</sup> — re-enactments repeat moments of history, whose importance has not been fully understood. Similar to the mechanical recording techniques (slow motion in film, enlargements in photography) described by Walter Benjamin, re-enactments make the Optical Unconscious visible.<sup>35</sup> Re-enactments are artistic interrogations of media images, which insist on the reality of the images but at the same time draw attention to how much the collective memory relies on media.

*History Will Repeat Itself*: The exhibition's title should not be understood in any way as a pessimistic statement (because history obviously won't repeat itself), but as an exhortation to look at history more than once. As Gertrude Stein remarked in 1934 in the quotation that introduces this chapter: Even repetition is not about repetition per se, but about insistence.

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<sup>31</sup> Rod Dickinson, 8.12.2005, *Crumb* mailinglist.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, my emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> In *The Uncanny* Freud does not equate the uncanny with the unfamiliar (Sigmund Freud: *Das Unheimliche*. In: *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 12, pp. 229–268, here p. 231) but asks under what conditions the familiar, the well known, can become uncanny and frightening (p. 231). In Freud's view this is when something of great similarity is repeated (p. 249), the unintended (p. 249) and insistent return (p. 250), and the element of unintended repetition that renders what is otherwise harmless uncanny (p. 250); "...for this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression" (p. 254) and which now returns. English citation: <http://people.emich.edu/acoykenda/uncanny2.htm>

<sup>34</sup> Solo show, Artur Zmijewski in the Kunsthalle Basel, 2005.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Kleine Geschichte der Photographie*, in: W. Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Frankfurt a.M. 1977, p. 50.