



**JORNE
VRIENS**

Renaissance of repetition by Jorne Vriens

On a sunny day in 1975 Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader sailed out of the Cape Cod harbor, determined to cross the Atlantic Ocean in three months' time to arrive in Falmouth, England. He did so in a Guppy 13, with its length of only 3.7 meters, one of the smallest sailing boats ever produced. He christened his boat 'Ocean Wave', after the naval song 'A life on the Ocean Wave', a daring name for such a small vessel facing the ocean's swell. Those who are not familiar with the proceedings of this adventure, I think can guess the risks involved. Indeed, the journey came to a tragic end: after three weeks, radio contact was lost. Nine months later, the Ocean Wave was found upside down near the western shore of Ireland. The faith of the 35-year-old artist has been told many times, only adding to the status of this radical yet enigmatic conceptual artist. However, next to nothing is left of his journey. The wreck was stolen, never to be recovered. The only photo that remains was taken by his wife Mary Sue Ader-Andersen upon departure, in it we see Ader in his Guppy steering towards the horizon. The image leaves almost everything to the imagination. Until 2010, when artist Ahmet Ögüt made a replica of the 'Ocean Wave'. Wisely not to be used for a second attempt at crossing the ocean, he instead invited the public to step into the boat on the Amsterdam waterfront, showing just how unstable this tiny boat already was in calm water - let alone the Atlantic Ocean. There's a video of someone who steers the replica backwards, as if it is moving back into time, we may say it symbolizes Ögüt's practice of bringing history back to life as an homage to a radical artist. Not only by re-telling a story, but also by making it possible to re-live an experience, albeit under much safer circumstances. In other words, it was only by way of re-enactment that this famous event in recent Dutch art history to become tangible.

Re-enactment is perhaps best known as a restaging of historical events, where enthusiasts try their best to make others believe they travelled by way of a time machine to step into our present and to show the audience what life is like in their respective times. Historians point out how

this is a way to make history come to life and increase our understanding of the past. According to them, it has a certain educational value. And surely, participants and onlookers are highly involved in the scene that unfolds in front of their eyes. Often, no expenses are spared when it comes to perfecting them, minutely recreating for example; roman battle dresses, antique rifles or even tanks. Indeed, this is the place to remark that it is mostly military history that is re-enacted. The photos of Peter de Krom give a fascinating insight into the subculture of re-enactors by showing us how they behave when they are not acting out a historic battle but simply walk around in their costumes. De Krom shot his photos at the world's largest re-enactment festival, the 'War and Peace Revival' in South East England. In what must be one of the unsettling photo's of the series, De Krom captured a smiling Nazi-impersonator who poses next to an eerily convincing (and obviously not smiling) Hitler. The photograph shows how re-enactment might be an excuse to dress up as one of history's evil actors. Although the Revival states peace as one of its lofty ideals, it is mostly war that is shown during the spectacular battle scenes. It is impossible to get a better understanding of history by only considering past violence, as historians hasten to add while praising the educational merits of such events. But it remains hard to imagine a restaging of far less spectacular, yet pivotal events like the week long Yalta Conference, that happened at the end of the World War II. De Krom's photographs bring up the question of what might be learned from history through re-enactment.

Making the past useful in the present is what re-enactment is about. Culture is brimming with references to the past; operating as a network of inspiration and influence reaching through time. Perhaps most visibly so in the arts. During the Renaissance, for example, artists and intellectuals did not merely want to rival their immediate forebears, but sought to compete with sculptors, architects and philosophers who lived in Antiquity. Harking back to previous times, was fertile ground for an artistic revolt. Even breaking with tradition, to make something radically new, is still a way of evaluating the past. A contemporary example might be Hendrik Kerstens' photographs. His portraits possess the same dignity with which Dutch Golden Age painters eternalized their sitters. Upon a closer look, however, what seemed to be a white cap on a woman's head, turns out



fig. 001
Humberto Tan, from
Ruud Gullit as Jacob
Rühle.

to be a plastic bag. This is a way of working with history on the artists' own terms; poking fun at tradition, something which is only possible when you understand the aesthetics of the Old Masters. The exhibition *Dutch Masters Revisited* (*Hollandse Meesters Her-zien*, held at OSCAM in 2018) has a different aim: instead of showing the usual wealthy white burghers and merchants of the 17th and 18th centuries, curator Jörgen Tjon A Fong asked contemporary Dutch citizens to pose as people of color from that period in time. Ruud Gullit was photographed by Humberto Tan, posing as Jacob Rühle, who just like Gullit had both a white and black parent. The photo is successful in showing a figure brimming with pride and thereby showing historic minorities whose stories often remain untold. But not all is said in this image. The photo fails to address if this pride is justified, as Rühle himself partook in the slave trade. In all aspects Gullit makes for a superior role model. This example marks how important the process of selection is for re-enactment to succeed in remembering a specific past. Without a given context, an event is easily misunderstood.

Whilst artists have always used tradition to make new work, re-enactment as an artistic strategy is a recent phenomenon. In the nineties it started at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, where in July 1997, Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard restaged a concert by The Smiths, the band that had split exactly ten years earlier. Besides hiring a tribute band (The Still Ills), the duo aimed to recreate the band's final concert as minutely as possible, by studying footage and speaking with eyewitnesses. To provide a new audience with access to an illustrious event in the history of music, the performance was completely scripted. Their approach to re-enactment proved to be the beginning of a series of re-enactments at the ICA, and soon other galleries and museums followed. So much so that another ten years after the re-enactment of The Smiths' final concert, Pil and Galia Kollektiv wrote about a 'spate of artists' re-enactments of historical events and performances.¹ The music critic Simon Reynolds took this even further in his 2012 book *Retromania* - with the ominous subtitle 'pop culture's addiction to its own past' - when he stated: the future is dead if artists keep looking backward. He refers specifically to band reunions, where they play their golden oldies and sell out stadiums, providing the

¹ Kollektiv, G.,
Kollektiv, P+.,
RETRO/NECRO:
From Beyond the
Grave of the Politics
of Re-Enactment.
Art Papers, 31 (6)
2007. pp. 44-51

band-members with leisurely retirement funds, whilst taking up space intended for new artists. According to Reynolds, re-enactment can instill a vague form of nostalgia, which prevents a culture from moving on.

Learning from the revival of concerts in the nineties, re-enactment as an artistic strategy in the performing arts really took off in 2001, when the artist Jeremy Deller partially re-enacted the Battle of Orgreave, a clash between striking miners and the police that took place 17 years prior. In the documentary made during the re-enactment, Deller said that he remembered watching the original event when he was a teenager and realized "there was something seriously wrong with this country if this was what we had to do to people." In the 80s the strike at Orgreave was emblematic for the ways in which the Thatcher government wanted to crack down on labour unions. In the documentary it becomes clear how this protest marked the beginning of a political era in which the diminishing of workers' rights (and salaries) became standard practice. Recently Deller was asked if nostalgia was a motivation for his re-enactment of the 1984 event. "No," he replied, "nostalgia suggests enjoyment and happiness."² Deller added a political dimension to the reasons for employing re-enactment; where earlier strategies mainly relied on amusement (concerts and historical battles) and a better historical understanding (once again, battles), he proved that re-enacting does not necessarily equate to a glorification of history, by pointing out how the past gives birth to problems of the present.

² Allen, J., *Coming Twice: Why Do Artists Feel Compelled To Reenact Past Events?* The Quietus.com

fig. 004 > p. 32

A need for processing a less than glorious or even traumatic past can be served by re-enactment. In collaboration with journalist Arnold van Bruggen, photographer Anoek Steketee documented Indonesian re-enactments of the Dutch colonial period, in a recent phenomenon called *plesiran tempo doeloe* which can be translated as 'playing with the past'. Through Steketee's lens we see, for instance, Indonesian actors playing out the scene of an Indonesian independence fighter getting arrested by Dutch soldiers. In another photo the notorious captain Raymond Westerling, sent to Indonesia to counter the Indonesian War of Independence, is played by an Indonesian native. At first sight, taking the role of a former colonial oppressor as a pastime, seems to be as unethical as posing as Hitler. Isn't the playing of



fig. 002
Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001. Police officers pursuing miners through the village. Courtesy of The Artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow. Photo: Parisah Taghizadeh



fig. 003
Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001. Participating former miners and their sons on the day of the performance. Courtesy of The Artist and The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow. Photo: Parisah Taghizadeh

fig. 004
Anoek Steketee,
Arrest of an
Indonesian
independence
fighter,
captured by
Raymond
Westerling, enacted
by Rubbin



'bad' historical actors an endorsement of the values that fueled historic oppression and violence? Processing history usually requires making moral judgments. Perhaps Steketee's photos provoke this response in a Dutch audience, where much remains to be discussed when it comes to the role of Dutch government in its former colony. A re-enactment can start this discussion, perhaps even more so that historical documents, because it does not offer a clear-cut interpretation. While written history places events in their context and invites us to understand them through a historical lens, re-staging such events leaves the interpretation and contextualization to the audience, leaving room for reflection based on contemporary morals.

The term re-enactment has a therapeutic connotation when referring to personal histories, whereby the past might be relived and is - hopefully - properly processed to become a memory that ceases to haunt you. Reliving is the theme of Vincent Boy Kars' documentary *Drama Girl* in which the lead actor is acting out scenes from her own life. It proved to be 'a wild ride' for Leyla de Muynck who in an interview explained how hard it was to be confronted with her own handling of the past - especially when it came to memories she deemed to be processed already.³ During the film Kars becomes increasingly demanding, which makes De Muynck visibly uncomfortable. The viewer sees these scenes not as therapeutic but as simply painful, pointing to the fact that the struggles experienced by De Muynck show how reliving past events is not necessarily cathartic. A more fruitful processing of the past might only be achieved by carefully selecting which events are fit for re-enactment.

Not all second comings provide us with fresh insights. Karl Marx famously wrote that when big historical events or characters appear twice, they do so first as a tragedy and second as a farce. The same might apply to the re-creation of artworks: generally speaking it does not require a lot of creativity to copy an original work, so we simply call such a work 'fake'. Indeed, repetition in many instances is just farcical. That's why Cheryl Bernstein's essay *The Fake as More* is so tantalizing. She argues that the exact copies of Frank Stella's paintings were superior to the originals, whilst reviewing the work of the copyist/painter in question: Hank Herron. In

³ Kleijer, P.
Regisseur Vincent
Boy Kars en
Hoofdrolspeler Leyla
De Muynck Over
De Verwarrende
Wereld in Drama
Girl De Volkskrant,
16 januari 2020

doing so, Bernstein claims that the search for artistic originality is overvalued, whilst the majority of visual culture relies on a repetition of motifs and clichés anyway. Some might say that verbs which start with 're' (remake, repeat) are a reduction of the original, but Bernstein points out that this is just part of the magical belief in the original as something special. Funnily enough, despite the truths contained in *The Fake as More* both Bernstein and Herron never existed but are inventions by art historian Carol Duncan. In a brilliant way artist Caz Egelie proved how invented figures can become very real, when he staged a performance with the title *Call me Hank Herron* in which he copied a Stella painting. Showing how copying is not the same as producing a fake or staging a farce - Egelie demonstrated how interpretation and rethinking are made possible through re-enactment.

fig. 005 > p. 35

During the previous decade, museums have presented many so-called 'remembrance exhibitions'. These take the inspiration or are near replicas of historical exhibitions that are still deemed relevant due to their influence on exhibition making and our understanding of the artworks presented in the original show. Examples are: the Van Abbemuseum, which presented *Zomeropstelling 1983* (organized in 2010), the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam with both *Op losse schroeven* (first held in 1969, again in 2011) and *Bewogen Beweging* (1961, 2016), finally the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag (currently: Kunstmuseum) hosted *Mondriaan en het kubisme - Parijs 1912-1914* in 2014, which recreated an exhibition Mondriaan himself organized at the Walrecht Gallery a century ago. Art historians Linda Boersma and Patrick van Rossem understand this trend as part of the 'experience economy': previously only known amongst art historians, now any museum visitor might experience these landmark exhibitions - without the need to chew on academic texts!⁴

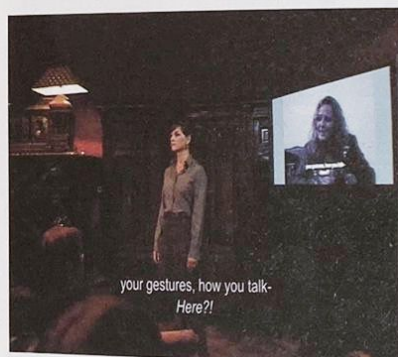
⁴ Boersma, L., Rossem, van, P., *Rewriting or Reaffirming the Canon? Critical Readings of Exhibition History* Stedelijk Studies #2 (2015)

There seems to be an ideal of democratization behind many re-enactments. One can see, and perhaps understand more of historical battles; be present at iconic concerts held before you were born; or time travel to a historical exhibition. The wish to make a singular event available to a larger audience can only partially succeed. Whilst restaging makes the original event available to a bigger audience than the fortunate few who

fig. 005
Caz Egelie, *Call me Hank Herron*, painting Arundel Castle by Hank Herron (1970)



fig. 006-008
Barbara Visser,
Lecture on Lecture
with Actress,
performance, video,
2004



witnessed its premiere, it is still likely you will miss the second staging too.

Besides the wish to reach a larger audience, most of the times re-enactments are also re-interpretations, as a search for meaning in that which lies outside direct experience. Simply because historical facts do not spring to life all on their own. Just as at re-enacted battles the waiting is usually left out in favor of actual fighting, so re-enactors don't have to wait wearily as their historic counterparts had to. Simply put: a story needs to be told. This poetic license is seen in the work of Mariken Wessels, she states that her research brings up the facts but it is her interpretation that provides history with the kiss of life. The use of imagination is demanded of the artist and surely of the public. The artwork exists in the mind, just as the past is a foreign country according to some. When it comes to the future, which is anything if not more unknown than the past, Pippilotta Yerna uses her imagination to make the unfamiliar tangible. In her work the future is made current by way of pre-enactment (fu-enactment as she likes to name it), by imagining her mothers death, who fortunately is still with us. She places herself in a long tradition that began with the Stoics in Ancient Rome, who meditated on the death of their beloved so as not to be too shocked when fate struck, and of the Romantics who put up faux tombstones engraved with the names of dear friends, as to make their very much being alive more precious. It's this affection for other times that enriches our present.

While writing this essay I read a short note on Barbara Visser's performance *Lecture on Lecture*, a re-enactment of a previous performance during the exhibition *Life, Once More* held in 2005 at Kunstinstituut Melly - then known as Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art. While both are surely very relevant to this subject here discussed, I simple missed them. Frustratingly enough, re-enacting seems to only increase the (canonical) status of a work or an exhibition, which proportionally increases the realization of missing out on something ephemeral, yet important. This shows how mass media, including photographs and films which are easily reproduced and available at will, remain second best in relation to attending the original event, or experiencing its re-enactment.

fig. 009-011 > p. 38-39

fig. 012-014 > p. 40-43

fig. 006-008 > p. 36

fig. 009
 Mariken Wessels,
 photo from the
 series *Snapshots of
 the Unknown* (I–VI),
 2020



fig. 010-011
 Mariken Wessels,
Model Cox III from
 the series *Arising
 from the Ground*.
 Ceramic sculpture.
 1160 x w 85 x h 15
 cm, 2018



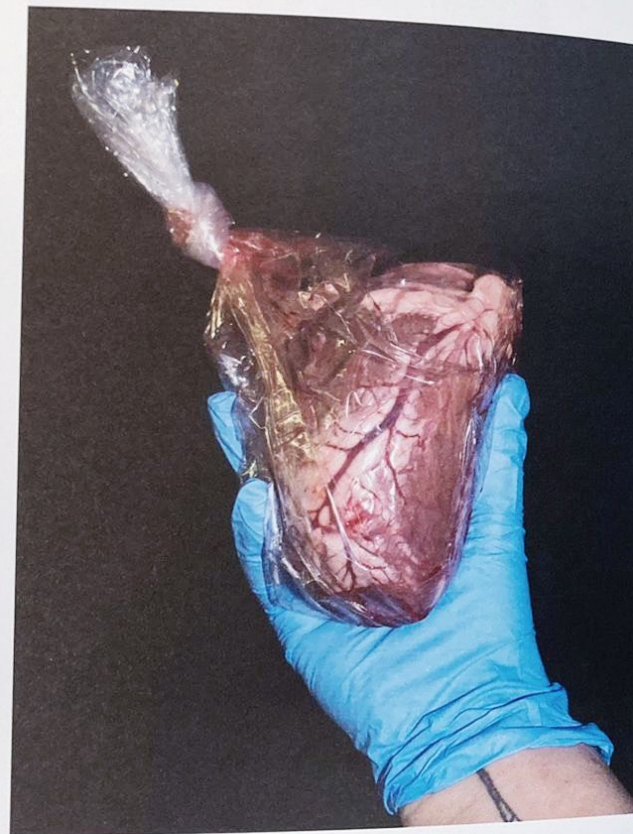


fig. 012
Pippilotta Yerna, *I would like to roll in her ashes, from She is the canary in the coalmine of a dying empire*, 2020



fig. 013
Pippilotta Yerna, *Fallen out of the window, from She is the canary in the coalmine of a dying empire*, 2020

fig. 014
Pippilotta Yerna,
*Sudden death in the
street, from She is
the canary in the
coalmine of a dying
empire*, 2020



Chapter opening image: Ahmet Ögüt, *Guppy 13 vs Ocean Wave: A Bas Jan Ader Experience*, 2010

Jorne Vriens is an art historian. Since graduating from Utrecht University he wrote exhibition reviews and musings on art in general. Until now, he has curated two exhibitions (in the Amsterdam City Theater and in the LTS incubator in Amsterdam-West in October 2018). He teaches Cultural Heritage Studies at the Reinwardt Academy.