

Twice into the River of History: Theoretical Concerns, Visions and Reflections on Contemporary Re-enactments

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Abstract

This paper takes re-enactment as a starting point for inquiry into the diverse strategies of historical revisiting in contemporary art exhibitions. Since the 1990s, many artists and curators have extensively explored and expanded this concept, creatively returning to the classics of art history, in particular works that leave little physical trace or visual evidence. They have sought to develop distinctive sensible interfaces that allow today's audiences the opportunity to immerse themselves in key exhibition events, and even social events, in which they have not been involved.

But is the reconstruction of historical scenes only based on the logic of an experience economy or spectacle shaping? Is the recurrence of important works and exhibitions only to make up for the regret of not being able to participate in history, that is, to relieve the original sin of “belatedness” that we cannot erase in any way, followed by the impulse of nostalgia? If not, what kind of conceptual changes in art-making and research are highlighted by the attention that re-enactment has received today? As a practical approach, what new aspects of theoretical issues does it reveal? Most importantly, in response to the more process-oriented, contingent, and dynamic aspects of modern and contemporary art history, does it really help us to construct a new "scene" for feeling and thinking? These are the crucial questions that we cannot avoid.

On the one hand, this paper will explore the various strategies that contemporary artists employ to revisit historical works and to sort out their potential theoretical frameworks. On the other hand, it will consider whether the revitalization and critical examination of archival documents through re-enactment can contribute to the study of exhibition history, or even an alternative approach to art history. On this basis, this paper attempts to argue that re-enactment should be seen as an art practice that looks to the past without being obsessed with it; it gazes into history but constantly questions the future, and makes art history a “living thing” that stimulates thought and action – a living art.