

Over the space of three hours one Friday evening in spring 2007, the Danish artist Lilibeth Cuenca staged 11 historical – some of them canonical – performance pieces in the gallery Kirkhoff in Copenhagen. The gallery was brimming with anticipation as we, the audience, waited for history to unfold. And it did. As if by magic, past became present as the artist moved corporally through history, inserting her body into performance art archives, books and other documentary records offering narratives, words, texts, images. One gallery wall sported a list of the titles of the original performance pieces which, during the course of the evening, would be transposed from lived to live, from past to present, from has been to right now. However, before any of us had time to absorb this information, we found ourselves roped into the game.

On entering the gallery, visitors were plied with blue cocktails (recalling the French artist Yves Klein's 1958 performance *The Void*), and those who so wished could have the artist sign somewhere on their body (recalling the Italian artist Piero Manzoni, who in his 1961 performance *Sculpture Viventi* signed a naked model and designated her as his artwork). The action then shifted to a small stage installed in the gallery, where the artist segued almost seamlessly through a series of iconic performance pieces, mostly from the 1960s and 70s. These included *Art Must Be Beautiful*, *Artist Must Be Beautiful*, originally performed in 1975 by the Yugoslav-born artist Marina Abramović, who combed her hair until the blood ran; *Cut Piece* by Yoko Ono from 1964, in which Ono invited the audience to come up on stage and cut off pieces of her clothing, and *The Artist's Kiss*, originally performed by the French artist Orlan in 1977, in which she sold kisses to an art fair audience in Paris. Lilibeth Cuenca closed the show with the 1962 performance *Simple* by the South Korean born artist Nam June Paik, where, following Paik, she poured a bucket of water over her head, thereby ending the dramaturgic sequence with a thorough rinse.

RE-ENACTMENT AS A CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC PHENOMENON

The performance that took place that evening fell into the burgeoning genre of re-enactment. Within the field of popular culture the term re-enactment designates certain large-scale re-stagings of epic wartime battles such as, for instance, the Battle of Gettysburg, which marked a seminal moment in the American Civil War. The original battle took place in 1863, but recent years have seen it re-enacted over a three-day period every July in the Gettysburg National Military Park, attracting thousands of amateur Civil War re-enactors and spectators, all playing their part in making history "come alive", as the organizers put it. A key feature of historical re-enactments, whether relating to the American Civil War, World War II or the Battle of Hastings, which is another popular event in the re-enactment industry, is the degree to which the re-enactors attempt to recreate the historical period in minute detail. Sameness is the goal, whether it relate to the material used for the soldiers' clothing or the length of their beards.

In the field of visual arts, on the other hand, re-enactment designates a specific kind of performance practice in which an artist restages a work by himself/herself or by others. Here repetition is most often used as a tool to create not sameness, but difference. As a cultural phenomenon, historical re-enactments go back to the 1960s¹, while in the visual art world, the phenomenon is of a much more recent date. The last few years in particular have witnessed a veritable boom in re-enactments. Notable examples include the legendary queen of performance art Marina Abramović's much hyped series of re-enactments *Seven Easy Pieces*, performed at the Guggenheim

TIME

What is the time of a re-enactment? The time it takes, obviously, which might be more or, in the case of Lilibeth Cuenca's work, less than the original performance. But also time understood as the time in which the re-enactment takes place, and the time that it re-enacts. Normally, in our culture at least, we structure time chronologically and linearly. Something happened in the past. The past is spatially situated before the present. What was then is *not* now. However, in the logic of re-enactment, time operates differently, so that what was then is *also* now. In a re-enactment, time is always at the same time. Time is twice present. Time is then *and* now. In consequence, a re-enactment places itself at odds with the nowness of the event, the manically charged presentness attributed to performance art, inasmuch as the historical moment – a moment in the past – is strangely brought to eruption in the present. In a re-enactment, what happens has already taken place. The event that occurs is always, already performed.

REFRAMING THE EVENT

Always, already performed. Repetition is one of the great temptations when writing about re-enactment as a genre, an artform, a mode of production. But repetition is also one of the lessons that we might learn from it – if anything is to be learned. I am thinking here of the way in which re-enactment as a genre might be said to dramatize the inherent citationality of any act. How it might point to the scripted quality of our everyday performances. Now if it does, then re-enactment is not just a genre, not just a mode of production within artistic practice, but embodies a more general principle that pertains to art as well as to life. As a general principle, re-enactment opens up towards a notion of change that is embedded in repetition. It opens up towards a notion of newness which recognizes its inherent pastness. By so doing, it invites us to rethink the notion of an event. It allows us to pose the question – my concluding question: What if the event is not this moment of sudden and radical newness, but rather the slow displacement of what we are all familiar with? In that case, I would call the event the moment of radical repetition.

¹ There are, however, earlier instances of re-enactment. As early as in 1913 a group of American Civil War veterans re-enacted a short segment of the Gettysburg Battle on the occasion of their fiftieth reunion. And in 1920 in Petrograd, a re-enactment of the Storming of the Winter Palace was performed to mark the third anniversary of the October Revolution, involving thousands of workers, soldiers and students.

² In conversation with the author, November 2007.

³ Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote", in: *Labyrinths*, London: Penguin Books, 1970, p. 65-66

⁴ Nicolas Bourriaud, *Postproduction*, New York: Lucas & Sternberg, 2002, p. 13

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 13

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12

⁷ Sven Lütticken, "An Arena in Which to Reenact", in: *Life Once More*, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2005, p. 40

⁸ As the critic Barbara Clausen has rightly remarked, an interest in performance cannot begin with the authentic experience, but has to be understood as an "ongoing process of an interdependent relationship between event, medialization, and reception." In: Barbara Clausen, "After the Act – The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art", in: *After the Act: The (Re)Presentation of Performance Art*, Vienna: Verlag Moderne Kunst, 2007, p. 7

⁹ Most notoriously as well as eloquently, this argument is stated by Peggy Phelan in her book *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, London & New York: Routledge, 1993.