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Visual Echoes:

Destabilising memories through Photographic Re-enactment

Prologue

Clare, a slightly overwhelmed first-year doctoral candidate, is about to present her research for only the second time since returning to her studies. This time, she thought it would be a good idea to perform her paper as a recital to highlight its performative focus. However, as she stands behind the lectern, staring out at the audience with her mouth rapidly drying from nerves, she starts to think maybe it wasn't such a good idea after all.

Clare spent most of the previous night re-reading, re-editing, and re-working her paper, desperately trying to shape her recent theoretical research into a concise twenty-minute presentation. Fearing she might run overtime, Clare delivers her presentation at an uncomfortably fast pace, with exaggerated pauses to gasp for air or quickly sip water. Although the audience can follow her, there is a palpable sense of unnecessary rushing. Some audience members squint and lean forward in their chairs, signalling their extra effort to keep up. However, these clues go unnoticed by Clare.

The play is set in an indistinct wood-panelled lecture theatre, which is slightly too warm and has a not unpleasant, doughnut-like smell. Clare is anxiously readjusting her standing position and trying not to forget to change the presentation slides. In front of her, the room is occupied by other academics. It is the first session on the second day of the symposium.

Act Two

CLARE: Photography inherently involves a fundamental process of reviving or resurrecting past memories or moments. My research delves into a more explicit form of reenactment through the performative return.

An embodied touching of the past, where prior knowledge is reinterpreted through our current selves and contexts. Both re-enactment and photography enable us to revisit and replay memories or events—re-enactment through its ability to create new performative recitations, and photography through its capacity to capture and monumentalize fleeting moments. However, neither medium achieves a perfect representation of the past. Instead, through their inherent inaccuracies and variations, they generate new iterations and revisions.

Both serve as visual echoes—not perfect repetitions, but rather distorted or destabilized returns. It’s as if they are shouting back at history from a new location and context, with a new perspective that impacts and reverberates through the revisualization being returned to us.

In this paper, I will explore how photographic artists combine re-enactment and photography to embrace the concept of destabilized returns. This approach involves resurrecting previous understandings that are entombed and fixed in the past and re-imagining them to generate new and alternative meanings. Performative return can provide opportunities to rewrite missing or dismissed interpretations of earlier events, proposing re-enactment as a means to challenge and destabilize fixed, dominant, and sometimes oppressive understandings of our pasts.

But first let me clarify what I mean by artistic re-enactment.

When I initially tell people my research interest is re-enactment, I think they have visions of me staggering around a muddy field, chasing after people dressed in historical costumes ...

Slight sounds of amusement from academics in the audience

...but this is not, unfortunately, what I am going to talk about. I am not interested in re-enactment as a literal re-presentation or performative repetition of a historical moment or memory, but rather in a more expanded understanding of how in re-enactments replaying, our understanding of the past is reshaped by our present.

Artistically, for instance, I've been employing this understanding of re-enactment by re-imagining classical paintings, sculptures, or religious iconography through performances in front of the camera. Initially, I considered these re-enactments to be iconoclastic revisions, aiming to smash and disfigure these restrictive symbols of western representational norms. I saw these disfigurements as the result of the combination of my non-normative queer body being used as the raw material, and my ineptitude in performance which stretched and misshaped past narratives, creating reformed parodies instead of new citation. These performative failures, or perhaps more just differences in my re-enactments, I posed as potential sources for new understanding. Now as I begin to reconfigure my use of re-enactment from purely artistic practice into artistic research, I am eager to explore re-enactment possible implications simultaneously within artistic gestures, philosophical concepts, and research methodologies. In my new role of doctoral researcher, within this half paper, half soliloquy, through textual analysis and situated reflections, artistic case studies I aim to explore the potential of re-enactments in performative returning to destabilize and reconfigure canonical understandings of the past.

In a previous paper I looked at the role of re-enactment in research, or research as a process of re-enactment, building on Barbara Bolt's Performative Paradigm, in which she argues the need to understand performativity within research in relation to its performative force and its capacity to '*effect "movement" in thought, word and deed in the individual and social sensorium*' (Bolt, 2016)

Bolt's new performative model redefines repetition in research. Instead of using replication to confirm uniformity, it uses it to uncover differences and drive new insights. This approach views past knowledge as flexible and open to reinterpretation from various perspectives.

In constructing the new paradigm, Bolt returns to Butler's comprehension of the role of citationality in performativity, stating...

'Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed by a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject.' (Butler, 1993, p.95)

For Butler, identity (in their application specifically gender identity) should be understood as a performance of all preceding performances. There is no authenticity, or truth within the performance; rather, it is merely an internalized citation or even parody of itself.

This lack of authenticity within performativity might be seen as undermining artistic value of re-enactment, as merely an act of mimicry. However, authenticity has never been something I actively pursued, as for me, as with Butler, there is 'no subject who precedes the repetition. Rather, through performance, "I" comes into being' (2016, p.135). This existence as a performance might be more overt for queer/crip people, when performance is a condition, many of us have existed in or even employed as a means of survival. This lack of authenticity is also felt whilst looking back at childhood photographs, I can see myself performing, or trying to pass or trying to be that passing that moment that isn't fixed and that isn't made authentic, it is through performance that we kept ourselves different. Both Butler and Bolt defines the transformative differences elicited by performativity as its reconstituting possibilities.

The *reconstituting* possibilities of re-enactment have been exploited by female-identifying, queer, crip, and Global Ethnic Majority photographic artists for its TARDIS-like time and place-traveling abilities.

Clare looks up from her paper at the audience.

That's...a ... umm... a Doctor Who reference...

Clare cough and re-focuses on her paper.

Notable photographic artists such as Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura, Samuel Fosso, Zanele Muholi, and Sunil Gupta have all engaged with re-enactment practices. They have each reimagined dominant and often oppressive histories from their situated positions through the syncopation of temporal planes, places, and people in their re-enactments.

What are the specific aspects of the re-enactment process that empower artists to generate new ways of understanding through the visual echoes it creates?

One aspect is re-enactment's ability to remix. In her 2020 book *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*, Legacy Russell proposes the re-enactment process as inherently remixing dominant understandings of the past. She offers remixing as a method to provoke more queer ways of knowing, acknowledging the original recording's reliance on hegemony. For people who identify as non-normative, the application of re-enactments can offer the capacity to reclaim, rearrange, repurpose, and rebirth new understandings of the original records. Re-enactment becomes, as Russell describes, an 'emancipatory enterprise, creating new "records" through radical re-imagining' (Russell, 2020, p.133). Through its remixing abilities, re-enactment becomes an act of self-determination.

However, it is not just remixing of temporal and spatial planes that give the process of artistic re-enactment its re-incarnating capabilities, artistic re-enactment also depends on the remixing of the live and still mediums of performance and photography.

Re-enactment combines the theatrical use of performance, pose, and gesture to represent the past, with photography being utilized to record it. The interanimation of performance and photography is at the core of the artistic use of the re-enactment process, or as performance scholar Rebecca Schneider identifies it, the 'inter(in)animation... of intermedia, of syncopated time, and of theatrical acts' (2011, p.7). Schneider's addition of the parenthesized '(in)' emphasizes that the two individual mediums, photography and theatre, are no longer distinguishable within the re-enactment process. Moreover, the individual roles attributed to them—the performance and the reproduction—are no longer relevant. The photograph does not merely act as a record of the performance; it is the re-enactment. As Schneider attests...

‘...for it is through the material support of the photograph that the re-enactment *takes place* as performance: the performance takes place *as* photograph, and in this sense might be considered redocumentation as much as re-enactment, troubling a distinction between the two’ (Schneider, 2011)

This entanglement of re-enactment and redocumentation, offers photographic artists the ability to create representation that oscillate in time. Through the inter(in)animation between theatre and photography the viewer its aware we are looking at a reference to the past, but past itself. To place a ‘re’ in front of documentation offers a troubling of traditional understanding of documentation practices, that the record can always be re-recorded or remixed or recorded over.

One photographer that embraces this inter(in)animation between redocumentation and re-enactment to utilising re-enactment for self-determination capabilities is Sunil Gupta.

Sunil Gupta's *New Pre-Raphaelites* series, created in 2008, represents his most overt use of re-enactment to date. Commissioned by Autograph Gallery, this series addresses issues surrounding Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Instituted by the British in 1861, Section 377 criminalized homosexuality, leading to the arbitrary arrest and exploitation of LGBTQ+ communities and individuals in India. This law remained in effect until it was overturned in 2018.

In this project, Gupta re-enacts paintings from the Pre-Raphaelite movement, which was founded by a group of English artists seeking to reject the mechanistic approach of Raphael. Instead, they emphasized naturalism, medievalism, and a return to the abundant detail and rich colours of early Renaissance art. In Gupta’s re-enactments, however, he replaces the original subjects—the white, heterosexual representations of idealized beauty—with real people from the LGBTQ+ community in India. These individuals, who were criminalized under Section 377, are now positioned within the context of classical art, challenging historical and contemporary notions of beauty and identity.

In Gupta's re-imagining, there is a doubling of re-enactment: the overt re-enactment of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, re-rendering the painting's focus on queer Indian bodies. These

very public representations of British cultural heritage hang on the walls of British institutions that grew from the greed and violence of British colonialism. But also, there is the re-enactment of intimate moments that take place in private spaces, or, when private spaces aren't available, in discreet places. This replaces the painting's mythological narratives with the very real, sticky, and sweaty pleasures of queer joy and freedom.

Through the double re-enactments, Gupta has created re-documentation of previous representations, reconfiguring them to include these previously criminalized of precious moments. Gupta's Pre-Raphaelites become transformative and subversive, post-colonial celebrations of the power of queer love and survival. In this series, Gupta negotiates the colonialist culture, not by aligning himself with or against its exclusionary works but rather by transforming the Pre-Raphaelite image for his own cultural purposes in a process José Esteban Muñoz calls disidentification. Muñoz elaborates on this concept in his book *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, where he explores how queer people of colour use disidentification to negotiate and resist the pressures of both dominant (heteronormative, white) culture and subcultural norms. This approach enables a more nuanced understanding of identity formation and cultural participation, highlighting the creative and resistant practices of those who are often marginalized. (Muñoz, 1999) Gupta's re-documentation in his New Pre-Raphaelites series creates a photographic re-staging and gives a stage to those previously criminalized, using iconic British imagery to remind us of the lingering impacts and lasting violations of British imperialism.

To bring this paper to a conclusion, it may be time to give this performance its final curtain call, though it could also be a new starting point. The use of prefixes has seemed to become an important linguistic element in this paper. The 're' in "re-enactment," the 're' in Butler's "reconstituting possibilities," the 're' in Schneider's "redocumentation," and the 'dis' in Muñoz's "disidentification" all play significant roles. The 're' signifies a return to something, while the 'dis' indicates a rejection or a 'dissing' of something.

In bringing these ideas together, I considered proposing an artistic re-enactment's unique role within Muñoz's disidentification as a possibility for 're-identification.' However, I quickly realized that this formulation of the term has already been used to name one of

the worst programs of colonialist rule. In reflection, I am beginning to consider that the artistic use of performative returning might not be about re-writing but perhaps about disavowing—more of a dis-enactment rather than a re-enactment.

Bibliography

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