Felix Gmelin

“I wanted to focus on painting as an action, as a political activity, as an act of resistance”


Felix Gmelin’s artistic oeuvre focuses on issues regarding acts of resistance, from an early series of paintings Art Vandals to video installations concerning the heritage of 1968s social and political agenda or paintings of suicide bombers. Felix Gmelin, originally a painter, works in video installations, often combining the two forms of expression for example in the series Film Stills, involving scenes from his father’s personal video archive. With subtle means, he shows the thin line between conviction and dogmatism and how the notion of revolution has become fashion in the commercial market. He asks how can one possibly make revolution today when Nike claims “Just do It”?

Felix Gmelin is perhaps best known for his two channel video installation Farbtest, Die Rothe Fahne II (2002), which received great attention at The Venice Biennale 50 2003. In Farbtest, Die Rothe Fahne II Gmelin recreates Gerd Conrad’s video from 1968, which films students running down the streets of West Berlin (amongst them Gmelin’s own father). Farbtest, Die Rothe Fahne II is a remake, with similar action, but cast with Gmelin’s own art students. When the artist restages the same act thirty years after the original, in another political setting, the revolutionary action is given a different consequence. Repetition as an act and a means of exposure is a method he also uses in Flatbed, The Blue Curtain (2003) when five young artists paint Picasso’s Guernica - in itself a repeated act by peace activists demonstrating against President George Bush’s invasion of Iraq. Gmelin makes the relationship between history and present clear and opens up a discussion about our contemporary political climate in relation to our heritage.

In Sound and Vision (2006) presented at the Berlin Biennale Of Mice and Men, the artist continues to examine the social and political issues of the 1960s and 70s, in particular focusing on sexual liberation. The double track of personal engagement and common political and social issues, characterizes Gmelin’s extensive work and gives them their multilayered meanings. Gmelin’s most recent work are two series of paintings of suicide bombers and remakes of painted portraits from the exhibition Entartete Kunst that took place in München, Germany in 1937.
There they are again, the blind ones, wandering in the woods. Some stretch their arms out in front of them and point their fingers towards a sun setting on the horizon and casting long shadows behind them. These children look as if they were pretending to be ghosts, not learning how to make their way unscathed through the maze of a forest. Here, they are hugging a tree trunk; there, a white bear with its paws clasped together in trained prayer. Now, they are huddling around tombstones – too inquisitive to be mourners, too young to be gardeners – and then making a miniature model with sticks and sand, as if the graveyard were a castle on the beach. They are not afraid of the dead, nor the dark.

Felix Gmelin's installation Tools and Grammar, 2007, centers upon the remarkable 1926 film Bei den Blinden (With the Blind), an educational documentary made with blind children living in an experimental pedagogical institute run within a Stuttgart monastery. The black-and-white film – an effort as anonymous as the children and the caretakers who appear in it – reaches the heights of voyeurism since the stars would never see their own performances on the silver screen. Along with this projection, Gmelin added close-up images of paintings – or perhaps sculptures – as well as three sound pieces: disembodied voices reading Diderot's reflections on the blind, Pudovkin's theses on film, and an excerpt from Godard's script from Pierrot Le Fou. As the too-close close-ups suggest, the senses are pushed to the extreme where perception meets imperceptibility.

In terms of collective perception – tools and grammar that could be used by both the blind and the sighted – the most remarkable passage in the film is the graveyard scene. The engravings on the tombstones – names, dates and places of birth, perhaps a phrase of eternal farewell – are among the few texts in public space that the blind can read as easily as the sighted, albeit with different methods. The blind run their fingers from the beginning to the end of a life, while the sighted cast a look of sad reverence. Beyond gravestones, there are the engravings on historical monuments and memorials, which offer yet another link with the dead, whether poets, statesmen or unknown soldiers. Both blind and sighted can read words representing things that they no longer hold in their hands.

That's where the universal legibility of public space ends, where the blind and the sighted part ways. As Hervé Guibert wrote, the blind ones remain immune to the orders that assail the sighted on countless signs: do not walk, do not touch, wait here, go there. The blind are equally indifferent to the visual charms of advertising. In their immunity, they resemble Justicia, whose bound eyes prevent her from seeing the scales of justice in her hand and the suspect beyond them. Yet as Guibert wryly noted, this full immunity always threatens to descend into the chaos of lawlessness: bad table manners, breaks in decorum, fatal accidents. Since immunity must always appear as purity, the blind become the object of intense hygienic rituals. Their hands, fingers and nails are regularly subjected to brushes, nail clippers and files. Using their hands as often as we use our eyes, the blind pick up the traces of what they have read, whether tree trunks, bears or tombstones. Of course, dirty fingers – unlike dirty spectacles – make no difference in legibility for haptic readers. This hygiene serves only the sighted, relieved to see lawlessness incarnated as cleanliness, as if the absence of dirt under the nails might bespeak innocent intentions.

Hygiene based on visuality would come to take on a much larger role in the Third Reich, which rose to power some years after the film was made in Stuttgart. Cinema, art and the law would prove to be perfect collaborators in a massive societal "cleansing," which began with euthanasia in hospitals and culminated in the death camps. The children in the film are likely to have perished in the wording of "Aktion T-4," the so-called mercy killings of the handicapped and the disabled, whom Hitler considered as "lives unworthy of living." Degenerate art - made visible, only to disappear - would follow a similar fate. In Gmelin's installation, the black-and-white film, while preserving the memory of the children, mechanically repeats every scene, every gesture, with an unbending obedience, like soldiers in a military parade. The black-on-white text – while presented orally only – advances like a locomotive, moving sequentially, letter after letter, word after word, to its meaning. Despite its title, Tools and Grammar does not lead to expediency, clarity and coherent rules but rather gives rise to a deep yearning for inefficiency, obscurity and, above all, the existence of many exceptions to the rule.

Jennifer Allen
Berlin October 2007
Tools and Grammar
17 photographs and paintings on canvas, slide projection, 3 sound tracks and 2 DVD films
Variable size
2007

Felix Gmelin, Selected images
Tools and Grammar
17 photographs and paintings on canvas, slide projection, 3 sound tracks and 2 DVD films
Variable size
2007
Felix Gmelin, images courtesy Milliken, Stockholm

Untitled, after Max Beckman
Oil on canvas
51 x 81 cm
2006

Untitled, after Wolfgang Willrich
Oil on canvas
63 x 52 cm
2007
Felix Gmelin, images courtesy Milliken, Stockholm

Sound and Vision
Installation shot “Of Mice and Men”, 4th berlin biennial for contemporary art
DVD Video in 2 Parts
2005
Felix Gmelin, images courtesy Milliken, Stockholm

Untitled (In Paradise, the Highest Heavens)
oil on canvas
63 x 76cm
2006

Untitled (Asya, the Destroyed Painting)
oil on canvas
120 x 80cm
2006
"Untitled" Painting series after black and white photographs published in Paul Schultze Naumburg's "Kunst und Rasse", Munich, ...
Oil on Canvas
2006

Felix Gmelin, images courtesy Milliken, Stockholm
Flatbed The Blue Curtain, Portikus Gallery, Frankfurt

FILM on DVD or Hard Disk

236 minutes variable size

May 2005

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Flatbed, Milliken installation view 2004

FILM on DVD or Hard Disk

236 minutes variable size

November 2004
Felix Gmelin, images courtesy Milliken, Stockholm

Film Stills
DVD Video on small monitor
56 minutes
2004
Two Films Exchanging Soundtrack
Double video projection with sound track
Installation view Portikus Gallery, Frankfurt am Main
May 2005

Felix Gmelin, images courtesy Milliken, Stockholm

Two Films Exchanging Soundtracks
Double video projection with sound track
Film still from projection
2004
Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II
DVD video in 2 projections
Installation View Portikus Gallery Frankfurt am main
2002

Felix Gmelin, images courtesy Milliken, Stockholm
Discussion. Ronald Jones and Daniel Birnbaum

Ronald Jones: As we are in Frankfurt on the 9th of November 2004, I would first just like to hear you elaborate on two anniversaries: 15 years ago the Berlin wall came down and 66 years ago was the Kristallnacht. I think that these two events are both connected to what Felix does in direct and indirect ways.

Daniel Birnbaum: Dates are always recurring; they are inscribed in a year, which has its repetitions. This brings us to something Felix is working with, namely originality and repetition. Dates have a specific quality: they always recur and they are remembered for different things. The two events you mentioned are of course very present here in Germany, and they are not as far away in history as one might think. Another theme related to dates, and one of the topics we are going to discuss today, is the destruction of symbolic monuments. This has to do with Theodor W. Adorno, who besides Goethe is the most famous son of the city. There was an Adorno monument made when his 100th birthday was celebrated recently with lots of events. It has been destroyed several times because it is not a typical monument by say Daniel Buren or Joseph Kosuth, artists who would usually be considered for a commission of this kind. It is a bit more problematic than that.

RJ: Describe the monument. What does it look like and what is its function?

DB: The monument is made by a Russian artist called Vadim Sakharov and it is a sculpture of a study, a desk, a few books and a metronome. Objects that did not belong to Adorno, but that resemble things he owned. It is a sort of private space situated in the middle of a public space, a square near the Institute for Social Research. There are quotes on the ground but it is really a closed, vacuum-like space.

RJ: And why has it been destroyed?

DB: It has been destroyed repeatedly although it is covered in thick glass.

RJ: Is there a philosopher somewhere that is upset?

DB: There are so many obsessions with Adorno in this city, but already during the inauguration, where the mayor of Frankfurt was present together with Boris Groys, there was an opposition towards the artwork. The whole thing has been destroyed a few times and it is now too expensive to repair. Instead, there will be a public discussion about what it means when artworks are destroyed in this way. One could say it is vandalism and that it is bad that public things are being vandalized, but there are also several art historians that have been working with this theme theoretically. The most famous one is the Swiss art historian Dario Gamboni, who wrote a book called The Destruction of Art. It discusses destructions of art where the destruction bears some kind of significance,
maybe even artistic qualities, if you want, at least a cultural significance: when the destruction of art wants to say something and is not just pointless destruction. There are quite a few examples, of people destroying a Barnett Newman painting or a Michelangelo sculpture and so on. Usually, these actions are political statements, but they could also be related to cultural politics as well as to internal art matters. I referred to some of the most famous examples in an article I wrote for Frieze magazine about the book by Gamboni, an article that used Felix Gmelin’s artworks from the project “Art Vandals” as illustrations. “Art Vandals” is a series of reconstructed destroyed art objects. The most famous one is of course “Guernica” but there are also more local Scandinavian works. And this brings us to a theme which Felix discusses, namely repetitions and radicality being repeated. I got us into this via Adorno, who actually had spectacular timing in his life: he was born on the 11th of September and died on the same date as the Hiroshima bomb was detonated – apropos of dates, which you asked about earlier. But I feel that one of the main issues visible in Felix’s art is the question of what repetition is and what its implications are.

RJ: Let me pick up on that because one of the things that interests me at this point is the way in which we begin to see that cultural critique, this popular and well known avenue of contemporary art, may be having difficulties in understanding that the most deeply felt reasons for making art are not in fact critical. Felix, I think, has placed himself very comfortably in that particular position between nostalgia and resistance. And although nostalgia has not been a dominant theme during the last 20 years, in fact it has been regarded as rather turgid when it is regarded at all; Felix frames it as perhaps one of the most powerful motifs in his art. His father, who is featured in much of his recent work, was a part of the resistance in Berlin in 1968. But with his reinterpretations, even retentions of what his father represented, Felix does not seem to move forward from a position of critical resistance. Rather, he seems to want to move on from a position of nostalgia.

DB: Are you sure it is nostalgia? I ask this fully aware of the fact that this is how you view most of his recent pieces. You can get nostalgic about a time when direct political actions seemed feasible. Is Felix digging into it or is he making a meta-ironic statement about it?

RJ: I agreed it is a meta-ironic statement uplifted on the back of nostalgia. I believe he is calling into question the viability of criticality, the viability of the very thing his father was investigating, resistance, as an option that made sense or could make sense now. There are a number of people – I count myself amongst them - who are beginning to dismantle the notion of criticality as a reasonable possibility as the worlds of art and philosophy are situated today. I believe that Felix is directly expressing a loss of faith in criticality, a loss of faith in his father and a loss of faith in resistance. In that sense it is not nostalgia for its own sake, but he is calling things back in order to unpack them and subject them to a meta-ironic scrutiny.

DB: Yes, but the best pieces work because you could indulge yourself in some of those moments of resistance. One important tendency is the recent examples of radicality that is expressed through violence...

RJ: Like the murder, one week ago, of filmmaker Theo van Gogh.

DB: Yes, no doubt, but also Chris Burden in the United States and many others. These
are examples of notions of radicality as a form of shock or even violence. Destruction could be interpreted as a form of protest, in a political sense. There is an Israeli-Russian artist who destroys pieces, and who spent time in prison after having destroyed an abstract painting in the Stedelijk Museum. People were getting involved in his case with the notion that he was more than just a criminal destroying art. And I would say that Felix’s ready-mades, because that is what they are in a sense, could be interpreted as the ultimate avant-garde moment. Felix freezes these moments of high radicality of destruction through his art, but in the end they are just ready-mades, appropriations of artworks, anything but the destruction of art. The whole tradition of the 80s, which is on some levels continued by Felix, instead freezes the act of radicality, the destruction of the artwork.

RJ: This brings us to the paintings Felix is doing of the film where his father and a woman engage in body-painting – but is it an act that today, could make us feel nostalgic for an earlier and simpler time in which revolution seemed possible. Or doesn’t it now look like a sketch from the American TV comedy show of the same era, “Laugh-In?” Tamed radicalism. What I would like to ask is if perhaps Felix is telling us that criticality and radicality are no longer options? Out of respect for his father, maybe he is suggesting that radicality cannot be described, much less exercised through a work of art, and that it has a much more personal and autobiographical resonance. This is why I bring up the suspicion hovering around criticality as a philosophical model: Felix brings us the first glimpse of what art would look like without criticality, which by this point has become toothless.

DB: What he makes totally clear is the fact that we normally think we know what radicality and criticality look like. There are conventions in the forms of gatherings – the red flag and so on. If you repeat that on a gestural level then maybe you will not say anything about radicality. What I would say is that Felix’s art is rather about deconstructing these signs of radicality. Both the “Art Vandals” pieces and his more recent works are about this. The most convincing piece is “Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II”, which means “color test, the red flag part II”. His father was a media theoretician and a filmmaker who worked in both Berlin and Frankfurt, and who starred in “Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne” by Gerd Conradt from 1968. In this film, Felix’s father and some other people were running through the streets of Berlin waving a red flag all the way to the mayor’s office, to hang it from the balcony of the city hall in the very end of the film.

RJ: The same balcony that Kennedy spoke from!

DB: Correct.

RJ: The later film was re-enacted by Felix in a different setting but by the same means, with a red flag and a bunch of people handing it off to each other. In 1968, everybody thought they were expressing criticality via a mock-revolution where flags and blood would run in the streets; that they would change things. So I wonder if what is most vital in Felix’s film is the fact that, in the end, the flag never appears at the City Hall in Stockholm.

DB: Clearly this is the most important part of his film, otherwise it would just have been a repetition of the original Farbtest. Felix’s film is a comment on political languages, almost poking fun at the naïveté of the radicality of 1968. At that time I was five years old, and
one of my earliest memories from the period was a protest, perhaps one of the most successful moments of protest, since the people actually won in the end. The trees in Kungsträdgården in Stockholm were supposed to be cut down but activists were able to stop the process. I remember it very clearly because of the simple language of the protest. The art of Felix is a lot about signs and about problematizing the whole idea of politics and language and their interdependence. At first instance, the fact that the flag does not appear could mean that there is something else that has replaced radicality in a sense. But does this automatically have to say that radicality is not possible today, or could it mean that it has to be sought somewhere else?

RJ: It is being sought elsewhere in the form of terrorism. Which only magnifies the fact that Felix’s father - we know his revolution was never his alone – self-destructed. One must also wonder what his father, now deceased, might think about his son’s art, and by extension, where he would pledge his own political allegiance today. When the Berlin Wall came down it was a momentous an event as that was for the East, according to a recent survey in the New York Times, a majority of East Germans, granted many unemployed, would now prefer to live under the communist system. Now what is this sense of nostalgia?

DB: Today we live in an age of post-production, where artists are quoting, sampling and so on. Felix fits right into this age by reproducing not only an expression, but also a code. He is reproducing on the level of codes, which distinguishes his works from what Sherrie Levine and her likes did, although her generation did deliver a lot of interesting arguments. Felix works on the level of language, but also with a great concern for biographies: his struggle with the previous generation is an immediate struggle with his father, which is something that cannot be found in any other contemporary artist’s work, I think. And I do not completely agree that his father failed, I mean he was pretty famous as an intellectual here in Frankfurt and his books are sold in bookstores. A bit like you and me, actually.

RJ: Yeah, that’s what we can look forward to!

DB: (Laughs) Yes, exactly.

RJ: Well, what I mean to suggest - saying his father failed - is that today, the films he made, the ones Felix uses as touchstones for his art, are little more than cliché. In his paintings and films, Felix is presenting the predicament of a generation situated somewhere between nostalgia and resistance. Resistance represents something real at this very moment, quite far from just running down the street with a flag. I feel that it is difficult to be nostalgic about ‘68 after 9-11.

DB: Let me give my view on why Felix’s work is so fascinating. So much criticism has been focusing on how to repeat art in meaningful ways. A chief example of this is Hal Foster’s The Return of the Real, where he describes how the neo-avantgarde repeats the original avantgarde in a meaningful and productive way. In a similar way Kierkegaard says that the person who is willing to work hard will give birth to his father, meaning that you can retroactively give birth to something that you believe was already defined beforehand. A lot of models can explain repetition. Hal Foster represents the deconstructive discourse where you get rid of the creative subject only to have it reappear as a historical subject. He also uses a Freudian model of trauma, where a
traumatic event reappears later on in life. Historically this would mean that something traumatic happening in the 1930s would have repercussions much later on. So here single subjects transfer traumas onto the collective consciousness, and this is exactly what Felix Gmelin works with. He uses highly personal contents: his very tragic relationship with his father, who later took his own life. In Felix’s case, repeating a radical language is not something unique in itself, but he has an immediate relation to someone quite prominent, a theoretician, and it happens to be his father – which makes some of his pieces even more elaborate and interesting.

RJ: In a strictly Freudian sense, the resistance is not towards the political, it is towards his father. Felix is far from trying to offer solutions to global problems but rather to understand, memorialize if you will his relationship to his father. He distances himself from the conventional rhetoric of criticality of the preceeding generation, indeed my generation.

DB: I remember when people started talking about Felix some 15 years ago: he was described as one of the most talented painters around. If someone had said that he ought to use his skill to continue to make paintings, it would sound reactionary to us. In the de-skilled art world of post-production it would look pretty strange, considering that art students are hardly taught painting skills at all anymore. Later on Felix stumbled into the theme of repetitions and started working with his relationship to his father. However, the question is whether or not the art he is making is interesting for a general audience. Another connected example is Liam Gillick, who discusses the impossibility of criticality by absorbing different forms of utopia into his neutralized, corporate-looking structures. Thinking of him and others like Tobias Rehberger, perhaps we can start talking about something I would not know where to find, but something that could be labelled post-critical.

RJ: Lets call it that. I am thinking of Rem Koolhaas, Liam Gillick and Felix Gmelin too as candidates for this new direction. My seminar at the Städel school is an interrogation of conventional but still well used notions of enlightened criticality and whether or not they continue to create knowledge or simply recirculate knowledge. Felix provides an excellent case study for them in this regard. Felix is one of those unusual artists who leaves you with a very quiet lesson, and the arguments and debates that have engaged us for more than an hour are settled inside of his work. Perhaps those arguments are not sufficiently widespread, but I think that they will be in the future. Do want to take the last word?

DB: In short, Felix makes art that opens up a discourse that involves paradoxes, repetitions and different problems of history as a subject. All of these problems regain a kind of density that forces us to go beyond them.
Felix Gmelin’s *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II*, 2002, a two-channel video, presents two short tapes that are, at a glance, identical. Closer examination reveals that in fact the images are not quite the same, but very similar. In each one, a runner carries a large red flag through the streets of what appears to be a northern European city, transferring the flag to another participant at various intervals. The sense of historical period is also rather vague: the runners wear similar dark clothes; their hairstyles are not particularly revelatory, either. Perhaps the large number of Volkswagens in the video on the left tips the viewer off that this one was originally filmed in Germany.

Gerd Conradt made the film in 1968, in connection with a camera seminar at the Deutsche Film- und Fernsehakademie Berlin, conducted by Michael Ballhaus, who worked with R.W. Fassbinder and later with Martin Scorsese. Gmelin’s father was a filmmaker and theorist with radical political convictions, and the event that Conrad captured on film had been enacted by several of Gmelin’s students and also Gmelin himself—he appears twice in the film. It documented a “revolutionary” student action; its final goal was achieved when the final flag-bearer entered the Berlin town hall—the Schöneberger Rathaus, where John F. Kennedy made his famous (and famously ungrammatical) “Ich bin ein Berliner” speech—and reappeared on its balcony waving the red flag. Contrary to what has been written about *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II*, the elder Gmelin did not organize the action himself; he wasn’t its “director,” as Gmelin fils is the director of the restaged event in Stockholm, using his own art students as participants in the red-flag relay race. In contrast to the triumphant—or at least dramatic—finale of Conrad’s film, the last flag-bearer in Gmelin’s re-enactment enters Stockholm’s town hall but doesn’t appear above brandishing the red flag. The opportunities for revolutionary action are evidently foreclosed, or at least ambiguous, uncertain.

Holger Meins had been a student in Ballhaus’s seminar, and it is Meins, who was the final flag-bearer in Conrad’s film, that appears spectacularly on the balcony of the town hall. Only a few years later, he would become one of the leading figures in the “terrorist” Red Army Faction (RAF), part of its “Harte kern.” He died of starvation in Stammheim prison, having gone on a hunger strike; his wards didn’t take the trouble to attempt to force feed him. There are two indelible photographic images of Meins: in one, he and Andreas Baader are led away naked after their arrest; in another, he lies dead in his prison cell, emaciated and horrifying—a far less “beautiful” death image than that of Che Guevara. Meins’s key participation in the original flag relay deepens our sense of the historical moment: how few years separate the perfervid enthusiasm of the student radicals of 1968 from very dark ends only a few years later. The fate of Meins and his RAF comrades at Stammheim is like the black-hole terminus of Utopian revolutionary aspirations.

Watching *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne*, one has the impression that Meins is “storming” the Schöneberger Rathaus. In fact, the school had contacted the proper authorities, asking permission to film the traffic situation from the town hall’s balcony. “Instead
Holger Meins hoists a red flag and the school was pissed,” Gmelin recounts. “No one was arrested, but the whole class was later thrown out of the film school. Dad resigned out of solidarity. The student Harun Farocki had been making a film about how to build a machine gun out of a vacuum cleaner. Holger Meins one about how to make a Molotov cocktail. It had provoked students to throw stones at the Springer press offices.”

Prior to making his shift to video with *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II*, Felix Gmelin was a painter, although a “conceptual” painter. His sudden shift to video isn’t quite the volte-face it seems, though. In his series “Art Vandal” (1994-96), Gmelin recreated artworks that had been vandalized, among others Barnett Newman’s *Who’s Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue IV* (1969-70), Picasso’s *Guernica* (1937), and Roy Lichtenstein’s *Curtain* (1962). In a sense, these are all appropriations, albeit appropriations of defacements. In *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II*, he appropriates Conradt’s film and, more generally, his father’s legacy. “By a coincidence, I saw this film about Holger Meins at a film club directed by Gerd Conradt,” Gmelin recalls in a 2003 interview with Ronald Jones and Robert Stasinski. “I asked him if he remembered my father and then we spent the next day together. Later, he sent me a copy of *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne*, since my father was in it… Then last year I also inherited my father’s archive… I thought Wow! I was working on a film script that was about inheriting a large archive of sculptures or something. I was thinking I would use this film as a detail of my own one…. But the more I was working on the project, the more the flag film grew and outshone everything else. So one morning I thought: OK, leave the script and use only the flag film. Do something with the film. Suddenly there appeared this idea about a remake of the film. Later I decided to include also the original film as a ready-made in my work.”

For his remake, Gmelin used his own art students from Konstfack, University College for Art, Craft and Design in Stockholm. It was shot on video: “No celluloid was used in my film,” Gmelin remarks. “That would be nostalgia. Gerd Conradt’s film was a school film and so was mine, so we used the simplest materials.”

Conradt’s film and Gmelin’s remake are projected side by side, but, contrary to the usual aesthetics of projection that prevail in the art world today, they are both projected on a very intimate scale. This intimacy or modesty of the medium of projection gives *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II* an unusual formal integrity. The small scale of the projections entails a different kind of attention from the viewer, perhaps a closer one. Gmelin deliberately de-spectacularizes an inherently spectacular medium. Scanning between the two projections, one notices that however close, clearly the cities are different, and the action of Gmelin’s is not so tightly organized that “variations” don’t creep in. “I was thinking very documentary,” he remarks in the Jones/Stasinski interview. “We shot the film only once. Everything that diverges from the original concept is OK… Just let things happen as they happen.”

Comparing the 1968 and 2002 works, one might discern a more buoyant mood in the former, as if the participants experienced what they were doing as somehow “revolutionary,” whereas the runners in Gmelin’s remake appear often expressionless, like students involved in a somewhat taxing academic project.
No Holger Meins stand-in appears waving the red flag in Stockholm. In one sense, *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II* engages with its “original” critically, suggesting the inadequacies or delusions of the radical student politics of 1968, or at least its blindness to the real future. Gmelin père “was convinced that revolution would be the method by which the world would change,” his son recalls. “However, how do I challenge a father like that? What happens if I copy dad? Are you happy now, dad, me doing your revolution? I think my film is about something totally different, although I am performing exactly the same act as he did.” The sense of foreclosure of radical politics suggested by the conclusion of *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II* accords with our own more cynical—more real?—view of historical change. We are acutely aware of the recuperation of the radical gestures of the sixties as fashion, for one. Nike sneakers are advertised with a slogan of Jerry Rubin, “Just Do It!” Che Guevara t-shirts proliferate in the rich cities of the West, talismans of youthful cool; posters of the same decorate teenage and collegiate bedrooms.

The ur-text for this sort of historical amnesia or misprision remains Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. It feels almost risky, i.e., possibly foolish, to quote its famously quotable opening lines, but they are so apposite to Gmelin’s artwork: “Hegel remarks somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” But in his gloss on this passage in *Difference and Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze offers a more “open” interpretation of the farcical second occurrence, one that retrieves it from the oblivion of false consciousness: “When Marx also criticizes the abstract false movement of the Hegelians, he finds himself drawn to an idea, which he indicates rather than develops, an essentially ‘theatrical’ idea: to the extent that history is theatre, then repetition, along with the tragic and the comic within repetition, forms a condition of movement under which the ‘actors’ or the ‘heroes’ produce something effectively new in history.” An artistic “document” of 2002, Gmelin’s *Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II* may yet presage alternative receptions of the legacy of sixties radicalism. The generation of ’68 could not envision the future; neither can we.
The Return of the Sixties in Contemporary Art and Criticism

James Meyer

Just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening, so must every presentation of history begin with an awakening; in fact, it should treat of nothing else.

Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project

Let me begin with two works. Felix Gmelin's Color Test, The Red Flag II, is an installation of side-by-side projections of identical size. The film on the left was shot in Berlin in 1968; the right projection is a reenactment staged by Gmelin in Stockholm in 2002. At first glance, the films appear to be the same. A young person runs down an urban street, disporting a large red flag. After a few minutes, he relinquishes his charge to another runner, and then another. And yet the more closely we compare the films we discern they are not equivalent. Is it the runners' haircuts and clothes, or the automobiles they pass, that date the first film to the sixties? Their boundless enthusiasm? (The runners in the second film appear listless). The work's conclusion confirms these suspicions. In the earlier film, the final runner storms the Berlin city hall, emerging on the building's balcony: he waves the red flag triumphantly. The later run ends at the Stockholm City Hall steps: the dramatic ending of the original Color Test is foreclosed.

Renée Green's Partially Buried, 1997, is yet another reflection on the counterculture. Where Gmelin has managed to retrieve an archival film, Green searches for an earthwork that no longer exists. Robert Smithson completed his Partially Buried Woodshed at Kent State University in Ohio shortly before the riots that left four students dead in the spring of 1970. Green's unearthing of Smithson's project took multiple forms. [i] The installation Partially Buried, at Pat Hearn Gallery in New York, consisted of a vintage table with paperbacks by James Michener, author of a 1971 book on the riot; shards of concrete—among the few physical remnants of Smithson's work—displayed under glass; and framed photographs documenting a recent visit by the artist to Kent State. The gallery beyond, painted an early seventies acid orange, was filled with period furniture and LP's. Video monitors presented an interview with Brinsley Terrill, the art professor who hosted Smithson at Kent State, in which Terrill describes the Woodshed's history and eventual destruction; clips of interviews with the Weathermen from the 1975 film Underground; a Super 8 "home movie" of Cleveland, Ohio, where Green grew up;
and a video of the artist's search for the woodshed's foundation. Probably the most
dramatic detail of the installation was a recreation of the set of *Underground*, which
included a banner bearing the text *The Future Will Be What We the People Struggle
to Make It*. A mere twenty-five years old, The Weatherman's revolutionary slogan
could not have seemed more unfamiliar, more distant.

Both *Color Test, The Red Flag II* and *Partially Buried* exemplify the "return" of the
sixties in contemporary art and criticism (not to mention curatorial practice). This
tendency is indubitably, excessively pervasive. Artists revisit the forms associated
with that era, and make the history of the sixties, and of sixties art, their subject.
(Christopher Williams's *Homage to Bas Van Ader and Christopher D'Arcangelo*,
Kerry James Marshall's homages to the Civil Rights Movement, Tacita Dean's recent
film *Mario Merz*, Andrea Fraser and Helmut Draxler's *Services*, Christian Philipp
Müller's Documenta X "homage" to Joseph Beuys and Walter de Maria, the
paintings of Matthew Antezzo, and the work of Sam Durant could be discussed in
these terms). [ii] Retrospectives of sixties movements and canonical sixties artists
have become ubiquitous: the past year alone brought us Ann Goldstein's survey "A
Minimal Future?" at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and major
retrospectives of such figures as Donald Judd, Robert Smithson, Dan Flavin, Lee
Bontecou, and Ed Ruscha. The Whitechapel Gallery, under Iwona Blazwick's
direction, recently organized a series of significant performances from the period. [iii]
Major survey exhibitions, such as Catherine David's Documenta X, Okwui Enwezor's
"The Short Century" and the 2004 Whitney Biennial each traced a different narrative
of the contemporary to the sixties. [iv] Younger art historians have taken it upon
themselves to write the history of the period's artistic practices internationally,
although it should be observed that the preponderance of these studies deal with
the art of the West—a myopia that efforts like "The Short Century" have done much
to redress. This impulse to historicize sixties practice entails a revival of such
traditional art historical formats as chronological narrative and the monograph, the
gathering of testimonial (interviews with artists, dealers, and critics), and intensive
archival research. The rapidly rising market values of sixties practice, and the
spectacularization of the minimal and postminimal installation at Dia: Beacon, the
largest contemporary art museum in the world, suggest a further integration of these
once radical tendencies.

This phenomenon gives us pause; what is the significance of this embrace of "the
sixties" across these various sites of art world practice (art-making, curation, art
history, the market)? The meaning of this tendency--how "the sixties" signifies
within contemporary art and criticism—is insufficiently understood. Could it be
that"the sixties, in becoming history, returns to us as a trope of contemporaneity—
as an object for present-day use? How does the current sixties return relate back to
previous such returns, such as the postmodernist construction of a sixties "without
apology" theorized by the editors of *Social Text* two decades ago? [v] What are the
current forms of artistic engagement with sixties practice? A fundamental reference for progressive cultural politics, does the sixties risk becoming an object of nostalgic longing, indeed affirmation?

It is, I think, important to establish a distinction between the sixties as a period, a set of historical conditions such as Fredric Jameson has mapped in his essay "Periodizing the Sixties," versus the sixties as figure, as effect: our concern is the latter. [vi] The second point is that the present sixties return reflects a broader historicist tendency constitutive of modernity itself, such as Jameson, Hayden White, and many others have described. [vii] The condition of being modern, Matthew Arnold observes in "The Modern Element of Literature"(1910), is one that compels us to compare the present to the past, and ourselves to our predecessors. "No single event, no single literature, is adequately comprehended except in relation to other events, other literatures," Arnold writes. [viii] Historical awareness, for Arnold, is a form of "deliverance" (the word is his). [ix] Recalling the Latin root de-\textit{liberare}, to free, Arnold conceives of historical consciousness as a kind of liberation. We are "delivered" by our understanding of the past. For Arnold's contemporary Friedrich Nietzsche, in \textit{The Use and Abuse of History}, (1873), in contrast, the past is hardly a deliverance, but a burden. Human beings "cannot learn to forget, but hang onto the past." The past is a "chain" that "runs" with us. [x] Nietzsche does not deprecate history per se. History is a shackle, but it is something we need. [xi] The pertinent question of this text is how history is used. Nietzsche objects not to history, but to historicism--to history as a burden, to use Hayden White's term. History should inspire life; a fixation on the past leads to inaction, to nostalgia, which are against "life" in the philosopher's sense. He distinguishes three historical models. Monumental history, a "preoccupation with the rare and classic," can leave us feeling that major achievement is possible, but also perhaps impossible for us. [xii] Antiquarian history is embodied by the "mad collector" of artifacts, who breathes a "moldy air." The antiquarian knows how to "preserve" life, but not how to create it. [xiii] Critical history, the philosopher's third model, suggests neither the monumentalist's celebration of the past, nor the antiquarian's archival obsession. It interrogates, indeed judges the past; it uses history for the present; it is, Nietzsche observes, "in the service of life." [xiv]

Nietzsche's model is far more inflected than this extremely schematic account suggests. The philosopher's concepts of history are relative; each has its benefits and its costs. [xv] Suffice it to say that Nietzsche's schema, generated at a previous moment of historicist intensity, the fin de siècle, is extremely suggestive. [xvi] As the projects by Gmelin and Green with which I began imply, the sixties has come to signify as monumental history in turn-of-the-century culture. If for the postmodernist artist modernism occupied this monumental status (the early work of Sherrie Levine comes to mind) now it is the sixties that represents the possibility—and, following Nietzsche, the impossibility--of artistic and social transformation.
Color Test: The Red Flag II captures the heady ebullience of '68, yet suggests that this feeling of freedom is irrevocably a thing of the past (recall the slightly bored affect of the runners in the second film). Partially Buried suggests that Smithson's woodshed has itself become an art historical monument, a particularly ironic outcome, when we recall Smithson's brilliant equation of monumentality and entropy: setting out to make a work that would destroy itself, Smithson ended up making a monument, one we now dutifully recall through the mediation of photographs and the recollections of those who witnessed its making. At the same time, Green's project suggests the antiquarian nature of this retrieval. For what is Partially Buried but an archive of the year 1970? Much like the philosopher's mad collector, Green is not a maker of the new so much as a scavenger of the old, a gatherer of artifacts, and in this resembles the legions of "younger" art historians who compulsively ransack the archives of sixties practitioners and critics for fresh materials and insights. Gmelin also performs an "antiquarian" role. The idea for Color Test: The Red Flag II came about when the artist inherited the archive of his father, a former art professor who organized the first flag run and who, in fact, appears in the original film with his students. The film Gmelin did not make would have consisted of shots of an inherited archive of sculpture. [xvii] Instead, Gmelin appropriated his father's film and then remade it, engaging his own students to reenact the piece.

But it is perhaps the idea of critical history that these projects most evoke; it is from this position that Gmelin and Green interrogate the other models. Both works point to the longing that attends present-day monumentalist and antiquarian constructions of the sixties. The monumental historian pines for a glorious past he himself did not experience; the antiquarian salvages and organizes its remnants. Much of the art writing on the period, my own included, bespeaks the melancholy of having not been present at the Happenings and the exhibitions and the demonstrations we so assiduously describe; we can only imagine these events. Green interrogates this longing for a past that is not one's own. "Did people have more fun then?" she writes. "Burying buildings with dirt, pouring glue down hills, making islands out of broken glass? Allan Kaprow gave students dollar bills to pin on trees at Kent State then." [xviii] Green's search for the woodshed allegorizes this longing, this feeling of having not been there, of "living on within the force field of a past not yet over and done with" (Jameson). [xix] At one point in the The Arcades Project, Walter Benjamin observes that "in order for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant, there must be no continuity between them." [xx] The Paris of the arcades becomes knowable only as that Paris has become historical, when it can only be accessed through archival means. Certainly, the works of Gmelin and Green construct the sixties as irrevocably past: the old furniture, the worn LP's, the black and white film footage of Underground look hopelessly dated; Color Test: The Red Flag II underscores the temporal gap between its two parts. And yet these projects speak of a particular kind of past, a past that is recent, that is not entirely past. Conceiving of the sixties effect in this way--as a force field or delayed reaction--
makes sense when we recall that both artists were born during this period; their memories of their childhoods are memories of the sixties. The histories they recall are in this regard their own. The narrator of Partially Buried recalls her mother's attendance at a music class at Kent State during the months of Smithson's visit. She remembers waiting for her mother to return home the evening of the riots. [xxi] Gmelin recalls having "only a vague idea" of his father's activities during the sixties. [xxii] Recall Nietzsche's insistence that critical history "interrogates" the past; it uses and abuses history. And what is Color Test: The Red Flag II but a judgement of Color Test: The Red Flag I? Gmelin's remaking of his father's film exposes the inadequacy of its revolutionary narrative. "I think my father was pretty naive in his dream about ruling the world.... [He] was convinced that revolution would be the method by which the world would change." [xxiii] But the revolution did not come; the world did not change in the way Gmelin senior imagined. The countercultural signifiers of Color Test I were appropriated for a different use. Revolution, Gmelin asserts, has become a kind of fashion. "You can see revolution on almost every poster, selling Nike shoes." [xxiv] (Indeed, the Yippie Jerry Rubin's exhortation "Do It!" now adorns the Nike "swoosh.") Similarly, Green observes in Partially Buried: "Everywhere she goes she encounters echoes" of the early seventies. "The seventies are in vogue now." [xxv] For Gmelin and Green, present evocations of the sixties and early seventies are deeply ambivalent; as the prior moment recedes into the past, it returns as commodity. The aftermath of the sixties, the sixties effect, thus stands as a conclusion to the periodized sixties mapped out by Jameson, conceived as the historical point of transition into advanced capitalism. Let us recall the concluding remarks in "Periodizing the Sixties":

The simplest yet most universal formulation remains the widely shared feeling that in the sixties, for a time, everything was possible: that this period... was a moment of universal liberation, a global unbinding of energies...Yet this sense of freedom and possibility--which is for the sixties a momentary objective reality, as well as (from the hindsight of the eighties) a historical illusion—may perhaps best be explained in terms of the superstructural movement and play enabled by the transition from one infrastructural and systemic stage of capitalism to another. [xxvi]

The cultural logic of the sixties is here conceived as a dialectical process of "'liberation' and domination;" new forms of freedom--the end of colonialism, the emergence of black, women's, third world, gay and lesbian rights—are themselves the manifestation of capitalist expansion on a global scale. Sixties returns suggest an extension of this contradictory logic of the historical sixties into subsequent periods. One could venture that the sixties returns most forcibly as a signifier of freedom, becomes most meaningful, when the freedoms it unleashed are put at risk. Bearing this in mind, we could imagine various periodizations of different sixties returns. We could point to the sixties return of the Reagan-Thatcher eighties, manifest in neoconservative trashings of that era and, conversely, in the recovery of the sixties
in such progressive ventures as *The Sixties Without Apology*; or the commoditized sixties return of our globalist moment, that has developed alongside the antiglobalization movement. If *Color Test*, *The Red Flag II* and *Partially Buried* register the present integration of the sixties, these projects also posit a sixties that holds within itself the idea of future transformations: we are induced to imagine less romanticized forms of opposition. Dismantling the sixties effect, these practices instead construct a periodized sixties, a sixties without illusion, a sixties we can use.


[ix] Ibid, 37.


[xi] "Every man... needs a certain knowledge of the past." Ibid., 22.
For example, Nietzsche obviously favors critical history over the other models, yet not entirely: those who condemn the faults of their forebears cannot themselves "shake off" history's chain. Monumental history may dwell too much in the past, yet its celebration of the past allows us to imagine that we can achieve monumentality.

My invocation of Nietzsche's historical model is indebted to the work of Yve-Alain Bois. See Bois's *Susan Smith's Archaeology*, exhibition catalogue (New York: Margarete Roeder Gallery, 1989.)

See the artist's remarks in "Rene—NE-E—Felix Gmelin and Ronald Jones," www.16beavergroup.org/mtarchive/archives/000853.php


"The girl watched the news and waited anxiously, often. That's part of what she recollects of childhood. Waiting. Seeing the running text of news reporting students shot at Kent State moving across the bottom of the TV screen. Waiting. TV programs were interrupted, and her mother was late returning home from there... Finally her mother did arrive, but she can't now remember what either said. It was May 4, 1970." Green, "Partially Buried," 43.

"Rene—NE-E—Felix Gmelin and Ronald Jones."

Ibid.

Ibid.

Green, "Partially Buried," 40.

The why nudged between two tellings
By Maxine Kopsa

A double projection on two small LCD monitors. The left shows a man holding a large red flag running through the streets of Berlin. The right screen shows a younger man with a smaller and cleaner red flag running through the streets of Stockholm. There’s a marked resemblance between the two protesters, a similarity in their expression, around the mouth, a certain determination. Looking more closely there’s also a slight but somehow telling difference: a hint of a smile hiding in the corners of the younger man’s mouth, and an awkwardness in his raised shoulders. The title of the work is Farbtest, Die Rote Fahne II (Color Test, The Red Flag II), Time travel, 2002 to 1968 and we learn -by reading the label- that the young man on the right is the artist, Felix Gmelin, and the other is his father. The left film is from 1968 and the one on the right from 2002. Left documents a relay protest where several runners pass on the flag eventually all the way to the town hall and end up waving it from its balcony. As a signal of defiance, of course, but also as closure to their demonstration. Right we find out is a re-enactment of this protest, this time in Stockholm, a truthful re-enactment that is, up until the part where they would have had to enter the town hall. Right doesn’t, it stops before, there’s no storming of town hall and no righteous flag waving from the balcony. Right has no signal, no closure, it’s a replay clearly without the same loaded significance as the original act; so obviously devoid of it, in fact, that it’s as if Gmelin the younger were pointing to the discrepancy, underlining it, making it about it, as if he were saying: no need to look further boys, there is no symbolism here, what you see is what you get. Holding a protest without reason to protest means re-doing the gesture of it, its shell, acting it out. That’s the apparent reading. The broader meaning lies in what this discrepancy signifies, what it means to see the same then, now.

To re-enact, simply put, is to act-out-again, to re-make. In art it could be a new video about an existing film, a new painting about an existing painting, a new photograph based on an existing photograph, a new performance referencing an older performance. But of course it’s more than just imitation. If you think about what a remake actually is, carefully, closely and slowly and try to grasp all its implications -is there a difference? Is it deliberate? Why change things? Why repeat them?- then you realize the tremendous intricacy of repetition itself. If I say something twice do they meant the same thing? If I repeat a gesture is my gesture the same the second time? Is there even such thing as true, honest to god, senseless repetition? Or does not every thing repeated become a new thing when repeated?

In 1980, in a small town in western Lithuania, Arturas Raila saw strange lights in the sky. Pinkish ones, which, in his words, moved in an unworldly fashion. He saw them four times afterwards and all five times in total he was fascinated and confused. It is the way in which he tells of these encounters that we as readers and viewers begin to feel a connection between his thoughts and these lights. He
speaks of them as though they had a kind of
relationship which causes him -we assume- to attempt to re-create and record these experiences.
The result entitled ‘Primitive Sky’ (2003) is a film and stills, of the sky at night in this small Lithuanian
town. Without the story, without knowing this is a re-creation, a re-enactment of a significant
moment, frankly you would walk passed and only wonder -like I did- at the plain-in-your-face
tediousness of it all. We see dull homes, average snowy suburban streets, bear trees, power lines
and faintly, very faintly -so that the dull homes and the streets seem the subject- lights, strange
geometric crisscrosses or jelly fish-like forms, red, indeed pinkish swarms or wavy lines. But once
you know and look again and think of Raila’s encounters, of his story, of these passed five -to him-
sublime experiences, you can’t but help to feel as though you’re looking right into someone’s head,
right into his dream. Raila tells us a story. ‘Primitive Sky’ is as though he has said ‘sit back,
relax and listen...’. He’s re-played his experiences as much it would seem, as a poetic exorcism for himself as
proof for all others. As much a return via recollection to the very personal ‘scene of the crime’ as a
nostalgic narrative.

Re-enactment isn’t only fascinating because of the psychological implications of repetition, it’s also
alluring because of its temporal nature. If you repeat something, you do so in time. The re-
enactment, whether it be an object or an event is always an elongated act. It’s an action. A
performance. And if in a re-enactment we consider the ‘script’ to be in fact the ‘original’ event, it’s in
these ties between ‘original’ and ‘result’ where the particularity of re-enactment lies. Closer to
‘homage’ than ‘reproduction’, the re-enactment involves feelings of respect and sentiment and
draws on both personal and collective memory -on nostalgia-, combining them. Not unlike a
homage’s vital link to the past, the re-enactment has an equally crucial relationship to its original act,
to the thing it’s repeating. What is more, all the reasons, each desire to re-make the thing or event
are present in the re-enactment itself. But quietly so. And deciphering them -the search for the why-
is an extended, I dare say performative activity.

So let’s get straight to that, the why, why this compulsion to return, to re-make, to appropriate, to
re-enact?

Douglas Huebler said in an interview on July 25 1969 (1) : “..The world is full of junk, anyway. The
world is full of too much stuff to walk around...” Pierre Huygue, years later explained his art-making
intentions as “not to add anything else to the world.” If there is among some artists today a will not
to add, an allowance for a certain saturation of things in the world, be it the world of culture or the
(visual) world at large, then perhaps a tendency to re-look at the already there isn’t so strange. Or
could it quite simply be a question of masochism? This need to return? This need to go back to the
scene of the crime, to the origin of the trauma, to repeat it, to re-enact it? Freud explains the
‘repetition compulsion’ as a manner to gain mastery. And mastery is surely something we all seek, if
not mastery -as in control- in the very least mastery in terms of understanding. But apparently
clinical experience has shown that this rarely happens (2). Instead -in laymen’s terms- everything just
gets worse (3).
I suppose one of the first times the term re-enactment was used distinctly for an artistic project, would be for a work by Jeremy Deller. ‘The Battle of Orgreave’ as the now infamous 1984 minor’s strike clashes in South Yorkshire are known were re-enacted on the 17th of June 2001 under the auspices of Deller. It was his concept, his idea, but it was organized a professional Re-enactment logistics company, EventPlan, and filmed by Mike Figgis for ArtAngel Media and channel 4. The hour long film is basically a documentary of the day’s events, a behind the scenes look following the minors who were invited to participate and the ‘professional’ re-enactors. A making of, you could say. Howard Giles, the head of EventPlan refers to Jeremy Deller as the ‘event creator’ but it is clear in the film that Deller is just as surprised and curious about the (psychological) effects of the grand staging as we are. Giles explains re-enactment as being ‘re-creation’, successful if it is able to get ‘as close to fact as possible’. It’s about ‘getting it right’, he says, about ‘re-living it’.

But what does this ‘getting it right’ imply? If we’re to understand the drive behind such an extensive hobbyist folklore tradition, then we must try to understand the why. We have to comprehend why a certain event has been chosen in the first place to be duplicated. ‘Orgreave’ was a ‘running sore’, according to Giles, an open wound, an embarrassing moment in history loaded a priori with significance. As though that moment in history was a self-aware watershed, an iconic instant full of its own future significance (4). Plainly put, some claim it to have been a grand set-up, both the strike and its outcome (the mineworkers lost). A re-enactment avant la letter you might say, a set-up, as if Orgreave 1 were already a rehearsal.

Without skipping into an easy though still so poetically paradoxical trap of chicken and egg: it can be said that the artifice was present in the original event. In other words, the past event held within itself its potential to be re-enacted. The London Riot Re-enactment Society’s mission statement touches on this chicken and egg -though without understanding its Zenness- “If we staged a re-enactment of May Day 2000 on May Day 2003, would people notice it was a re-enactment or would they think it was that year’s May Day riot? And if the next year we re-enacted June 18 1999 on May Day 2004 would people notice the discrepancy?”

Indeed, indeed, would they? But is that the point? I can understand The London Riot Re-enactment Society being worried about misleading the audience but I think the point is more subtle and more complicated than mere honesty. Onlookers may or may not notice a difference but the difference would still be there, plainly, but implicitly. And that’s the point. There’s part of the why. One would have to know.

Re-enactment thus is not only privy to, but creates, a legend. You could say that the re-enactment of the thing or the event, establishes it. We can also safely say that it underlines all the intricacies of repetition, proving that to repeat is not merely to copy. To repeat in its case is to tell a story, to speak reverently of..., to honor..., or at the very least to re-visit... But you need both. Both the knowledge of the past and its retelling. You need to know. You need to be in the know. You need the ‘inside information’. Which makes re-enactment’s use of citation -of appropriation- so very unlike the
suggestive surface quoting of postmodernism’s appropriation. The point here is not to juxtapose differing signs and contexts just for the shock of it. The point goes far deeper. Re-enactment, you could say, brings appropriation -appropriation in all its full intellectual glory- into the 21st century. With a narrative twist. Re-enactment’s afore mentioned mix of the quoting of personal and collective memory blurs their very boundaries, letting us into the collective or the collective into us. It’s very loaded story-telling. Manon de Boers’ work ‘Sylvia’ (2001), a 40 minute super 8 film, shows Sylvia Kristel in the opening scene smoking a cigarette. She says nothing, just takes a few drags and turns away from the camera. And then we’re given a pan shot of a grainy Paris, an overview of what looks like the entire city and she starts telling. In French she commences ‘The first time I went to Paris it must have been 1972…’ Her tale persists as she moves from film set to film set, from man to man, sometimes happy in love and successful in her career and sometimes depressed and in doubt. After 20 minutes she comes to an end and we see her again, silent, smoking, on the same green hill overlooking, in the distance, a city. This is an interruption but a tentative one, we soon see, since the film promptly start all over again. But not quite the same. We pan back to Paris and Sylvia begins recounting again. This time though she starts differently, in a different tone, a less anecdotal ring to her voice and far more factual. She ends this time somewhere closer to the present, somewhere in Amsterdam, her current home. Closer to the truth? Closer to now? We’re left wondering why she’s edited herself, why she first told us of her insecurities, her infidelities, her desires and her misgivings. We’re left to reflect on a possible correlation between the two stories, the whys of certain screaming gaps and other more silent ones. I’ve left out an important clue, I should have started with. In the beginning of the film we’re told the first monologue was recorded 22.09.2001 and the second monologue 10.11.2000.

There it is again: the clue. The point. The why nudged in between two tellings. What has Sylvia’s re-enactment of herself shown us? A different image of herself, certainly, a different portrayal of character. But not only a mere alternative, also proof that ‘self image’ and ‘character portrayal’ are not fixed beliefs. They change from day to day, from listener to listener, from camera to camera. The psychology behind re-enactment is apparent in Sylvia, and more complicated than in the case of Orgreave. More intricate as an example of re-enactment, Sylvia is an auto-referential case in point where ‘original’ and ‘result’ are self inflicted, where part 1 and part 2 fall almost seamlessly together. Almost, but not quite, and that’s the point, again.

This re-look and re-work -this new appropriation- comprises a re-think that offers the audience at the very least a re-telling of what has already passed or been made, and at best an alternative view of that same past. Be it personal -be it even yourself- or not. Perhaps, but this might be going too far, this re-telling is a not dissimilar version of (former) oral traditions: it too is a passing on, a slight re-interpretation, re-collected timely amendments, from generation to generation, from them to us. Question is, does a proper quote not comprise a true new? And the answer is of course, of course. But a contingent new. If you think about it, what appropriation really is, that it’s a manner to deal with the (immediate) past, with history, then re-enactment’s version is certainly a critical translation, a questioning of position, the makers’ own, the viewers’, the narratives’. Not a macho this-is-the-
answer-to-supplant-all-others attitude but a modest inquiry. A suggestion. Another take.
Gmelin’s protest, Deller’s riot, Raila’s vision, de Boer’s Sylvia are trying to re-tell us our favorite bedtime story. With each slight alteration of the original, of the first time, reading like personal commentary of then in the now. And there’s a consolation in that, a consolation not all too different from the solace of the (unchanged) parental home, as banal as the relief of a trusted restaurant, the return to the same hotel, the conviction of a brand of toothpaste…The consolation of recognition. And at the same time the desire for the element of surprise (‘I love this restaurant AND they have daily specials’). That’s re-enactment’s wondrous cocktail. You need both, you see.
Re-enactment could very well be the first form of artistic practice where knowing the background, knowing the part 1, is an explicit pre-requisite to part 2, minus any elitist implications.

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(3) Think of J.G. Ballard’s desperate hero in the novel Crash (and later David Cronenberg’s film adaptation) who after having experienced a serious car accident becomes obsessed, addicted really to (the surge of adrenalin of) a crash, his crash, any crash. Throughout the book he continues to re-play various ‘famous’ car crashes, returning to the locations where they occurred. He returns to the trauma, or rather, more precisely, his incessant return to it, his re-living of it, creates it. Turns the original experience into the trauma, after the fact. Things just get worse.
(4) As if the minors and the police force then, in 1984, were already being ‘trained for a specific role’.
This pre-training (picket manipulation) becomes apparent in stories form one of the policemen and a lobbyist who describe how Margret Thatchers politics in fact forced the issue actually orchestrating the conditions for the conflict What with M15 infiltration in the plant, provocation from the police instead of the minors to kick start the conflict (though sequences were reversed on TV), forcing the strikers (actually escorting them) to picket in a field North of the plant and then flanking them on three sides leaving the railway lines still open for transport…Deller’s re-enactment invited the minors to re-play the conflicts, but to do so from the other side: some of the minors played their former enemy, the police.