

Reinventing History: Warren Neidich, Photography, Re-enactment, and Contemporary Event Culture

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The role of the historian and the notion of what constitutes historical evidence have become more unstable in recent decades, particularly with digital imaging technology. In Warren Neidich's project (and 1989 book) *American History Reinvented*, the photographer anticipated the myriad current art practices that engage with re-enactment, where artists restage past events to investigate current political and social condition. Rather than simply perpetuating a complacent nostalgia for the past, a re-enactment as an art project may have the potential to prompt a critical reevaluation of historical narratives. A consideration of additional, more recent, photography suggests how Neidich's *American History Reinvented* can be understood as a precursor to the work of contemporary practitioners negotiating the territory of re-enactment, particularly the UK artists Jeremy Deller (b. 1966), who won the Turner Prize in 2004; Tom McCarthy (b. 1969) and Rod Dickinson (b. 1965) in their collaborative projects; and photographer Jim Naughten.

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In 1989, Warren Neidich published his *American History Reinvented*, a vast project, using the medium of photography to engage in a discourse that goes further than the mere interpretation of history.¹ Within Neidich's many reconfigurations of history, a complex story is retold with layered and intricate methodologies, taking the viewer beyond memory, to uncharted territory where the line between truth and fiction becomes blurred. As Neidich's philosophy is deeply rooted in cognitive science, he claims that the human brain is currently undergoing a phase of "cyborgisation," due to immense and sudden changes in our media-centered technological environment. In his book *Blow-up: Photography, Cinema and the Brain* (D. A. P, 2003), Neidich proposes a model in which natural memory (those memories recorded through experience with the real world) and photographic memory (the production of memory constituted through the mind's interaction with the plethora of mediated images found in books, advertising posters, in family albums, museums, billboards, and film) are in competition for neural space.²

Given Neidich's emphasis on the formation of memories and their relationship to both authentic, lived experience and to photographic imagery, *American History*

Reinvented can best be discussed in the context of theories of replay, sampling, and re-enactment, and as part of event culture and mass media. Neidich is playful in his reinterpretation of historical events in American history, and tests notions of truth within the history of photography, particularly within photojournalism. His reinventions go beyond the world of historical evidence, and into the realm of creative photography, where the notion of truth is subjected to the bizarre, surreal ambience of staged museum settings and the other institutional spaces that Neidich has critiqued. (See, for example, "Gallery," p. 000: "Recoding American History, Roping off History," 1986.) Neidich's project crosses the line between documentary practice and conceptual art. As Pavel Büchler has argued:

A critical attitude towards older or concurrent (competing) modes of production is one of the most distinctive features of modern art. At its most radical, as for instance in 1960's conceptual art, it was this systematic scrutiny of the traditions and conventions of modernist photography that brought to the fore the possibilities of integrating photography's broader social functions, within art.³

Büchler puts forward the notion of "investigation" as the driving force behind this type of photography, and in this respect, Neidich's practice corresponds to the work of Victor Burgin (b. 1941), David Hilliard (b. 1964), and Bernd (1931–2007) and Hilla Becher (b. 1934). A consideration of more recent photography suggests how Neidich's *American History Reinvented* can be understood as a precursor to projects of contemporary practitioners negotiating the territory of re-enactment, particularly UK artists such as Jeremy Deller (b. 1966), who won the Turner Prize in 2004, Tom McCarthy (b. 1969) and Rod Dickinson (b. 1965) in their collaborative projects, and photographer Jim Naughten.

History and Re-Enactment, Then and Now

The role of the historian and the notion of what constitutes historical evidence have become more unstable in recent decades. The intervention of digital technology has revolutionized history-in-the-making, as well as the analysis and distribution of recordings of events. Neidich's 1989 project interrogated these changes at the very beginning of this paradigm shift, highlighting the speedy, almost seamless, revolutionary changes within the culture of information technology. Simultaneously, Neidich's work investigates issues of identity politics, and his method of exploration using historical evidence as a construction has only become more meaningful over time, and as the number of texts relating to these issues has increased.

Neidich's project questions the supposedly harmless nostalgia offered by "living history" museums and re-enactments, revealing their one-dimensional view of events, and unmasking the information received in this context as inauthentic and fictional. It is the institutional context of the museum and the presumption of photography's truthfulness that verifies the meanings attached to the reconstructed scenes. As one commentator has put it, "Neidich engages in an act of cynicism and originality...a fictional rectification of social roles that both pre- and postdates the famous Farm

Security Administration Project that established the important role of the photographer in America's social conscience."⁴

Theorist of photography Vilém Flusser has claimed that the machine has dominated the postindustrial age, but specifically in the mode of what he calls "apparatus": camera, computer, agencies of state, and market forces. Flusser insists that, "apparatuses were invented in order to function automatically, in other words independent of future human involvement. This is the intention with which they were created: that the human being would be ruled out."⁵ What Flusser puts forward is the notion of the photographer as a "passive" interloper in the photographic experience, secondary to what is made possible by the technology at hand. The machine controls the processes, and even though the photographer makes a choice in relation to how the photograph is taken and processed, he or she is secondary to an outcome predetermined by the existing technologies. Neidich's practice consistently and deliberately questions the apparatus as paradigm in his conceptual approach to reinterpretation, and in his groundbreaking project, he has self-consciously chosen handmade technologies in his interventions on prestructured historical events.

Neidich's exploration of photography, history, and reinterpretation includes, for example, the juxtaposition of albumen prints with a set of photographs after retouching, printed at an amateur photo lab on RC paper, a cheap plasticized imitation of real paper ("Gallery," p. 000: "Pseudo Event, Free Soil," 1987–1988). The rationale for this choice is threefold: firstly, to draw attention to the importance of photographic materials and their symbolic function in the determination of photographic meaning. We are reminded that photographic history itself is not, as Beaumont Newhall suggests in his canonical chronicle of the medium, a linear progression of techniques, technologies, and creative potential.⁶ Secondly, the use of RC paper draws attention to the material distinctions between the handmade prints throughout the history of photography and the mass-reproduced machine prints of today. Finally, this decision binds these images, through their materiality, to other images that derive from library files in which one never has a chance to inspect the original archive or touch the original prints.

Later in Neidich's ongoing project, he uses the giant Polaroid format in his appropriation and reshooting of the Associated Press propaganda photographs depicting Japanese Americans interned in relocation camps during World War II, fraudulently posed as happy and thriving individuals ("Gallery," p. 000: "News from No-Place, Return of Loved Ones," 1988–1989). These images operate alongside Neidich's staged photos of African Americans inhabiting the life and roles of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie in America. In this section ("Pseudo Event: the Politics of Appropriation"), the staging of historical events and their subsequent manipulation and falsification calls attention to the well-documented instances of similar alterations in archives such as those manufactured by Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, who felt it necessary to manipulate their own national photographic record in the hopes of solidifying personal legacies.⁷

Viewing and reinterpreting these photographs requires a leap of faith on the part of the viewer, for in the context of the institutional archive, we are predisposed to believe unquestioningly what the photograph tells us. Neidich's interventions reveal

how the use of RC prints in archives becomes part of the inbuilt illusion of “authenticity,” as the resin-coated paper in this process is sealed by two polyethylene layers, making it impenetrable to liquids. Since no chemicals or water are absorbed into the paper base, the time needed for processing, washing, and drying is significantly reduced in comparison to fiber-based papers. Resin paper prints can be finished and dried within twenty to thirty minutes. Resin-coated papers have improved dimensional stability, and do not curl upon drying. And so, as we observe the quickening of time, photos made in haste, and the intervention of modern photographic processes, there is the emphasis on durability over fragility and on the distance from the original photographic processes.

Neidich’s photographs are typically taken onsite with a 4 × 5 camera and rephotographed with a 35 mm camera to make the doppelganger in an act of self-appropriation. This type of assemblage is found in many of the series that make up *American History Reinvented*, as falsification becomes the believable norm. Each series utilizes a different kind of camera, lens, and format.

For “Aerial Reconnaissance Photographs: The Battle of Chickamauga” (this event originally took place 19–20 September 1863), the artist hired a twin-engine plane to fly over a Civil War re-enactment at a historic battlefield outside Chattanooga, Tennessee, in order to photograph it from the air; he then processed the resulting images in the archaic tintype format (“Gallery,” p. 000: “The Battle of Chickamauga,” 1990–1991, and “Chickamauga Double Line-up,” 1990). Here Neidich re-enacts Félix Nadar’s legendary balloon journey above Paris in 1858, but he also produces a dialogue with Edward Steichen’s famous aerial photographs first delineated in Allan Sekula’s pivotal study “The Instrumental Image: Steichen at War.”⁸ Again, Neidich’s use of tintypes oppositionally foregrounds the contemporary modernization of information gathering, museum culture, and memory. For this series, Neidich used a 35 mm camera with three different lenses—wide-angle, normal, and telephoto—to make pictures of the re-enactments.

Neidich’s work also draws our attention to present-day staged news events. From George W. Bush’s triumphant landing on an aircraft carrier to the annual Academy Awards ceremonies, we are overwhelmed by what Daniel Boorstin referred to as “pseudo-events” in which make-believe events are created only to be documented and distributed through media circuits for profit.⁹ These are woven into the daily menu of disasters, scandals, and gossip to be distributed worldwide on twenty-four-hour news channels hungry for fresh stories to disseminate to a public riveted to television sets and computer screens. In this evolving cultural-visual landscape, the conditions of the truth of the image can vary enormously.

Contemporary Art Practice and Re-enactment

One can trace a genealogy for Neidich’s work in early experimental art photography, including that of the Surrealists, whose “staged” photographs provoke visual discord, questioning the relationship between representation and reality. Here, silent dramas enhance for the viewer the strangeness of unlikely juxtapositions, as in the staged montages of Antonin Artaud (1896–1948) and Eli Lotar (1905–1969). The “performed

image” creates dissonance for the viewer, placing him or her in a separate, third space of observation, between reality and unreality. The questioning of what is real becomes a part of the viewer’s experience, but the scopophilic drive and desire to encounter the truth overrides and suspends the viewer’s disbelief.

As in Surrealism, Neidich’s camera acts as a scientific instrument that takes the place of the organ of sight in the detection of strange and reinvented realities. In Neidich’s framing and cropping, insertions, and playful rearrangements of reality, he offers up a hypertrophied real, where the viewer remains in a liminal state, between what has happened in the past and what changes have occurred in the re-enactment, and observes the actual physical interventions in the photographs that mediate between the two.

Neidich’s *American History Reinvented* looked forward perspicuously to myriad current art practices that engage with re-enactment, and in which artists restage events as investigations of current political and social conditions. Neidich’s work is also an examination of the problems of authentically performing the past. He analyzes re-enactment both as a cultural phenomenon and as a series of performances that aim to recreate past events accurately. Rather than simply perpetuating a complacent nostalgia for the past, a re-enactment as an art project may have the potential to prompt a critical reevaluation of historical narratives as singular isolated events.

Until recently, with the notable exception of Richard Schechner, there has been little written about the phenomena of the historical re-enactment.¹⁰ In the last two decades, however, studies on re-enactment produced within the fields of visual arts and performance studies have increased dramatically. Recently, scholars including Rebecca Schneider,¹¹ Peggy Phelan,¹² Baz Kershaw,¹³ and Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks,¹⁴ have been involved in a critical reevaluation of this field of investigation. A reexamination of Neidich’s photos within this discourse will contribute to scholarship in the field of performance studies regarding the role of repetition, mediatization, and disappearance in performance, while simultaneously examining the key problems of performing the past in postmodern culture, with particular focus on the emergent notion of authenticity or authentic experience.

Double-Take: Re-enactment in recent work

Jeremy Deller, the collaborators Tom McCarthy and Rod Dickinson, and Jim Naughten are influential and controversial UK-based artists experimenting in the area of event culture, and have all made re-enactment central to their oeuvre. By recreating on film the violent clash of the 18 June 1984 miners’ strike which took place in Orgreave, a small town near Rotherham in South Yorkshire, UK, on Sunday, 17 June 2001, the day before the seventeenth anniversary of the original strife, Deller offered a restaging of a political event that occurred during a period of immense change in UK politics under then-prime minister Margaret Thatcher. Artangel, the London-based public art commissioning agency, engaged Deller to film this re-enactment within an art context (Plates 1–2). This work has become pivotal in event culture, linked to art, and viewed in the cultural arena. What is striking is that Deller’s live re-enactment

was so realistic that it is virtually impossible to differentiate the recreated action from footage of the original confrontation. Deller has taken a further step in the falsification of historical evidence, as his intention to create a “double take” was also linked with the need to reinstate some of the trauma of that event. He described the undertaking this way:

Despite unpleasant cold & wet weather (in stark contrast to the blazing heat of June 1984), our 800 re-enactors and extras threw themselves into their roles. Because of the weather, uniform/period clothing was not fully worn until Sunday morning. “Riot Policemen” square-bashed and were trained by Lancashire Constabulary instructors in the use of long and short shields, whilst the “bobbies” practiced forming a cordon and holding their ground against the expected “pushes” by the “miners”. The latter practiced advancing and running away in loose formation, looking unorganised although for the purposes of our re-enactment, being highly organised through a “command structure” not dissimilar to our “police”.¹⁵

In addition to re-enactors, miners who were present at the historical event also took part, as did 280 local people. For these participants, a feeling of déjà vu became part of the experience. For Deller, this sense of the uncanny was intentional, as the experience of cultural forgetting became one impetus to make this work. By moving the context of viewing this work from newsreel/documentary film to art museum, Deller has discovered a new audience and generation of viewers for the dissemination of this event. Deller develops his ideas within the tradition of the exploration of history and authenticity that Neidich set out in *American History Reinvented*.

Rod Dickinson & Tom McCarthy’s installation, titled *Greenwich Degree Zero* (2006), including film footage (57 seconds, black and white, 35 mm, silent), was the first collaboration between artist Dickinson and artist/novelist McCarthy (Plate 3). This is an exhibition that interrogated in detail the role of media and technology in the construction and reconstruction of public experience and memory.

The artists’ starting point is a strange late nineteenth-century event: on the afternoon of 15 February 1894, a French anarchist named Martial Bourdin (1868–1894) was killed when the bomb he was carrying detonated. The explosion took place on the slope beneath the Royal Observatory in London’s Greenwich Park, and it was generally assumed that his intention had been to blow up this building—the place from which all time throughout the British Empire and the world was measured, and a prime symbol of science—“the sacrosanct fetish of to-day,” as Joseph Conrad (1857–1924) wrote in *The Secret Agent* in 1907.¹⁶

Using the mechanisms of historical representation, Dickinson and McCarthy reimagine the event as a successful attack on the observatory. Employing a similar methodology to Neidich, they infiltrate and twist the media of Bourdin’s time: creating a film shot on a hand-cranked Victorian cinematic camera depicting the burning observatory, reprinting existing 1894 newspaper reports and anarchist literature edited to fit their version of events, as well as video interviews with contemporary explosives experts and political historians. The installation reports an event that did not quite

happen, blurring the distinction between fact and fiction and relocating the genuine public outrage and hysteria about the threat of anarchist terror that prevailed in the 1890s in the ambiguous space of nonevent. Bourdin's death brought on a plethora of speculative stories in both the mainstream and underground media. Rather than try to establish the "truth," Dickinson and McCarthy use a form of repetition to reach back to the degree zero of time, mediation, and terror.¹⁷

Jim Naughten is a photographer who, as a child, was obsessed with his collection of toy soldiers, tanks, and all things military. He would build aircraft and hand paint in detail his toy soldiers. His family has strong military links: his grandfather was a "desert rat" who served with General Bernard Montgomery's 8th Army. It is no surprise, then, that as a photographer in adulthood, he has chosen re-enactment as the theme of his photographic practice. Yet Naughten's work is different in methodology and intention from Neidich's, Deller's, or Dickinson and McCarthy's.

The subject matter for Naughten involves an investigation into what lies behind the strange phenomena of re-enactment culture, especially for the individuals who take part. Over two years in Kent, in the countryside of South East England, Naughten made a digital record of the various battle re-enactments. During this period, his topology includes some five thousand shots, edited down to form a book of portraits of the re-enactors. Naughten is astonished at the seriousness of the sitters, and the attention to detail of their costume, hair, and accessories (Plate 4). Their "look" perfectly recaptures that of wartime Germans and Britons. As one critic of Naughten's work has proposed, "by standing outside his subjects, however close they may be to the fantasies of his childhood Naughten nonetheless sublimates his subjects by means of photographic technique...Jim Naughten's Re-enactors maintain their mystery. Nothing of their real lives is revealed."¹⁸

Naughten's project adds a new dimension to the subject of truth and the role of photography in reinventing history. The sense of the uncanny is again at play here: Naughten's perfect portraits pose interesting questions in relation to technological advances, as his flawless digital prints portray subjects whose passion compels them to mimic people from time past: a soldier, naval officer, or sergeant, and women who act as civilians on the sidelines. Under the guise of "living history," these individuals are also able to live out a fantasy or nostalgia for the past that emanates from all other areas of its representation within the modern technologies of the movie, the television drama, and the museum. Naughten's subjects are photographed with a plain white background, mimicking the straight photography of August Sander (1876–1964), or more recently the portraits of young bullfighters and mothers by Rineke Dijkstra (b. 1959).

Against this stark background, the viewer's gaze lands on the expressions of Naughten's subjects and on their pristine and perfect attire. In Sander's case this photographic trope was used to represent a stereotype, and in Dijkstra's case to critique the notion of the stereotype as well as the history of photography. In Naughten's work, the subjects remain deeply rooted in their own fantasies, highlighted against the stark background. We have no real sense of the individual; his subjects are expressionless and bland, apart from their extraordinary uniform costumes and their obvious commitment to re-enactment as a way of life.

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- 3 Pavel Büchler, "The Blind Train Spotter: A Delirium of Doubt," in *Where is the Photograph*, ed. David Green (Maidstone: Photoworks, 2003), 88.
- 4 Lew Thomas, "Picture Intimidation and the Return of the Vanquished," in Warren Neidich, *American History Reinvented*, 7.
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- 6 Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1949).
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- 18 Bill Kouwenhoven, "The Secret Life of Jim Naughten," *HotShoe* (October–November 2009): 46.