ART OF APPROPRIATION

RE-ENACTMENTS
DHC/ART FOUNDATION FOR CONTEMPORARY ART
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What does it mean to be original? Is true originality even possible? That was the underlying question of the recent show “Re-enactments” at Montréal’s DHC/ART Foundation for Contemporary Art. The exhibition featured a slate of world-renowned artists whose videos re-create or “re-author” other artworks. This idea, in itself, is not a particularly original one for an exhibition. Contemporary artists routinely incorporate—or even wholly appropriate—the images and narratives of others. Many use snippets of iconic Hollywood films, photojournalism, advertising, or famous artworks as a form of collective memory, fully expecting the viewer to “get” the reference. The challenge for appropriation art is to be as artistically and intellectually compelling as the original and therein lies the genius of “Re-enactments.” Curator John Zeppetelli has selected works that nearly all meet this challenge. The show was the perfect retort to cynics who—having seen too many insipid Marilyn Monroe mash-ups in galleries—conclude that appropriation art is nothing more than uninspired copycatting.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking piece in the show was Kerry Tribe’s uninspired copycatting. Perhaps the most thought-provoking piece in the show was Kerry Tribe’s video Here & Elsewhere (2002), in which an unseen male narrator asks a precocious 10-year-old girl a series of theoretical questions—questions loosely adapted from the experimental video France/En/Tear/Death/Scene/Enfants (1977) by Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Mieville. The narrator asks: Does a photograph of a dead person “take place” in the past, the present, or the future? The girl thinks it takes place in the past, but the narrator challenges her: Isn’t it also taking place in the present, since she is looking at it now, and in the future, since she is thinking about how the person is dead and will not exist in the future? This questioning goes on for ten minutes, with both the girl and the viewer being challenged to rethink their own preconceptions.

“Re-enactments” did not start with this piece, but it should have. It is an ideal introduction to the fluid meaning of images. In one telling moment, the narrator asks the girl, “Do you know what an image is?” Of course she does, she replies. Then she hesitates, unsure whether there are multiple possible answers. Indeed there are, as the rest of the exhibit proves. Harun Farocki’s video Deep Play (2007), for instance, shows multiple views of the same action from the 2006 World Cup Final. Screens cover every wall of the gallery, each showing a different vantage point of the same event. We see, all at once, the TV footage of the game, a chalk diagram of the action, player avatars, the fans in the stadium, and more. Deep Play is an intriguing reminder that whatever we are seeing, it is never the entire truth.

Another standout installation, Nancy Davenport’s “Weekend Campus” (2004), played with story in a different way. Her long, looping video of a college campus filled with traffic jams and car accidents is an homage to the famous tracking shot of a traffic jam in Godard’s film Week-End (1967). But whereas Godard used only one camera, moving in real time past the assembled actors, Davenport combines multiple images to create a false, yet compelling narrative.

Stan Douglas’s video installation “Inconsolable Memories” (2005) also created a new narrative by appropriating scenes from the classic Cuban film Memories of Underdevelopment (1968, by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea). A film’s meaning is not limited to its plot, Douglas implies, nor does reality have a clean beginning, middle, and end.

All the video installations play on continuous loops, which emphasized this break from traditional narrative structure. Even so, museum visitors tend to watch a video until it starts to repeat itself. To them, wherever they came in is the “beginning.” In a sense, this is a metaphor for how we view our own lives in the context of history: This is where we came in, so for us, this is where the story starts.

Appropriation art also reminds us that images and stories influence our own sense of identity. Most of us would accept on faith that a Beatles fan who reads Joan Didion is fundamentally different from a Metallica fan who likes action movies, even if we have no other basis for comparison. In western culture, our favorite songs and movies, the iconic news footage we experience, and the sports teams we root for (if any) are all part of how we define who we are.

Bad appropriation art fails because it merely uses well-known images to make a didactic and often sophomoric “statement.” In our own lives, however, the selective editing of culture—what we value, what we discard—is what makes each of us unique. The same is true of the best appropriation art. When an exhibition is as strong as “Re-enactments” the now-familiar idea of appropriation feels as fresh and new as if someone had just thought of it.

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