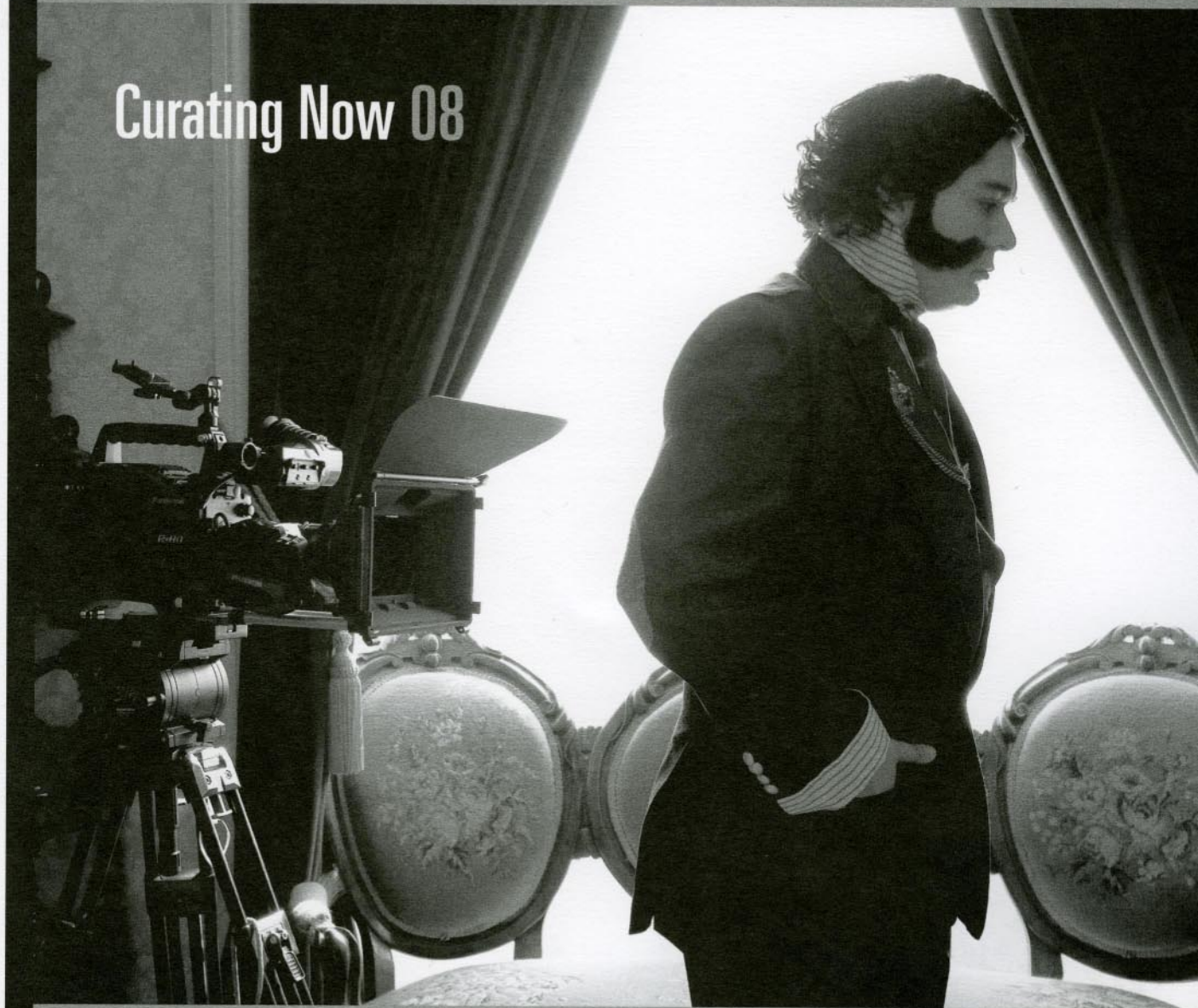


Curating Now 08





## History Doesn't Repeat Itself, but It Does Rhyme Maria Antelman, Julio Cesar Morales, and Mark Tribe in conversation with Sally Szwed

**T**his interview connects three artists who utilize historical reenactments in their practice as a means of simultaneously examining the past, present, and occasionally the future. Julio Cesar Morales is a Tijuana-born, San Francisco-based artist, educator, curator, and co-founder of Queen's Nails Projects in San Francisco's Mission district. His recent project, *Interrupted Passage* (2008), is a speculative reenactment of the events immediately preceding and during a feast that took place in the eight hours before General Vallejo's arrest. Artist Maria Antelman was born in Athens, Greece and now lives between San Francisco and New York City. She is the creator and publisher of *Ozon Magazine* and shows her work internationally and locally, most recently in Bay Area Now 5 at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. *Voyage: A Comprehensive Questionnaire* (2004) is a 5 minute video composed of photographs shot at the annual Monmouth Battle reenactment in New Jersey and a soundtrack. Mark Tribe is an artist, curator, and Assistant Professor of Modern Culture and Media Studies at Brown University. He is the founder of *Rhizome.org*, and co-author of *New Media Art* (Taschen, 2006). The Port Huron Project, which began in 2006, is a series of reenactments of public protest speeches from the New Left movements of the Vietnam era. The project has traveled to the original sites of many important political

speeches including *deFremery Park* in Oakland, California, *The National Mall* in Washington DC, and *Central Park*, New York City.

**Sally Szwed:** I am interested in the different uses of reenactment in your respective works, and its increasingly prevalent appearance in contemporary art in general. How do you see reenactment functioning differently in your work from traditional historical reenactment?

**Julio Cesar Morales:** *Interrupted Passage* is a project that is influenced by the events immediately preceding California's secession from Mexico. I attempt to illustrate this overlooked period of time by uniting three very distinct versions of that occasion from the perspective of the American, Mexican, and "official" Californian histories. These histories focus on General Vallejo's last hours in power in which he negotiated the future of California over an eight-hour feast prepared for his captors. The difference lies in this combination of perspectives, which negates any single dominant historical voice, and in their reduction to sound and motion only, as my project contains no dialogue.

**Maria Antelman:** I shot the images for *Voyage: A Comprehensive Questionnaire* at the annual

ABOVE:  
 Mark Tribe  
*The Liberation of Our People: Angela Davis, 1969/2008*  
 Courtesy of the artist  
 Photo: Nick Davis

RIGHT:  
 Maria Antelman  
*Voyage: A Comprehensive Questionnaire, 2004*  
 DVD (still)  
 Courtesy of the artist, and The Apartment, Athens, Greece

Monmouth Battle reenactment in New Jersey. Executed by heritage buffs from all over the United States, the reenactment is an elaborate two-day recreation of the battle with full period costumes, horses, guns, canons, the works. To accompany these visuals, I recorded a soundtrack that combines two sources. One is the voice of a medium channeling messages—promising a beautiful future that evades death, fear, and loss—from an alien entity to her human followers. The other is a series of questions derived from an extraterrestrial resource website with the purported aim of evaluating and categorizing alien sightings. The questionnaire is offered to website visitors as part of an ongoing project to prove and map the existence of extraterrestrial life.

This disjunct between the soundtrack and the reenactment imagery underlines the lack of connection between historical events and their interpretations, but also by presenting new kinds of folklore ultimately raises questions about the sanity of our society.

**Mark Tribe:** Each reenactment in the *Port Huron Project* series was staged at the site of the original speech and delivered by an actor or performance artist. When casting, I looked for performers with strong oratorical abilities and an understanding of

the subject matter rather than those who resembled the original speaker. The performers did not wear period costumes, and I directed them to deliver the speech in their own way and not to try to imitate the original speaker.

Outreach has been a big part of the project, both to build audiences and to connect with local communities. I organized community meetings in Oakland and Los Angeles, and worked with local organizations to reach out to their constituencies. Through these organizations, I was able to hire young people to help with the reenactments by operating cameras, taking photos, distributing flyers, performing as DJs, and cooking barbeques.

**SS:** Reenactments in the realm of contemporary art seem to be utilized as a way of exposing overlooked histories, correcting falsities, distorting perceptions of truth, or giving past issues new alignment with current issues. Which, if any, of these objectives were you considering during the conceptual stages of your project?

**JCM:** Yes, this project started with the statue in downtown Sonoma, which is dedicated to the raising of the Bear Flag by the Texas militia, or “founders” of California. The monument depicts an

idealized moment that is very different from Vallejo’s experiences in 1846. It symbolizes a vast distortion of variable truths in terms of the portrayal of the men who took part in the Bear Flag revolt and how they have become “legends.”

**MA:** My interest was to show how war, either as a game or as a reality, is timeless, perpetual, and absurd. I think I could have used any battle reenactment, from any historical moment, without changing the concept of the work. Maybe this reenactment is more funny than most. There’s also an element of absurdity in the fact that what history commemorates most is wars.

**MT:** My objectives had more to do with using the past as a mirror to look at the present. When I started teaching at Brown in September 2005, I was surprised by how little antiwar protest I found on campus. It was clear that my students cared deeply about American involvement in Iraq, about the Bush administration’s disregard for civil liberties and human rights, and numerous other issues, but they seemed to believe that resistance was futile. It is not hard to imagine why. In 2000, they witnessed a presidential election that appeared to many to have been stolen. In 2003, many students participated in the



largest antiwar protests in history, but the Bush administration hardly noticed. And in 2004, many of them worked on the Kerry campaign, only to see George Bush reelected by the narrowest of margins amid accusations of voting fraud.

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek argues that, “[t]hings look bad for great Causes today, in a ‘postmodern’ era when, although the ideological scene is fragmented into a panoply of positions which struggle for hegemony, there is an underlying consensus: the era of big explanations is over . . . in politics too, we should no longer aim at all-explaining systems and global emancipatory projects.”<sup>1</sup> In the absence of a unifying political theory, it has become difficult to sustain sweeping radical agendas. Today’s students stage small protests focused on specific issues or pursue public service. For them the “massive social movement” that Students for a Democratic Society President Paul Potter called for in “We Must Name the System”<sup>2</sup> exists only as history. It is difficult these days to think about radical politics and the place of protest in American culture without considering the legacy of the New Left movements of the 1960s and 70s, their charismatic young leaders, and their revolutionary aspirations.

The Port Huron Project seeks to take up this legacy in all of its unresolved complexity by reanimating largely forgotten yet remarkably illuminating historical speeches. It adopts the form of historical reenactment to intervene in public space and contemporary political discourse. It aims to produce experiences of temporal juxtaposition in which the complexity of historical transformations (such as the decline of radicalism in the face of a rising neoliberal consensus) are rendered evident.

**SS:** Why do you think so many artists working today are looking to the past and utilizing the reenactment as a tool to both reconsider history as well as examine the status quo?

**JCM:** I believe that this strategy is of interest to contemporary artists as it can encompass traditional as well as new and conceptual forms of art production. I think that artists have always sampled and created variations of historical events and brought them to light, going back as early as Goya’s *The Third of May* in 1808. I myself am inspired by contemporary Mexican cumbia bands that appropriate the music of 70s British rock groups like Pink Floyd to create new takes on classics and simultaneously copy,

destroy, and invent variations of each respective song. That to me is more in line with a critique of cultural history in the here and now.

**MA:** The feeling of time traveling in the fast information lane, the pessimistic times we are experiencing and the need for some kind of resistance in a media-saturated society make us want to pause and look at the past. The act of reenactment can refer to the circular nature of history, the impossibility of change, and the quest for authenticity.

**MT:** It’s a symptom of the postmodern condition: our primary relation to the past is no longer, as it was until about 40 years ago, one of novelty, innovation, or progress. It has become one of repetition, variation, recombination, and pastiche. In the 60s a new, radical student organization came up with a new name for themselves: Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In 2006 a new, radical student organization decided to give themselves a name from the history books: Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).

**SS:** Do you think reenactments presented under the context of contemporary art have less of a responsibility to be historically accurate than other historical reenactments? In your project where, if anywhere, did you intentionally utilize subjectivity?

**JCM:** We need to leave accuracy to the cultural anthropologists. Artists are able to translate historical material into a visual format that may have a longer lasting impact on a viewer or audience as opposed to a dry document. However, for my project I did collaborate with a food anthropologist on the recipes in order to get a good sense of what was available at the time, as only hints are given in historical material as to what this last feast may have consisted of.

**MA:** In *Voyage* the reenactment soldiers are guided to the battlefield by the words of an extraterrestrial medium. Incompatible worlds are brought together so that new meanings arise, where the logical and the nonsensical, the comical and the tragic coexist. Usually in my work I use direct sources from my surrounding physical reality and the Internet in the form of visuals, voices, and sounds. Then I juxtapose these disparate elements in an attempt to create fictional realities. I guess I am looking for accuracy and subjectivity or imagination at the same time. Is this possible?

**MT:** Yes. I didn’t intentionally utilize subjectivity, but I didn’t try to make my reenactments “historically accurate” either. The very notion of objective historical accuracy is problematic. I only intended my reenactments to have two things in common with the original events: the text of the speech and the site. Everything else, from how the speakers dressed and how they sounded to how I documented the event, was contemporary. If I had tried to make my reenactments more “accurate” by using costumes, antique microphones, etc., I would inevitably have introduced more subjective elements. The way I approached it was, if anything, less subjective.

**SS:** What role does the audience play in your work? Are they imagined to be passive viewers or engaged protagonists?

**JCM:** Within the project there was a series of food tastings in which I collaborated with the culinary anthropologist and also Max La Riviere-Hedrick, a chef and former school mate. We took all the information we had on the last feast and presented our interpretations during the tasting as a way to fundraise for the video reenactment. We invited a certain number of gallery patrons to the dinner and hosted about 4 dinners for people from 40 to 100 a night, they essentially ate the same dinner that Vallejo’s captors had that day in 1846.

**MA:** *Voyage* breaks with the linear narrative that is typically associated with historical trajectories and the film medium. Instead the narration is fragmented, complex, and multilayered; this effect works to disconcert the viewer, who must continually question the narrative and its meaning.

**MT:** At the events, members of the audience find themselves playing the role of protestors in the reenactment applauding, and shouting in response to the speaker. In this way, they are engaged not only as spectators but also as active participants in the production of the event. I feature the audience prominently in my documentation of the reenactments.

**SS:** Many artists working today are looking back to performance art from the 1960s and 70s and re-staging happenings and performances from the time. What do you think are the implications of reenacting a time- and place-specific event forty years later?

**JCM:** I think it is important to retain certain elements that made this work initially exciting and if an artist needs to recreate a happening or performance, it may create a bridge between the first iteration and its urgency now. As Mark Twain reportedly said, “history doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.”

**MT:** An example of this would be Marina Abramovic’s reenactment of VALIE EXPORT’s *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) as part of Abramovic’s *Seven Easy Pieces* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City (November 9–15, 2005). I wasn’t there, but I believe Abramovic reenacted this performance in the rotunda of Frank Lloyd Wright’s museum. Relocating the performance changes it in several ways, the most obvious of which is the legitimating effect of the museum’s cultural authority. One might read into your question an implicit ethical challenge based on the notion that, because we value authenticity in relation to history, infidelity to history is a bad thing. In response to such a hypothetical challenge, I would argue that Abramovic’s displacement of *Action Pants* from art cinema to museum is actually subversive—not of the museum’s cultural authority, but of the sexist exclusion of women’s performance art—particularly overtly sexual work—from the art historical cannon.

**SS:** Do you think that reenactments provide a realistic opportunity for physically and psychically entering into history or a version of history? When does the reenactment surpasses its status as a performance and become an authentic or original experience?

**JCM:** Yes, reenactments are a trope through which you can erase, cut, paste, re-introduce, and re-imagine history according to personal resolution. If successful, they can transform a specific history into an experience which is capable of a deeper significance. It’s a stretch, but The Cure’s cover of Jimi Hendrix’s most popular song, *Purple Haze*, completely makes the original disappear, wiping the slate clean for a new experience.

**MA:** Approaching a reenactment from a realistic viewpoint does not work, as there will always be an awareness that it is just a “copy.” However, if the performance is thought of as a “copy” and if it dwells in this reality, then every time it is



Julio Cesar Morales, *Interrupted Passage*, 2008  
Production shot. Courtesy of the artist

viewed one can observe how by relating differently to the “here and now” it becomes an original experience.

**MT:** I’m not sure what you mean by realistic. I do think reenactments can produce powerful emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic experiences. And I would argue that reenactment does not need to surpass its status as performance in order to provide authentic, original experiences for audiences. All experience is, almost by definition, original and authentic. Whether or not reenactments themselves can be authentic or original is another question. And to that question, I would answer: yes, but who cares? Originality and authenticity are overrated.

1 Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, (New York: Verso, 2008) 1.

2 Potter delivered this speech on April 17, 1965 on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Tribe staged a reenactment of this speech in July, 2007.