



**FAIL
AGAIN,
FAKE
BETTER**

SELECTIONS FROM
THE 13TH ANNUAL YORK UNIVERSITY
ART HISTORY GRADUATE STUDENT SYMPOSIUM

KAPSULA

SPECIAL ISSUE

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Untitled image

Taken in the yard of the Academy of Fine Art, Munich, Germany, Winter 1985. Photographer unknown.



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CAPITALISM AND CONTEMPORANEITY: On Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*

EDWARD BAAH

On the respective topics of failure and forgery, Jeremy Deller's 2001 performance piece, *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001)^[1] is particularly germane. In confronting the defeat and dejection of a past politics, particularly by recreating the historical failures that weigh upon the present, this work comes to define our current reality as one born of failure itself. Of course, this is not to understand "failure" in its conventional, negative sense, but to describe a position from which to approach any sort of progressive politics. In light of the "triumphs" of globalization, the unabated advance of neo-liberal rationality and corporate culture and the cultivation of political power in favour of such forces, one might wonder if failure does not represent the paradigmatic condition of contemporary socio-political consciousness (if not that of the post-1968, or at least post-Berlin Wall, era). That is to ask: is failure a tenable condition by which opposition can be, or in fact is, articulated—at least to the extent that it urges us to think and act outside the cognitive and ideological structures of victory, success and productive functionality? Inasmuch as failure represents a conscientious opting-out of this overarching mindset—a refusal to take part in the perpetuation of success as a force of material and cultural production—it serves as a pre-condition for an interminable drive toward the just. In a world in which, *pace* Beckett, one can't go on but must go on, one can only aspire to fail better, lest one realizes a politics for which *realization* constitutes regressive totalization.

This is the sense in which I want to consider Deller's piece, a large-scale dramatic re-enactment of the so-called "Battle of Orgreave" that occurred in the eponymous Northern English coal-mining town. The battle, a clash between miners and police that marked a climactic moment in the former's 1984 strike, has from its outset attained notoriety in English socio-political history. Nevertheless, as Deller's impetus to re-enact it suggests, the critical immediacy of the event has faded from the national imagination: as Ralph Rugoff explains, "the collective memory of this 'battle' ha[s] fallen prey to social amnesia that accompanied New Labour's 'Cool Britannia' make-over (which was predicated on keeping a distance from anything to do with aggrieved unions and class confrontation)." ^[2] Indeed, the strike itself marked an historic turning point in the political life of Britain, inasmuch as it marked the Thatcher government's first successful attempt to defeat the unions—unions that, as Stuart Hall describes, the Thatcher government "regarded as one of the principal forces blocking the path to privatisation and the reconstruction of Britain as a neo-liberal 'market-society.'" ^[3] Given, then, the dominance of Thatcherism that followed the strike, and the further development of post-industrial capitalism under New Labour, history has not favoured the losers. Hence, it is against dubious historicizations that conceive the strikers' defeat as a neo-liberal triumph over organized labour and the welfare state that Deller reconsiders Orgreave's legacy; as such, he calls for



Orgreave's revival in collective memory alongside a reappraisal of how one can or should represent such socio-political events within the project of constructing history.

To this end, Deller adopts the vernacular of historic battle re-enactments (a longstanding tradition in British culture), employing roughly eight hundred members of historical re-enactment societies and two hundred former miners to re-stage "the battle." Assembling in Orgreave en-masse and in full costume, the re-enactors dramatized the stand-offs and violent confrontations that occurred between police and miners, including scenes of grouped picketers collectively chanting, waves of riot police chasing miners down fields and the brawls fought between these groups. In the absence of a definitive account of the event, Deller predominantly based this portrayal off testimony he received from former participants, who were thus permitted

to invest their own experiences into the account. (Among the primary documents accompanying the work is a book of first-hand accounts of, and original songs and poems from, the strike. Likewise, the re-enactment itself was subsequently broadcast on television, in a documentary format that featured interviews Deller conducted with the former participants.)^[4] To be sure, the prominence of Deller's research (which he conducted for two years) is all the more significant given the extent to which the British media intensely overdetermined the original event: the pervasive influence of populist, right-wing tabloids purveying the incumbent ideology of Thatcherism played a significant role in determining the representation of the strike, as did, alternately, the countering voice of left-leaning papers. This media battle, in which different sides fought over the representation of miners, their clashes with police and the public persona of National Union of Mineworkers leader, Arthur Scargill, rendered

the strike, and no less “the battle,” a most divisive issue. Consequently, all subsequent representations of the event have had to contend with the ideologically determined simulations by which the media constructed it. Deller’s efforts in *re-constructing* it, then, work to highlight this very constructedness, and so consider how Orgreave’s iterations have determined the meanings and functions it acquires in public consciousness.

On a less literal level, the work depicts the changing face of British society following the strike. Against the growing order of economic neo-liberalism that the Thatcher government helped spread throughout the “developed” West, Deller faces a larger challenge: representing these scarcely visible and increasingly naturalized socio-economic shifts within the spaces of working and middle-class life he depicts. In this respect, my concern is that this neo-liberal order places great pressure on history itself: the ideological naturalization of neo-liberalism occurring between 1984 and 2001 (which has since only intensified), and which saw a decisive victory in Thatcher’s surmounting of once deeply powerful unions, demands efforts to represent these socio-economic shifts as historic constructions, rather than accepted states of socio-political nature. The work of defining contemporary socio-political consciousness thus necessitates a significant dosage of self-critical history in order to demystify the hegemony of capitalism in the age of globalization. The task Deller sets, then, is to delve into history in order to establish narratives that counter those instilled by accepted neo-liberal myths. In doing so, he forwards terms with which to critically think about art and politics in contemporary Britain.

As a young artist working at the turn of the millennium, Deller’s work functions in ambivalent relation to the socio-cultural circumstances that affect artistic production in his time and place. Like many of his peers, he works with an eye to mass culture, media and national identity; however, he arguably resists the aesthetic pandering and marketability that was particularly pronounced in the worst of British art of the time. On this point, we may take our cue from Julian Stallabrass, whose 1999 book *High Art Lite* charts the dominant vicissitudes of British art in the 1990s. In particular, Stallabrass describes how encompassing economic and market

forces shaped the ground for a new generation of artists in the UK (i.e. the “young British artists” or *yBas*, a term Stallabrass rejects in favour of the more derisive “high art lite”) to come to the fore. For instance, Stallabrass cites the 1989 UK recession as a condition of possibility for high art lite’s emergence, given the extent to which economic downturns destabilized the UK art market on both domestic and international scales. As local galleries fought to stay afloat, as artists struggled to show (let alone sell) their work and as collectors found themselves unable to afford pricey international art, a marked turn to the new, local and DIY took hold. (For instance, artists began using abandoned spaces to curate work from their own social circles while arch-collectors like Charles Saatchi began to take especial notice—particularly, in Saatchi’s case, after financial stress led him to sell off his own lavish international art collection.) [5] On the other side of this equation, Stallabrass describes how this turn toward young British art brought with it new artistic interest in mass culture and media (and implicitly, national identity), suggesting a bridging of high and low through a demystification of artistic elitism. The result, however, was a pointed increase in efforts to publicize and market the artist-qua-image, such that most of this art—still heavily entrenched in high-art-market culture—lost in criticality what it gained in accessibility (hence: “high art lite”).

What, then, does this account tell us about *The Battle of Orgreave*? Aside from perhaps explaining Deller’s DIY approach and interest in mass media, culture and national identity, it expounds the root material conditions that influenced art production of his time and place. In particular, we may read Deller’s work vis-à-vis Stallabrass’s intent to critique the received narrative of contemporary British art: “a tale of tough entrepreneurs braving the harsh circumstances of the recession to produce an art fit for the bracing climate of the untrammled free market, and capable of holding its own against the spectacular productions of mass culture.” [6] Moreover, we may locate Deller’s work in relation to the fact that the UK recession’s effects on British art parallel, as Stallabrass hints, “the successive recessions that tore up British manufacturing industry and led to the rise of service-oriented businesses.” [7] I am specifically interested in this idea because it concerns the same socio-political shift *The Battle of Orgreave* points to: the turn to a post-Fordist economy of immaterial production that has obscured the traditional socio-political role of the industrial working class (that which Northern

English mining unions exemplify, for example). This form of post-Fordist immaterial labour, coupled with the globalized dispersion of production that neo-liberalism has allowed (e.g. through pervasive outsourcing), has come to increasingly represent the face of contemporary multinational capitalism in the developed West. As a result, art faces a new set of responsibilities in contending with the intrusion of capitalist hegemony in the cultural sphere, particularly with respect to the changing avenues by which artistic production and labour enters into the market. In sum, one can then critique high art lite to the extent that it embraces the marketing of lifestyle and the aggressive commodification of contemporary capitalism (here we need only think of the excesses of Damian Hirst's spectacular, hypercommodified art) and for thereby submitting to a post-industrial capitalist rationality. Recalling Stallabrass, it should be clear how, in the face of these socio-economic shifts, much art of this time and place trades in its critical autonomy precisely to enter into the untrammelled free market and the spectacular production of mass culture.

To the extent that a work like *The Battle of Orgreave* resists these tendencies, it does so by countering the neo-liberal climate in which they have flourished. In addition to eschewing the private art market (inasmuch as the work was made for Artangel, a not-for-profit public art agency) *The Battle of Orgreave* takes a critical stance against the encroachment of capitalist ideology into contemporary art production. In contrast to the aestheticization of neo-liberal politics one finds with the yBas (those accordingly dubbed "children of Thatcher"), Deller makes the social conditions underlying the former his aesthetic focus. This amounts to setting out what Frederic Jameson defines as "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system..." Within Jameson's canonical theorization of postmodernism as the manifest cultural logic of late capitalism, such practices of cognitive mapping represent a response to the subjective spatial and temporal disorganization found in contemporary culture. These practices thus serve as means by which to locate subjectivities and identities in relation to an otherwise fragmented experience of a world multinational capitalism has suffused. It is as such, Jameson further writes,

that "we may be able to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our spatial as well as social confusion." Jameson's account of postmodernism thus remains useful not only for elaborating this spatial and social confusion as an effect of advanced capitalism, but also because it simultaneously reveals the temporal and historical complexities the latter involves. This is to say, the overall transformations multinational capitalism heralds, including its productions of space and its intrusions into the field of culture, equally signal a crisis in the experience of history. Just as, for instance, globalized flows of capital witness the deracination of place within the increasingly virtual space of finance, so too is time strained by this logic. Hence:

The crisis in historicity now dictates a return, in a new way, to the question of temporal organization in general in the post-modern force field, and indeed, to the problem of the form that time, temporality, and the syntagmatic will be able to take in a culture increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic. If, indeed, the subject has lost its capacity actively to extend its pro-tensions and re-tensions across the temporal manifold and to organize its past and future into coherent experience, it becomes difficult enough to see how the cultural productions of such a subject could result in anything but "heaps of fragments" and in a practice of the randomly heterogeneous and fragmentary and the aleatory.

A consideration of this disorganization of temporal experience brings us to *The Battle of Orgreave's* most pointed function, which is to intervene in the experience of history to not only map subjectivities but to articulate critical positions from which they may be redefined. In other words, in remaking past events Deller participates in the present making of history so that alternate narratives may emerge from it. Meanwhile, in eschewing received representations that ignore or dubiously interpret Orgreave's past, he opts to make history a collective, participatory and immediate experience. In sum, he makes the representation of history—that is, its coterminous interpretation and enactment—the material by which he effects his critique. As such, this relation to historiography evinces what Hal Foster has identified as an "archival impulse" (or, more simply, a turn to archival methods) that has flourished in recent art. As Foster observes, a newfound concern with history and his-

torical investigation has led inquiring artists to turn to the more maligned and forgotten people, places and things of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In addition to an interest in historical research, this impulse manifests itself as new form of archive-making in and of itself, given the efforts of artists to establish their own informal means of ordering unofficial histories. For example, in the case of *The Battle of Orgreave* (and in addition to the broadcast documentary feature and book that accompany it), the work conventionally appears in galleries as a kind of museological archive, complete with artefacts, illustrated timelines, accessible books and audio recordings, vitrines and a projection of the documentary. This is a work, essentially, that is distinctly the product of Deller's extensive research; its function, accordingly, is to create and offer a foundation of knowledge by which to situate oneself in relation to history—or, more precisely, to navigate the archives through which one comes to understand history in relation to oneself and vice versa. Indeed, the point is not simply to assert another set of historical truths legitimated by the institutional function of the museum, but to engage discussion within informal settings. This model thus outlines new terms with which to construct historical knowledge, doing so in ways that allows participants and viewers to redefine subjectivity through the development of informal historical archives.

Moreover, this impulse works in distinction to the radical temporal compression of advanced capitalism—the amnesiac immediacy of the postmodern present—to undo a sense of subjective desensitization to the experience of history. Recreating an event from less than two decades past—or as Deller notes, from within living memory — counters a general sense of alienation from one's own history. Against the temporal condensation of postmodernism and the obscuring of history that is endemic to advanced capitalism, this reenactment

of history decompresses memory and expands time. In sum, it opens avenues of historical knowledge that denaturalize neoliberalism's ahistoricity and so allow one to understand one's location within an expansive social history. In this respect, Deller furthermore evokes what Mark Godfrey has labelled “the artist as historian,” which is to say that Deller takes on the task of not only representing history, but of actively and strategically working within its structures. Here, art becomes a vehicle to “invite viewers to think about the past; to make connections between events, characters, and objects; to join together in memory; and to reconsider the ways in which the past is represented in wider culture.”

And it is precisely as such that *The Battle of Orgreave*, Godfrey himself writes, “point[s] to the way in which English history tends to be addressed only when romanticized and no longer deemed to be of political impact.”

As such, *The Battle of Orgreave* works upon these historical perversities in order to conjure Orgreave's present relevance within the contemporary experience of history. Against the postmodern disorientation of time that undermines the relation between past, present and future, and which consequently renders history flat and impenetrable, Deller's project attempts to impart a sense of historical consciousness by staging history and, in the same inextricable gesture, its representation. As such, it invokes history while undermining the authority it assumes in its hegemonic form, thereby disassembling the imposed historical structures that neglect the political import of Orgreave's past. In this capacity, Deller finds a critical passage between (to borrow Godfrey's categories) the increasingly amnesiac nature of globalized capitalist culture and mass media's increasingly spectacularized and romanticized representations of history. Deller constructs a history that is at once present, critical and self-critical, and that neither renders its object a mute simulation nor a hazy, romantic vision; instead, he iterates history through its intimate relation to its spaces and to those it has directly affected. He does so, moreover, by extending that intimate relation to the wider collectivity of the work's participants and, indeed, to its viewers. Deller therefore operates as a critical historian, insofar as “the critical historian,” Godfrey notes via Hayden White, “must proceed on the basis of the realization that she has to invent a language adequate to the representation of historical reality for her own time and place of work.”

In sum, a historiographic or archival approach not only illuminates the particularities of Deller's work, but effectively locates the political functions of its most critical expressions. Indeed, Deller takes history on as a system that has become inextricable from its ideological perversions, and so operates both in and against it. He offers a history through his own work while demanding a critical meta-historical analysis that should allow us to situate our and other histories into a larger framework, namely one that takes into

account the ideological mediations of contemporary capitalist culture. Thus, as Benjamin Buchloh describes in another context:

The telling of history as a sequence of events acted out by individual agents is displaced by a focus on the simultaneity of separate but contingent social frameworks and an infinity of participating agents, and the process of history is reconceived as a structural system of perpetually changing interactions and permutations between economic and ecological givens, class formations and their ideologies, and the resulting types of social and cultural interactions specific to each particular moment.

[17]

Viewing *The Battle of Orgreave* in this vein, we may begin to see how it instances a politicization of aesthetics by intervening in the cultural productions of capitalist hegemony. It does so by not only reconstructing history from the ground up, but by doing so in a way that is inclusive of the many factors—be they people, places, objects, or practices—that converge in the making of the work and of history. Finally, by iterating itself in the fallout of the past's failed political aspirations, *The Battle of Orgreave* reveals the quality of our present condition, in which yesterday's utopian goals have fallen out of reach. Of course, it is only in the very absence and failure of utopia that one can continue to move in the direction of that which utopia promises but can never deliver. *The Battle of Orgreave* makes no such promises and holds no illusions that it can reproduce the original event in order to retroactively achieve its failed goals; instead, it urges us to take up its expanded history in the present, to adopt a history of failure, in order to orient ourselves toward a different future.

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