

# Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag SONNTAG IM PARK

## Same Old Songs

by Christian Koch

More than 20 years after the provisional downfall of the experiments in socialism, we appear to regard the notion of revolution with mere nostalgic sublimation. We security fanatics regard this past in which nothing was certain but everything seemingly possible as the old century, whose ramifications for the present we diligently ignore. Is this historical amnesia perhaps already rooted in the principle of the revolutionary movement, which aims at an ideal beyond history? Or is it the fault of the impatience of technical apparatuses invented for archiving purposes? Do the machines revolt as a result of going haywire, breaking down or wearing out? Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag's most recent video installation poses this question in face of the polyphony of archival decay, as in: What if everything we see and hear today were to carry inside itself the losses and mistakes of the entire past? What would we have to hold on to? These doubts appear to belong to the nostalgic, reacting against the uncertainties of the present, afraid of the future, and mistrustful of utopias. Instead of answering this question, *Sonntag im Park* creates its own notion of revolution from the perspective of memory, in particular technically assisted memory.

The etymology of the word "revolution" contains two contradictory ideas of historical development. For example, the English word "revolve" means mainly to turn, to rotate, but also to renew. Is then the movement of human destiny in time directed at an ultimate aim (such as paradise or communism) or does it instead rotate, repeating the same again and again in cycles? In 1882, Nietzsche introduced the idea of the eternal return,<sup>1</sup> designating the radical repetition of all history beyond analogies and similarities. The other major theory of history from the 19th century, Marxism, treats history instead as a dialectical class struggle with the aim of communism. Marx coined the phrase of permanent revolution,<sup>2</sup> and it is immediately clear that the immanent critique of the status quo is surprisingly similar to Nietzsche's ethos of evaluating your own behaviour in terms of the eternal return. Gilles Deleuze combines these two figures of thought, making repetition (or eternal return), the "twin damnation of habit and memory" and thus "thinking the future".<sup>3</sup> The revolutionary aspect of the notion of repetition is the inclusion of forgetting in the process of memory itself, which then becomes a "positive force". This forgetfulness appears in Sonntag's video installation as a failure on the part of technical media.

*Sonntag im Park* connects three fixed video installations: One shows a park in the historical neighbourhood Coyoacán in Mexico City; a third shows Diego Rivera's mural *Sueño de una tarde dominical en la Alameda Central* (Dream of a Sunday afternoon in Alameda Park) from 1947, now installed in that same park in Mexico

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1 Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Viertes Buch Nr. 341. In: Nietzsche KSA 3, p. 570.

2 Cf. Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, *Ansprache der Zentralbehörde an den Bund* (1850). In: MEW 7, p. 244-254.

3 Gilles Deleuze, *Differenz und Wiederholung*. 2. Ed. München 1997, p. 23. (Translation: SB)

City, in the Museo Mural de Diego Rivera. Sonntag shows the images in Halle in sequence on a screen that can only be viewed from a distance in sober black and white. The original sound from the three locations runs in sync with the images whereby the sound belonging to the image currently shown is brought out somewhat more strongly. Among others there is the sound of the organilleros (hurdy-gurdy men), still there today in Mexico City and sounding almost like contemporary music, often using instruments from 1873 by the Berlin firm Frati & Co. The technical innovation that was crucial for these instruments – Jacquard’s combination of punch cards and cylinder drive – was patented in 1842. It works by means of a perforated paper roll on a cylinder with moving rods that project forward when they hit a perforation in the paper, releasing air into the pipe over a metal tongue. The use of the bands over the century has “inscribed itself into the discrete music machine’s hardware and software”.<sup>4</sup> The holes become larger with wear, holding the rods too long and at the wrong places. Sonntag uses the resulting dissonances, prolonging slightly the background sound tracks in correspondence to the hurdy-gurdys’ tempo fluctuations.

The synchronisation causes Rivera’s mural to merge through the ambient local sound into the two other locations, constituting a memory place of the artist. The mural weaves the history of the Mexican revolution, Rivera’s own life story and the history of Mexican art into a huge tableau. At the centre of the picture is the artist as a child, holding the hand of a calavera (traditional costumed skeleton), his wife Frida Kahlo and other important people in his life, surrounded by figures from the pre-revolution Díaz era and the leaders of the revolution. In his late period, Rivera employs techniques from the late 19th century,<sup>5</sup> casting a nostalgic glance at the past as it is present to his recollection. The process of history is transubstantiated in the “dream”, transmuted into the simultaneity of the painting, which represents the failures of memory outside of time, like in dreams.

The initial question of the nostalgic forgetting of history remains open in Sonntag’s installation. He chooses an image of a place which is itself nostalgic; the park as idyll. The park houses a museum for a painting that elevates the nostalgic gazing at a vanished epoch to the status of a principle of style. The organilleros play instruments from the 1910s whose dissonance causes the inhabitants of Mexico City to remember the “old times” that they themselves never lived through. “The people at the piazza, where organilleros play simultaneously on three different corners, gave nostalgic answers to my question of how they cope with the cacophony: It’s the sound of the good old time – the revolution.”<sup>6</sup> Nostalgia is perhaps the state of floating you get in dreams, suspending time and making everything appear as though it had already been there. Sonntag leaves the viewer of his installation in precisely this state of suspension by presenting a subjective recollection of Mexico. By digitally prolonging the suspensions caused by the defects in the organs, he causes the reference system to fall apart visually and sonically that appeared to hold the piece

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4 Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag in an E-Mail to the author from 31 July, 2012. He writes further: “The interpretation and reinterpretation of image and sound generating technology is for me the a priori of the avant-garde in its fidelity to a linear modernity.” (Translation: SB)

5 Cf. Rochfort’s studies, in which he views Rivera’s late work as a repudiation of the avant-garde he once intensively assimilated, above all cubism and expressionism. Desmond Rochfort, *Mexican Muralists: Orozco, Rivera, Siqueiros*. London 1992.

6 Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag in an E-Mail to the author from 31 July, 2012. (Translation: SB)

together. By defamiliarizing both the sense of history as consistent and linear as well as memory itself, whose process of decay he demonstrates, he generates something new. Amongst the ruins of the Schauburg in Halle, via the recomposition of historical vestiges, slowly decomposing in memory, a new image of the revolution is generated; revolution as a movement directed toward a future that lies in the past.

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