

## Tobias Rosenberger The An-Archic Device

### The Sublime Was Now or The Automatic Conquest of Mexico

by Ingmar Lähnemann

With *The An-Archic Device* from 2009 Tobias Rosenberger has created a complex machine, which he himself characterises as “something between a showcase, a punch and judy show, and a street altar”<sup>1</sup>. It is complex in technical construction, combining rotating mechanics with a modified screen for video sequences. Its complexity is however primarily in terms of content. The artist references the text *The Conquest of Mexico* by the French author, theatre director and actor Antonin Artaud, an associate of the surrealists. The text is for Rosenberger not only a reference source for the artwork, it is also a consciously subjective interpretation of the country. The artist went there in 2009 with a stipend from the Goethe-Institut in Mexico and Werkleitz in order to create an artistic model by means of a personal juxtaposition of Artaud and Mexico.

The resulting machine makes the same balancing act that Rosenberger undertook with his personal conquest of Mexico. On one side, Artaud’s cryptic text is transposed directly onto the stage according to the author’s instructions. On the other side, the machine provides the recipient with a broader space for experience of Mexico than Artaud’s play itself, while containing to the same extent Rosenberger’s experiences of the place. The essential thing is that the experiential space – made for the recipient and as a narrative space for the artist – is a subjective, preformed, dreamlike Mexico of their own fancy, just like Artaud’s reference text.

Among the countries of this earth people dream of going to between Iceland and Australia, Mexico sticks out (as a place of exile), both in the historical fictions of socialism as in those of surrealism. Artaud’s *Conquest of Mexico*, which constitutes the essence of his concept of the theatre of cruelty, is like André Breton’s characterisation of Mexico as surrealist country par excellence an example of the reinterpretation of personal experience in terms of preconceptions about history and culture. While Artaud’s text seems little up to date as a travel guide in the 21st century, its radical subjective projection of expectations and experiences onto the country are nonetheless inevitably fascinating for an artist, especially a former student of theatre theory like Rosenberger.

It is curious, especially in the context of the surrealist, dream/nightmare-like reference text, that Rosenberger, after choosing Artaud as a source of reference, then arrived in the Mexican capital at the exact moment in 2009 when the country was paralysed by the swine’s flu that was currently holding the world in suspense. With Artaud’s text *The Theatre and the Plague* in mind he could observe directly how life and behaviour change in a society confronted with an epidemic. At the same time

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1 Cf. <http://www.tobiasrosenberger.de/De/Arbeiten.html> [25. Juli 2012]

as he created an apparatus as the definitive experiential space for Artaud's theatre, Mexican reality confirmed Artaud's analysis and his central metaphor for theatre: "The plague uses dormant images, a latent disorder, and pushes them suddenly into the most extreme gestures; and theatre also takes gestures and pushes them to the limit ... it rediscovers the notion and figures and symbols-types ..."2 Before the artist demonstrated to visitors his own apparatus for conquering Mexico, he himself was seized by the same surrealist mood that saturates Artaud's text and supplies Rosenberger's apparatus with its ultimate mission.

The *An-Archic Device* thus unifies Artaud's and Rosenberger's distorted conquest of Mexico, which serves as an associative point of departure for a piece of drama, a backdrop, a dream, a Mexican experiential space and a surface for subjective projections for the individual recipient left to their own devices. The artist has organised his work in such a way as to make it only approachable one at a time. As an ironical little reminder of interactivity and the question of the value of the artwork, the apparatus requires a 10 peso piece to get started. Rosenberger's own definition of the artwork as a street altar is a just characterisation, since the *The An-Archic Device* is intended for private devotion with the devices of a showcase and a punch and Judy show, a sensually possessing machine whose stimuli – occurring in constantly changing, nuanced combinations – can neither be attributed nor put in context. The impressions the piece delivers are bereft of rationality and sense and can at best be described by a renewed reference to Artaud: "And now we see before us a battle of symbols, charging each other in an impossible trampling: because theatre can only exist when the impossible has begun in reality and poetry feeds and overheats the symbols made real."3 Rosenberger deploys wordplay in the title, reminiscent of surrealist techniques and Duchampian double meaning, making clear that he wants to generate an "archic" complex with the cathartic effect of antique tragedy in addition to the machine's obvious anarchic nature. This also requires that Rosenberger's automatic play – resulting the same way as automatic writing, hallucinogenic drug experiences and chains of association in the surrealist exquisite corpse – is conceived as a direct juxtaposition of performance and recipient.

As far as possible, Rosenberger has taken Artaud's *Conquest of Mexico* literally, and the piece reveals diverse references to Artaud's Mexican paradigm. In correspondence to the four acts of Artaud's piece, there are four rotating backdrops, abstracted doll's houses in a pre-Columbian looking aesthetic, whose forms are only vaguely visible behind the screen of the machine. The figures in the video on the pyramid from Teotihuacán, can be read as the first act, as the "image of waiting Mexico" (Artaud). The two male figures can be read as embodying Cortez und Montezuma, the two protagonists from acts two and three: in the meantime, like an Ariadne's thread, automated, ritualised violence in the aesthetic representation of the pre-Columbian Codex Cospí, ironically ruptured by the animation of the Aztec drawings from the Codex, are reminiscent, in the context of the piece as a whole, of gambling machines and kitsch pop clichés of Mexican culture.

These are nevertheless just intimations of Artaud's ideas and of the images that could represent Mexico. Rosenberger's many-layered, sensual, ultimate (analytical)

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2 Antonin Artaud, *Le Théâtre et la Peste*. In: *Le Théâtre et son Double*, 1964, Paris, p. 38.

(Translation SB)

3 Ibid.

surrealism-machine shows that Artaud, the archetypal Mexico traveller, was in Mexico to look for the sublime, the experience of transcendence, which his theatre of cruelty in its concrete form as *The Conquest of Mexico* represents. While the text in Rosenberger's translation reads all the more as a sublimation, the artist's *An-Archic Device* offers the recipient a narrative that functions subliminally, anarchically allowing him to put together his own story – a subliminal sublimation machine of the sublime for 10 pesos and as such in every way an appropriate artistic response to an old aesthetic question, that becomes devastatingly infectious again and again, as demonstrated by the example of Rosenberger's Mexico.

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