



# 612.43 WEISS IS ALMOST CINEMA, IT STOPS JUST BEFORE IT REALLY BECOMES CINEMA

Interview with Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag  
ARIE ALTENA

The artistic roots of German media artist Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag reach back to minimal- and concept art, as well as to new and experimental music. In installations, videos and sound works (such as the different versions of *Minimal Disco*), he examines human perception of light, sound and space. He is extremely interested in both scientific and philosophical issues, and reflections on the history of modernism lie at the centre of his work. He has also collaborated with scientific laboratories, especially for his SonArc::project, in which he searched for the essence of electricity and the possibility of domesticating lightning.

Sonic Acts met Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag in Middelburg, in the hours prior to his *612.43 WEISS* work opening as part of an exhibition at the Kabinetten of the Vleeshal. We started by discussing this audiovisual installation, but Sonntag hit upon many other issues as well, from modal jazz and the use of multiphonics by trombone player Albert Mangelsdorff (Sonntag used to play the trombone and currently prepares a work on Mangelsdorff and the Munich Olympics) to German media theory and the relationship between art, academic research and scientific think-tanks. This edited version of the interview primarily focuses on *612.43 WEISS* and the subject of cinema.

AA 612.43 *WEISS* is a work with very slow movement. It is about Stalingrad and uses the Schubert song *Der Leiermann* as source-material. Can you explain in more detail what it is about?

JPS I have been working on *WEISS* for ten years. All my works take a long time to develop and all go through many intermediate stages. The genesis of this work goes back to when I was asked to participate in a conceptual theatre piece dealing with the theme of pathos. I was asked to find a visual solution for depicting Stalingrad. That was a really heavy thing, and that is why *WEISS* deals with Stalingrad.

At the time I was really interested in narration. That was special for me, because I used to hate storytelling in the visual arts. I was always more interested in the conditions of perception and the conditions of what art can be. Such a conceptual approach fits very well with the tradition of music, because music is very abstract. But I found out that narration always has a connection with modernism. On a certain level narration and the conceptual approach deal with the same thing. You can see it in the way the experimental filmmaker Stan Douglas deals with narration inside modernism. I also discovered that I like to talk and tell stories. In my work I am playing with this history of modernism and the avant-garde. I feel in no way part of popular culture. I was never interested in mass media culture or mainstream cinema, I grew up liking jazz and experimental things. Since I was a student I have been mainly influenced by the avant-garde artists. In that sense I am really an academic artist: being influenced by for instance John Cage, and always by way of books, theories and recordings.

On the other hand I do like some aspects of Hollywood films, especially the music and the dramaturgy, because of the effect they have on you as a viewer. Steven Spielberg is a master of playing on the emotions. I do admire how these effects are made; it has a lot to do with pathos. Yet intellectually I am more on what you could call the Adorno-side, thinking “I can see I am influenced by the effects, but I am also a victim of this emotional movement that is created”. In *WEISS* both these things – pathos and the history of modernism – come together. As for the title: 43 refers to the historical moment, and 612 is the number of the hotel room in Switzerland where I was staying when I started to work on *WEISS*'s visual part.

So you are positioning yourself between these two sides, on the one hand the pathetic effect of the cinema, which mostly comes from the sound, on the other hand the critical mode of Adorno and the intellectual history of modernism? Why choose Schubert?

I decided to compose a variation on Franz Schubert's *Der Leiermann* for the theatre project on pathos. But as I wasn't asked to do the music for the production, it became a piece on its own. The main point is that *WEISS* uses the recording of Hans Hotter singing *Der Leiermann*. Hotter was Nazi Germany's favorite heroic tenor. He was the voice of a certain kind of hopeless Romanticism. As Schubert's

*Winterreise* is a climax of Romanticism in music, *Der Leiermann* is the climax of *Der Winterreise*. It describes a completely hopeless situation, and is a highly-charged historical symbol for the sensitive Romantic ego. The 1943 Hotter recording is very famous: some people say that in the background you can hear the bombs falling on Berlin. It is a good mythical story. At the time of the recording the circle closed around Stalingrad. Stalingrad symbolizes the turning-point of World War Two, it is a collective tragedy. So you have totally opposite symbols: the sensitive ego on the one side, which is a total Romantic thing, and on the other side there's this collective tragedy. For me this connects with Adorno, because he argued that even Schönberg and high-modernism actually continued the tradition of Romanticism. *WEISS* then shows Adorno's idea that you cannot continue the Romantic tradition: the Romantic ego fails in a totalitarian regime. That is why Adorno and the Frankfurt School say we cannot make this kind of art anymore. Stalingrad signifies the end of a Romantic idea of the individual, which was continued in modernism. But this is secondary, because I am not Adorno. It was really interesting to work with these highly-charged symbols like *Der Leiermann* and Stalingrad.

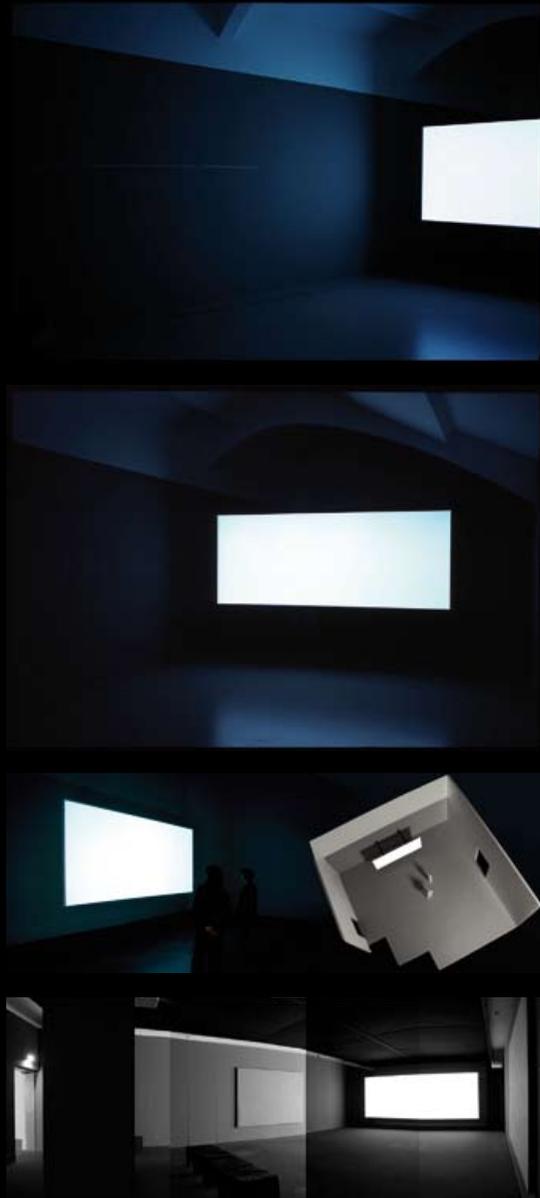
To represent Stalingrad I took a picture of the area from a book showing a snow desert and an isolated person. If I had called the work *Amundsen* you probably would have imaged a polar station, therefore the installation includes a single sentence so that you see it is Stalingrad and hear Hotter singing. I show a historical coincidence. By bringing together the picture and the highly emotional music I create a narrative structure that we know from Hollywood.

On seeing *WEISS*, an intellectual art lover in an 'Adorno-state' will say, “ah, I cannot like this, it is manipulative, it's like Spielberg”. But at the same time such an art lover will think, “But it is a strong concept, so I am allowed to like it”. The piece gives people a sentimental feeling, but they think they are only allowed to like it because it has a strong concept.

It was interesting to note at the last Venice Biennale that the video-works people spend the longest watching were using music from Wagner's *Parzival*. But nobody mentioned the music, everybody talked about how emotionally effective it was visually. Whereas as a musician, you know it comes from the music. It is the effect Hollywood always uses.

Is that because sound is primary, it envelops and binds you most directly to the world?

I don't think sound is primary in my work, but sound certainly works more directly, especially these clichéd sounds that create second-hand emotions. We know how to read that kind of music. A cliché is a language. Schubert is the model for this sort of romantic sound.



612.43 WEISS, Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag, 2004-2007, cabinet version,  
30 June 2007 - 8 September 2007, Kabinetten van De Vleeshal, Middelburg,  
3m x 1.2m free hanging screen, single channel video, two channel sound, grey  
walls and floor, text on the wall, computer, beamer, 20-19.000Hz soundsystem,  
bench.

Can you explain further what you did with  
the visuals and the sound?

I started working on the visuals when I was in Switzerland. I went up to Mount Pilatus in a snowstorm and took photographs. All you can see on them is white. But when I opened them in Photoshop, I could 'see' that there was a slight difference between various whites. The digital camera had been able to read something that I could never see in reality. It could discern the next mountain in the white.

For *WEISS* I started with the photo of Stalingrad. I normally have it on a large format, five by two meters. I think of it as an oil painting. I put layers of white on top of the picture, because when you come out of a snowstorm, all the information you have is 'white'. The snow flakes are white dots. They are programmable objects in a layer of the picture and there are four hundred in total. I had a computer program written for the snowstorm, it makes the snow flakes swirl around, and I used another program for snowfall. We took quite a time looking at how a snowstorm behaves in reality. The snow flakes move around in the picture according to these programs. There are different layers, but all the layers just take information away, they do not add new information. We shoot white layers into a photo that is already quite white. We do not manipulate the historical footage as the snowflakes are a layer on top of the picture. The white flakes create little holes in the digital grey and white on the original photo.

A photo is a still, a frozen moment, and film creates movement from a series of these. Our eyes will scan over a still photograph for some time, but at a certain point – and this is psychological – we begin to get tired and no longer focus. Yet, when there continues to be a stimulus on the photo, like a moiré or a white noise, you are psychological stimulated to keep focused. That is exactly what I do in *WEISS*. It is a photograph, yet there is movement functioning as a stimulus to keep your eyes focused on the picture. Your whole brain is triggered to think that the picture is totally static, because it is not registering any change of real information, but you still have the stimulus of the changes as a sort of potential information. I was really interested in doing this psychological experiment, to create this static, abstract atmosphere.

For the music I used an old mono recording of Hotter singing *Der Leiermann*. I cleaned the recording and remixed it to match the aesthetic of the visuals. But you still recognize the voice of Hotter. In the original composition there are two motives, one is the singer's melody and the other is the piano playing the repetition of that melody. I cut those out, so only the underlying piano chords were left. In this song Schubert wanted to imitate the sound of the hurdy-gurdy, and it uses a bourdon-tone with a sixth-interval. The song almost loses its chord progression and becomes modal. Of course *Der Winterreise* is a cycle of songs,

but this last one, *Der Leiermann* is really modern in its use of a sixth-interval. I took this sixth from the recording and used a computer program to stretch it. I created a really long interval from the first chord. It sounds electronic now, although it is actually a piano. In other words, I made a minimal version of *Der Leiermann* based on my piece and my own perspective on sound aesthetics.

Both the visual and sound concept of *WEISS* are based on throwing information out, to bring in a minimal movement in the microcosm of what is left. As a viewer you don't necessarily have to know all that. You can walk in, read one line and look at it. You might like it because it is minimal, totally white, because it is like a Turrell-space, just a color-field. You receive sensory information and it has this emotional impact.

It is interesting that in the text about the piece you mention the two historical sources, yet you minimize and reduce them so that they are hardly recognizable as source material. You then process it in a way to affect a certain emotional state in the audience. The piece almost becomes research on how people experience this sort of minimal 'almost cinema'.

In the end, the main interest was in creating a minimal cinematic effect. Starting with pathetic forms and high symbolic structures, then going into what I could do with the footage, how to minimize and cut out information instead of adding to it. I do not change the symbols, but I create a movement by taking away certain aspects.

It was a personal research, and all the material is taken seriously, all the levels are researched seriously. There is no irony in it, at any point. I really love Schubert. I see a lot of modern art making heavy references to popular culture. I am too serious for that. As a person, I like a lot of different kinds of music, but intellectually I am simply more interested in the compositional structures of, say, Iannis Xenakis. Intellectually those structures are more interesting than those used in popular culture. I really think and work as a composer, also in the visual sense.

Fundamentally, are you trying to discover what a cinematic effect is?

All my work is about possibilities of language. *WEISS* is about how to bring together different levels and consider what cinema can be. *WEISS* is almost cinema, it stops just before it really becomes cinema. According to its curator Eva de Groot, the Almost Cinema-program in Ghent (2007), took its title from a text of mine. I never used the term because I wrote the text in German. It came from the translator, but it was completely correct. I try to figure out which are the conditions that create cinema. With cinema I refer to mainstream narrative cinema, not experimental cinema. What makes it work on a psychological level? Music is really important, how it plays on the emotions of the audience, how it makes cuts in the narrative, and creates perspective. *WEISS* is just sound and movement in a still image, but it could be a film. You can read it as film; it has the same emotional impact.

Jan-Peter E.R. Sonntag has studied Art, Art History, Music, Sociology and Philosophy (Aesthetics). His art reaches back to minimal and concept art as well as to so-called new and experimental music. Since 1990 he has made site-specific, interactive installations on perceptions of light and sound. Since 1995 he has worked on the interface of the human body and technical/medial systems, and frequently cooperated with scientific laboratories. Alongside an examination of human perception, the question at the centre of his artistic work concerns the visions of modernity – an unfinished project.