



## Pavel Büchler's loops

Progress, far from consisting in change, depends on retentiveness. When change is absolute there remains no being to improve and no direction is set for possible improvement: and when experience is not retained, as among savages, infancy is perpetual. Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.

GEORGE SANTAYANA

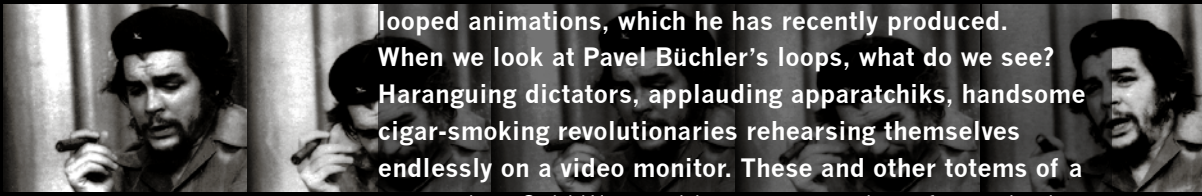
George Santayana's well-known and oft paraphrased adage is, after all, an optimistic phrase – optimistic in the sense that it offers an exit from such eternal recurrence. Memory, in some way, sets you free – it allows you to move, permits change. Of course, Santayana's adage doesn't come out of the void. The operations of time, change and memory on the material world are at the heart of western philosophical tradition. From Heraclitus onwards, at least in fits and starts, western thought has proposed change as a fundamental condition of lived experience which defines and delimits all other factors. The question is not that things change, but what we do with our experience of those changes.

Pavel Büchler is an artist who has witnessed a great deal of change in his lifetime. He went into exile from a country that no longer exists and can now only be visited as memory or as a pavilion in the Giardini during the Venice Biennale. His work doesn't speak directly of that country, not anymore, but one doesn't have to indulge in overt biographicalisation to read into his practice a sense of lost places and moments. This is especially true of a series of short videos, essentially

**looped animations, which he has recently produced.**

**When we look at Pavel Büchler's loops, what do we see? Haranguing dictators, applauding apparatchiks, handsome cigar-smoking revolutionaries rehearsing themselves endlessly on a video monitor. These and other totems of a**

now extinct Cold War world are presented not frozen in time but continually enacting their known positions. They are not static but they are stuck, stuck within the moments of their own iteration. Refusing to sit still like a good picture should, they also refuse to change. The looping moment, rather than the static one, is change's antinome. In setting its own parameters of time and conclusion, the loop more decisively rejects change's profligate ways. By their adherence to their particular moments these looped images permit, even insist upon, precisely that order of retentiveness which Santayana describes. And this shouldn't surprise us for, after all, those images are not an idle sampling of visual material. When we look at Pavel Büchler's loops, who do we see? Stalin, Lenin, Gagarin, Guevara, Beckett – these are names associated with the political, technological, cultural and revolutionary avant-gardes of the twentieth century. Progress is, or was, and then again, still is, their lingua franca. The more one starts to pick at Büchler's loops the more they appear as a meditation upon the twentieth century's ideological love affair with progress. This is a romance which finds its origins in earlier nineteenth century infatuations but, within living memory, has blossomed into an ugly divorce.



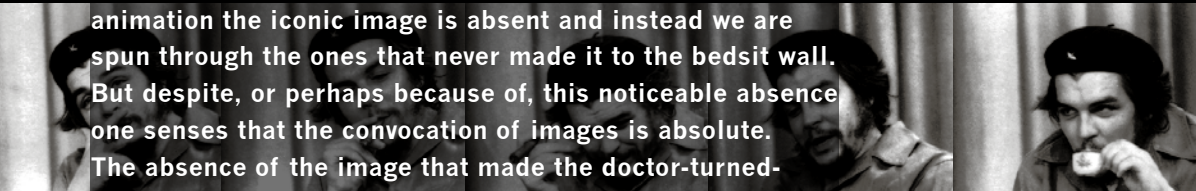
**Yes and no, Che**  
2001, video loop

How different things were then, how handsome everyone was. Take those images of Che Guevara. We see Che smoking a cigar, sipping a coffee, laughing and then doing it all over again. Who wouldn't fall in love with him? These images were taken by Alfredo Korda at a press conference in Cuba in 1960 and are from the same contact sheet that supplied the famous iconic image of the Argentinian doctor, the image that has floated into popular culture as a poster, t-shirt and pin badge. In Büchler's

**animation the iconic image is absent and instead we are spun through the ones that never made it to the bedsit wall. But despite, or perhaps because of, this noticeable absence one senses that the convocation of images is absolute.**

**The absence of the image that made the doctor-turned-revolutionary-turned-Cuban Minister of Finance into the poster boy of international socialism only serves to remind us that Guevara's career embraced variety. Korda's images of Guevara are images of a government minister and Büchler's animation of these images employs a very particular logic which refutes the iconic's attempt to flatten and enclose. As we see images of Guevara thinking, laughing and holding forth we are watching the unravelling of an icon. For this is neither Che the poster boy nor does it hold any pretence to give us Che the biopic. Rather it provides the one thing that the icon must, axiomatically, deny – its context. The logic of animation at work here is inclusive, almost uncritical, like harnessing the weather to prove that the coastline exists. When 'available sources' are pressed into service in this way, the results are always going to be unsettling and the rapid fire sequence of Guevara leaves much room for semantic doubt being as it is both valedictory and cold in its presentation of the subject. But this is central to the artists' strategy – forcing an uncritical montage to permit an analytical reading of the subject.**

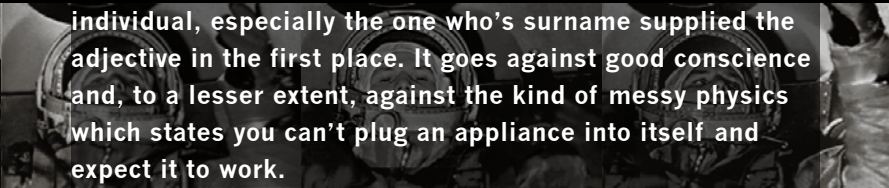
The same can be said of *Nodds*, an animation which takes two photographic portraits of Samuel Beckett and runs a point-to-point between them. It's a neat use of its source creating the



**Space Race**  
2006, video loop

most basic of animations whilst at the same time alluding to the binarity which was such a feature of Beckett's work. As we watch the film stutter between the two images of Beckett – one looking straight at the camera, the other with his head bowed – several things occur. Firstly, it conjures a kind of easy physical comedy, the kind we might associate with the Beckettian clown trapped in the grinding eternity of a repetitive act. Then again, it is as if Beckett himself is being made to nod to us, perhaps in greeting or gracious acknowledgement, or perhaps he's simply banging his head against the inside of the tv screen – the work is, after all, shown on two monitors. The bleak comedy here is perfect and is achieved with an economy of visual means which underscores Büchler's debt to conceptual languages that are broadly synchronous with Beckett's later creative phase. There is a 'justenoughness' at work that triangulates our idea of Beckett with the visual languages of conceptualism and Büchler's own engagement with those languages. Here Beckett is made Beckettian before our eyes, something which is simultaneously an achievement and unnerving. We want to resist it, of course. It's a little ill-mannered to adjectivise an **individual, especially the one who's surname supplied the adjective in the first place. It goes against good conscience and, to a lesser extent, against the kind of messy physics which states you can't plug an appliance into itself and expect it to work.**

Like the work, our response must stutter between two opposing modes, between delight and a recognition of the distance that separates us from the historical moment of those photographs. Whilst this is never a nostalgic space, it reeks of memory, not in the sense of a thing personally experienced, like a childhood recollection or the thought of a recent event, but rather as a thing whose very fabric is memory, an object which if you could hold it between your fingers would be somehow dusty and oily at the same time. Repulsive would be too strong a word but there is some order of pulsatory force at work here



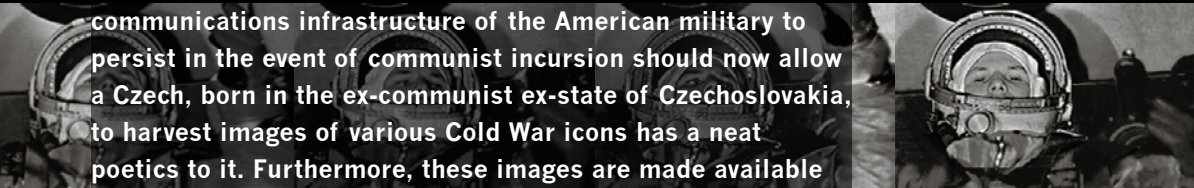
and it seems to me to be key to understanding how a work like *Nodds* functions both as an art object and in a wider sense as an exemplar of Büchler's practice, especially the series of animations of which the Beckett piece forms a part. Look again at the dramatis personae of this series – all of them are icons, products of artistic and political contexts that have very recently slipped away. Yet this revisiting of a recent past forces us to revisit them both as image and a vital force. Stalin wagging his monster's finger, Gagarin raising his hero's arm, Lenin shaking his victor's shoulders – these are more than images they are rehearsals of forces which shaped political, even geographical realities for half a century.

But all this goes beyond the content and even the context of these images. I'm thinking of the source of much of this imagery, this biblioteka of the feigning, and increasingly distant, unfought war. It is, of course, all from Google – in the modern sense of the word 'from' meaning 'pointed to by'.

There is something quietly remarkable about Büchler's use of the internet. That a system first developed to circumvent the disruptive force of an ICBM attack and allow the

**communications infrastructure of the American military to persist in the event of communist incursion should now allow a Czech, born in the ex-communist ex-state of Czechoslovakia, to harvest images of various Cold War icons has a neat poetics to it. Furthermore, these images are made available**

via a system of usage rather than a system of publication in the strict sense of the word. It's not simply that there is no small cadre of bureaucrats who are responsible for the ordering and dissemination of this imagery. It arrives at the gallery via the artist from a dispersed group of third party users who have scanned or ripped or encoded these visual elements. And so there is a double layer between the artist and the imagery – one historical and the other utilitarian. The act of remembering the past is here an active and a distributed one and Büchler's part in it, like the viewers, is precisely that – a part.





Lift Off  
2006







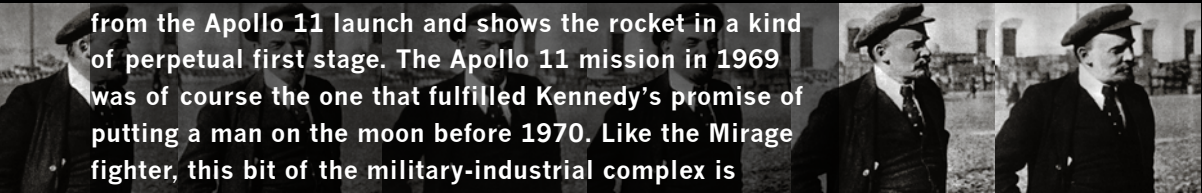
And then there are loops drawn from other repertoires, other historical periods which appear, at first, to distinguish themselves from the grainy heroes and dictators. The two identical Mirage fighter jets, which bob around implausibly in the blue above the clouds on two unsynchronised monitors, present themselves as something like a puppeteers apparatus or a detail from a fifties B-movie – dangling on an invisible but already recollected string. In Büchler's hands it seems even the full colour of a military hardware internet download is somehow shifted in time, pushed backwards into a world where the Berlin Wall still stands and the nuclear threat manifests itself in the imaginary glamour of the tactical missiles' atmospheric realm, rather than in the dirty bomb in the dirty suitcase which awaits you on the dirty train line. Again, I think that I read a nostalgia in the comical, and utterly penile, extension and retraction of the missile. The floorshow of superpower conflict, which always conflated sabre rattling with its masturbatory cognate, is offered here



as harmless spectacle. One doubts that the endless supply of accidentally loosed missiles will actually cause any harm – only the promise of harm. The Cold War, unlike the two warm ones which preceded it, never was about causing actual harm to the main protagonists – though they unleashed a deal of it on their proxy agents – but was rather an exercise in exchanging the fear of harm. This was geopolitics as conspicuous consumption, a kind of reverse potlatch where the material gift was withheld and the symbolic gift of tradeable fear was what the superpowers offered one another. How else can one think of the polaroids of a May Day parade in Red Square or spectacle of Cape Canaveral. Whilst the former may have, as yet, evaded the artist's interest the latter has not. The work *Lift Off* uses footage

**from the Apollo 11 launch and shows the rocket in a kind of perpetual first stage. The Apollo 11 mission in 1969 was of course the one that fulfilled Kennedy's promise of putting a man on the moon before 1970. Like the Mirage fighter, this bit of the military-industrial complex is**

similarly compromised, bobbing up and down on the screen but never giving you any sense that it's actually going anywhere. I wouldn't place Büchler in the ranks of the conspiracy theorists who reckon the entire moon landing was staged in the Nevada desert, but his work astutely brings to mind that the moment of lift-off really is the money shot of this particular Cold War beauty pageant. For whilst the moon landings belong to a Munchausean world which could accommodate unicorns and mermaids as much as the weightless golf playing Americans who eventually took part, the moment of lift-off is the point at which the term fire-power achieves a horizontal semantics, compressing threat and display into a single image. Just as the phrase 'we have lift-off' is a telling indicator of how the space programme functioned within an us/them economy of deferred conflict, so the loop of a rocket, so large it doesn't quite fit on the screen, so conspicuous in its consumption of rocket fuel that it seems buoyed up by its incandescence, allows us to read



**Yes and no,**  
**Vladimir Ilich**  
2006. video loop

the triumphalism of that moment and all that it prefigures in the twenty years that are to follow.

The common argument that the West (i.e. the USA) 'won' the cold war simply by outspending the Soviet Union ignores the reverse potlatch that took place. It was not the excessive generosity of the West in purchasing ever greater quantities of fear with which to garland their adversary that brought down the Berlin Wall – the gift of fear does not have that effect on human populations. Rather it was a deficit of fear on the part of European populace in the face of their own states. Revolutions happen when the state, at some level, permits it – fails to open fire, fails to send in the tanks. This is why after 1989 Germany has managed to become a single national entity

**and China has managed to remain one. Troops in the former failed to open fire, troops in the latter did not. The will we/ won't we pantomime of a Mirage fighter jet slipping out its missile and slipping it back in again is an acute distillation of how the state employs fear. Because you just can't tell** what it might do. When you look at those images from the 1936 Communist Party conference of Stalin, always with a finger or hand raised, it becomes absolutely clear that one could never tell if Uncle Josef was on the verge of explaining something or of hitting you. These looping moments, these short sequences of a dictator's swagger or an author's nodding head are based on the withholding of the moment that came next. In this sense the loop, by urging us to remain with an image and let its fullness unfold within its own self-sufficient time, gives voice to its semantic resonance in the fullest sense and allows us to possess more adequately its significance within our own time.

