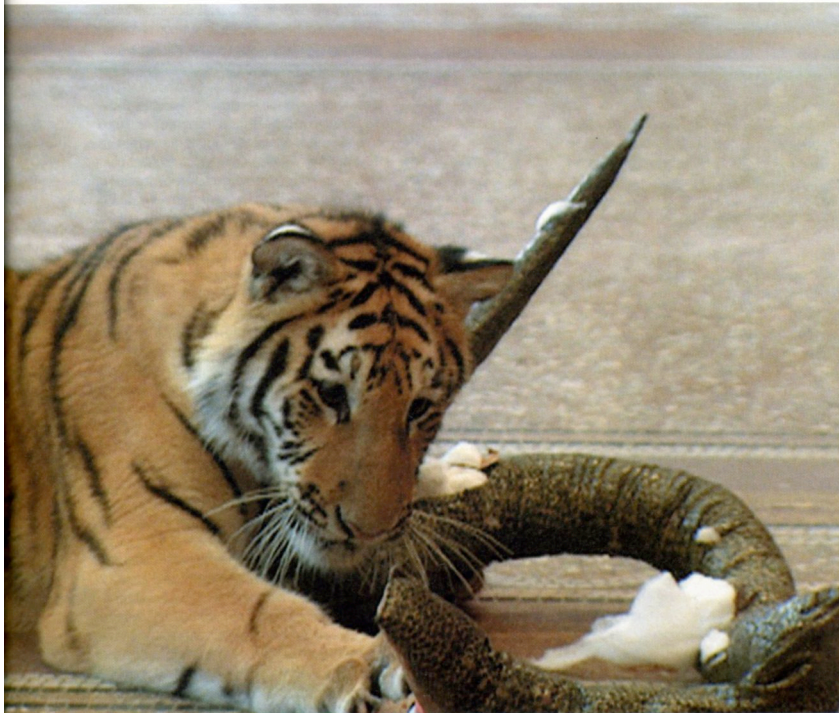


BACK



Musée d'Art Contemporain, Marseille, France

Just prior to seeing Peter Friedl's retrospective exhibition in Marseille, I happened across a short review by a French critic who castigated the artist for being 'lazy' and reprimanded the art world for buying into his 'new genre of pretentious intellectual[ism]'. The author's indignation shouted from the page with a virulence rarely encountered in the press, in what could be interpreted as another illustration of a growing backlash against the frustrating disjunction between the discourses that frame an artist's work and the experience of the work itself. Sometimes those disjunctions are laughable, sometimes they make you feel like an uncomprehending idiot, sometimes everything clicks. It's a gamble. The pay-off of 'Peter Friedl Work 1964-2006', curated by Bartomeu Mari at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Barcelona, where it was first presented before travelling to Miami and then to France, is hardly evident. Conceived on the model, and as a critique, of a retrospective, it obstinately resists being read as one. At least in Marseille, its presentation was

not straightforwardly chronological or linear, but instead brought together fragments of an oeuvre that stubbornly refrain from gelling into a coherent whole.

The surfeit of visual information in the show felt hermetic at times, though catalogue texts by Mari, Mieke Bal, Roger M. Buergel and Friedl himself offer potential interpretative approaches. Nevertheless, this provides little comfort to the visitor, who must navigate the mass of disparate material - videos presented on identical flat screens as if to neutralize their contents, photo-documentation of public projects, catalogue pages enlarged into posters, neon sculptures, design projects and framed drawings, some from Friedl's childhood - without the usual reassuring wall-texts, labels and biographical materials as guides.

The resulting feeling of disorientation is not entirely unpleasant; simply groping one's way around without direction can be enlightening. There are a few familiar landmarks, such as *Playgrounds* (1995-2007), child-height slide projections of playgrounds from all over the world, and *Theory of Justice* (1992-2007),

Peter Friedl
Tiger oder Löwe
(Tiger or Lion)
2000
DVD still

a fascinating archive of press images ranging from Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez in baseball gear to American children pledging allegiance. Historical and aesthetic references abound and are often tinged with absurdist humour, as in the short video *Tiger oder Löwe* (Tiger or Lion, 2000), which shows a tiger playfully savaging a toy snake in the brick-red rooms of the Hamburger Kunsthalle, where Eugène Delacroix's oil painting *Tiger and Snake* (c. 1858) hangs.

When lost, one strategy is to follow the sound of a voice. In the absence of clear signposts I found myself guided by the a capella voice of the artist and singer Daniel Johnston emanating from the video *King Kong* (2001). This work became the object around which everything else turned and to which I kept returning. Shot in Triomf Park, in Sophiatown, Johannesburg, the video shows Johnston seated on a park bench on the edge of a playground. He holds a sheaf of paper from which he sings the lines of his 1983 eponymous song: 'They shot him down, they shot him down. They thought he was a monster, but he was the King.' As he sings and the camera pans, black and white children encircle the singer; a child wearing an ape mask occasionally enters the frame, and one group of cameramen is revealed. It turns out that Sophiatown, a mostly black suburb that was razed in 1955 and then rebuilt as Triomf by the apartheid government in the 1960s, was also the setting for a jazz opera, *King Kong* (1959), which recounts the tragic story of boxer Ezekiel 'King Kong' Dhlamini. Friedl's reconsideration of the Beauty and the Beast tale forcefully recontextualizes this entertainment classic with respect to colonialism, apartheid repression and the history of South Africa.

Friedl has long been exploring curatorial practice as a genre, and this is an exhibition that mirrors its title: its interpretation requires work. In a 2002 text entitled 'One World', reprinted in the catalogue, the artist provides a clue to what is at stake here: 'Museums are never autonomous and neither are art works. Also questionable is the oft-evoked autonomy of market powers. What does exist, however, is aesthetic autonomy as a concept and as a direct experience.' By throwing spectators back onto their own devices for confronting this conceptual and experiential autonomy - as rich or impoverished as those devices might be - Friedl simultaneously exposes and repudiates the implicit contract between a viewer and a retrospective. This contract implies that one should come away knowing more about the artist than one did before entering the museum. It implies that the museum holds the power to provide that knowledge. Here Friedl effectively underscored this highly codified representation of the self and of history as representation. But then again, I could be entirely wrong, and that, too, may just be the point.

Vivian Rehberg

Peter Friedl