

Peter Friedl On Theatricality



Peter Friedl, *Evergreen*, 2013; wood, polyurethane resin, acrylic paint; 23 x 31 x 23.5 cm; private collection, Turin.
Photo: Fabrizio Carraro. Courtesy: the artist and Guido Costa Projects, Turin.

“Teatro” – Peter Friedl’s (b. 1960, Oberneukirchen, Austria) solo show at Kunsthalle Wien – addresses a series of recurrent themes in the artist’s oeuvre: models, language, history, translation, and theatricality. Interviewed by L’Officiel Art, Friedl offers insights into the projects in the exhibition, on view until June 9.

L’OFFICIEL ART: “The title of your solo exhibition at Kunsthalle Wien is “Teatro”: how do ideas of theater and theatricality recur in your practice? I think of your film *Report* (2016), premiered at documenta 14 in 2017, where more than 20 actors appear on a stage and recite extracts from Kafka’s *A Report to an Academy* (1917).

PETER FRIEDL: I’d say: theater is my favorite aesthetic enemy. And good enemies are always helpful. In fact it’s been ages since I have been to any regular theater performance. I mean, theater as an apparatus is and remains a much compro-

mised thing. It’s really compromising and contagious, historically. I am not using it simply as a theme, metaphor, toy or style, but rather as a symptom. Many of my artistic strategies and models derive from there; they refer to the transverse nature of theater. *Report* is first and foremost a video installation, larger than life – perhaps the cinematographically most complex among my video works. My source text, Kafka’s *A Report to an Academy*, is a very famous, often over-interpreted, more or less self-referential parable about assimilation and mimesis written in the form of a monologue. The sole location of the film is the large and empty stage of the National Theater in Athens. The actors who appear on that stage are mostly non-professionals. They all recite extracts from Kafka’s text by heart in their own native tongue or in a language of their choice: Arabic, Dari, French, Greek, English, Russian, Kurdish, Swahili. The original German of the Kafka piece is absent. There are also no subtitles; they simply don’t get a chance here. You really have to focus and rely on the actors’ presence and charisma and find your own way of understanding and empathy. The film remains totally faithful to the original narrative, throughout the fragmented polyphony



Peter Friedl, *Report*, 2016; still from video. Courtesy: the artist. © Peter Friedl.

of languages and gestures. There are just a few omissions and changes. Actually, I remember Walter Benjamin once saying about Kafka: he tears open the sky behind every gesture. The gesture remains the decisive thing.

Could you tell us more about the concept and structure of your show in Vienna?

We wanted to really focus on theatricality in my work as a possible key, as prisma, reference, mental space, imaginarium – however, within an exhibition (as medium). Theatrical space and time are relational. They very much exist in relation to the viewer and foster the insurrection of a free, individual viewer. So this is to some extent the conceptual backdrop for the selection of works from three decades for the show in Vienna. Negation is another useful principle: I wanted an exhibition with no pictures on the wall. There are just moving images to be found on some screens. The rest of the works are “props,” if you will, displayed in the Kunsthalle’s long, cathedral-like space. For example, the sixteen vitrines of *Theory of Justice* (1992-2010) with hundreds of newspaper clippings come from the collection of the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid. It’s a project on pictorial justice asking questions such as: What happens if the pictures themselves want to become theory? In the context of “Teatro” this project functions like a big historical casting, with many portraits and dramatis personae. Or think of *Teatro Popular* (2016-17) with its colorful handpuppet theater prototypes, a sort of shadow boxing with realism and mimesis. This theater could start to perform at any moment, but it remains silent and still.

The show also contains the series of architectural models “Rehousing” (2012-19). Here you make use of the model as a social-historical-political case study.

I am generally interested in new and different models for narratives. Yes, the idea of model is central to this exhibition. It’s a very specific poetics of critical intimacy; sometimes I think that everything now has the character of a model for me. Let’s put it this way: a good artwork is or has to be also the solution to a particular problem. As for “Rehousing,” it is thus literally about minutely detailed architectural models playing on a multitude of meanings. I once called them case studies for a mental geography of different forms of modernity. Recently, somebody told me: each of those models is like a film or a series of photographic images and texts at once. I like that. In the past you would have labeled such artworks probably as second-order media, emphasizing the fact that they can be their own discourses and analyses. They present the history of modernism as an open series of heterogeneous and often unresolved problematic cases and conflict scenarios. As a conceptual tool, the model offers a condensed description of the world; as a political instrument it can also point to the future.

The laconic title references the Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Program of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development.

There are also two new models on view in Vienna: 8115 Vilakazi Street depicts a historical moment of the house of Winnie and Nelson Mandela in Soweto long before it was transformed into a very popular museum and tourist attraction. The other one is the model of a prefabricated construction from Amona, the Israeli outpost located on privately owned Palestinian land in the West Bank which was evacuated two years ago.

“Peter Friedl: Teatro.” Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna. Through June 9.