

ArtReview

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Athens + Documenta = ?

Peter Friedl

Reality begins to quietly unravel through the artist's staging, re-staging and de-staging of histories. Can his pointedly frustrated narratives point to a way beyond posttruth?

by Raimar Stange



The Children (still), 2009, video, colour, sound,
2 min 12 sec (loop). Courtesy the artist

A man stands in a pedestrian underpass and throws money into a cigarette machine. When it doesn't dispense the cigarettes he paid for, he kicks the machine furiously and leaves. A junkie approaches him and begs for money; when it's refused, the junkie kicks the man. Peter Friedl's video *Dummy*, produced in 1997 for Documenta 10 in Kassel, presents what at first appears to be a realistic, everyday scene. But not everything is as it seems. The man standing at the cigarette machine is the artist himself, who isn't a smoker, and nor is there in reality such a machine in the underpass; it was specially installed for the video's production. The occurrences are therefore not sociocritical documentation, but artistically staged. This became obvious, if it wasn't already, when the 32-second video was shown in precisely the same underpass during that selfsame Documenta, the now-missing cigarette machine betraying the work's fictional nature. But Friedl pointedly questions even this condition of being staged, for the fiction here is based on a platitudinous cartoon from an illustrated magazine. The artist executes the cartoon's trope on film, tersely and without interpretation. So maybe *Dummy* is something like documentation after all.

The aesthetic explorations of the 'realism problem' – located somewhere in the tension between interpretation, staging and the power of language to simulate truth – that run through the Berlin-based artist's work go far beyond the current juxtaposition of 'factual' and 'postfactual' that haunts our daily political lives. This was obvious even in the relatively early work described above; it contains, already, crucial aspects of a confrontation that later only becomes more complex – the clash of genres, the absence of a plot that would generate meaning, the displacement of significant elements and above all the eschewing of an 'artistic' staging as it is usually defined, ie 'bringing a dramatic work completely to fruition'. Instead Friedl's

strategies aim towards deconstructing *any* demands on 'truth'. This deconstruction highlights exactly the qualities that generate contextual meaning – like the power exerted by (hi)stories, and above all the relationships between language and body, construed interpretations and localised presentation, and finally author and actor.

A year after *Dummy*'s installation at Documenta 10, Friedl organised an exhibition, titled *Peter Friedl*, in the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. To make it, he first asked the museum's employees what animal they would like to become. Costumes depicting these creatures were then fabricated in both child and adult sizes, and presented in the exhibition space. Displayed on the wall were the names that the employees had bestowed upon their animals (their alter egos?). Visitors were permitted to put on the costumes and play(act) with them. At the same time, the costumes riff on Friedl's own early drawings, as a child – fittingly, since the exhibition's very name designated the show as a retrospective. Here visitors were presented with connections between identity and role, authenticity and interpretation, and genre and institution.

In his later videos *The Children* (2009) and *Bilbao Song* (2010), which rearrange and reconstruct paintings, Friedl focuses on firmer historical questions – in the sense of questioning the discipline's modes. How is history written, and with what political demands? In *The Children*, he takes the little-known 1966 painting *Femijet* (Albanian for 'children') by Albanian socialist-realist painter Spiro Kristo as a starting point. The picture shows a street scene with seven children playing; one of them has a wooden toy weapon hanging over her shoulder, while a boy draws the image of a weapon on the ground. Friedl takes this scene and depicts the children as if in a *tableau vivant*. He transports the scene to the interior of a room – in a salon in the former high-end Hotel Dajti in Tirana, to be exact. The hotel, which

Friedl's strategies aim towards deconstructing any demands on 'truth'



Bilbao Song (still), 2010, video installation, HD video, colour, sound, 5 min 53 sec (loop). Courtesy the artist



Dummy, 1997 (installation view, Documenta 10, Kassel, 1997).
Photo: Dieter Schwerdtle. Courtesy the artist



Teatro Popular, 2016–17 (installation view). Photo: Daniel Malhão.
Courtesy the artist and Lumiar Cité, Lisbon

was built during the early 1940s in a fascist architectural style and now stands empty, was long considered one of the best in the Balkans. At the beginning of the two-minute video, the children enter the room, then take their poses and remain in position. Nothing is audible on the soundtrack except street sounds; only at the beginning does an off-camera girl's voice quote Michel Foucault's well-known statement from *The Order of Things* (1966): "The picture must step out of the frame". In Friedl's video, this is exactly what happens.

More important, however, is that 'history' is seen here not as a strictly defined temporal sequence that then generates meaning, but as parallel, temporally distanced moments: in this case the period of fascism in Europe in the first half of the past century and the communist regime in Albania in the 1960s. In addition, the characters in this historical picture are not characters apparently standing in the centre of what is occurring; instead this *Geschichtsuniversum* ('universe of history'), as the philosophy academic Maria Muhle wrote of *The Children*, is 'populated by "subaltern and infamous"' – the 'very tiny and small' seven children. Friedl withdraws two things essential to (bourgeois) history writing: a linear temporal sequence and the subject.

Telling other (hi)stories in another way, and thus unmasking the fictional character in the story in question, is exactly what he does in his work *Teatro Popular* (2016–17). In this sculptural piece, recently on view in the Lisbon exhibition space Lumiar Cité, the artist deals with Dom Roberto, a kind of antiquated Portuguese street theatre using puppets. The *barraca*, is a simple wooden construction, covered with fabric to hide the puppeteer; the puppet shows are simple plays marked by repetition and typecasting. For *Teatro Popular*, the artist made four prototypes of the *barraca*, which can be constructed and deconstructed without tools. The fabric coverings, the textiles, do not come from Portugal, but from Brazil – an intentional reference to colonial history. Friedl designed the hand puppets, assembling an

ensemble of characters from various centuries, continents and societal spheres. Among them are the fifteenth-century astronomer Abraham Zacuto, who revolutionised sea travel; the twentieth-century general António de Spínola, who was the first transitional president of the Third Portuguese Republic; and Bonga, a legendary contemporary Angolan pop musician. But the sleekly rendered puppets also represent fictional characters, like Ilsa Lund, played by Ingrid Bergman in the classic film *Casablanca* (1942), as well as a devil and an elephant.

The 22 puppets, which allow a multilayered network of seldom-assembled historical references to emerge, lie dispersed among the *barracas* and are not used to perform – 'staging' is once again denied. In this work, Friedl practices a 'minor art', in the sense used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, which is here characterised by three things: first, crucially, the street theatre of Dom Roberto was once collective folk culture but today takes only a minor role. Second, the temporally dispersed cast of the puppet ensemble and the denial of a performance nullify theatre's conventional semantics. And third, every element of this theatre contains political references, pointing to sociopolitical connections in Portugal's past and present. Deleuze and Guattari developed the concept of 'minor art' in *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975), which leads to Friedl's work at this year's Documenta. As per the 'rules' of the event, details on the work are tightly under wraps. What can be said is that here, in the National Theatre of Greece in Athens, he's taken a good two-dozen 'players' from a Kafka text and staged them into a film. But, knowing him, one has to ask: will he really stage it? **ar**

Translated from the German by Kimberly Bradley

Peter Friedl's work is being shown in the Athens portion of Documenta 14, 8 April – 16 July, and in Variable Dimensions: Artists and Architecture at MAAAT, Lisbon, through 29 May



Teatro Popular (detail), 2016–17, wood, aluminium, fabric, 22 glove puppets, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Lumiar Cité, Lisbon