

Peter Friedl

Teatro Popular

On the occasion of the 2023 Berlin Art Week, we present our first solo exhibition with Peter Friedl. The three-time documenta participant's presentation focuses on sculptural works of the past several years, including a new project, and illustrates why this challenging artist has been so important to contemporary art and thinking for over three decades.

Peter Friedl is a historian. Historians want to tell (hi)stories, and that, we might say, is what Friedl does, though he doesn't tell them in linear fashion and certainly not through to the end. Rather, Friedl creates spectacles—in Greek, *theatra*—: scenes where there is something to see. Situations in which something happens, or perhaps put more precisely: is inclined to happen. We stand in sculptural settings, contemplating plastic figures or their outer shells, which manifestly have a lot to say and relate—we believe, we can see they're capable of it. Just as you believe, you see an actor will deliver who leaves her dressing room in full costume to go onstage, and before the play even begins you can see it coming, before you even know what she'll play.

In fact, the cast Friedl arrays at KOW consists of famous as well as ostensibly marginal protagonists who in their day played their parts in events we know now more, now less about, events that are considered more or less momentous and that Friedl now makes it impossible for us to avoid (as long as we keep to the point, which is to say: keep looking). Who are they? What did they do? What was done to them, which violence was inflicted on them? What happened? What do we see coming? How do they relate to one another and to us? And what is it we don't know about all this?

What Friedl shows us are open-ended narrative models and sometimes also models of history that stand as alternatives to, athwart or against, the narratives we typically have down pat—or that were drilled into us—and that the artist now breaks up.

He does that not by rounding out counter-narratives but, and this is remarkable, by releasing his historical material into an aesthetic autonomy that makes it available for a reconsideration of realities in which a story can be told (in this way) (or in that).

Let's go into some detail:

No prey, no pay, 2018–2019:

Seven plinths, each lovingly handcrafted as though for a colorful circus arena, each a little stage, the site of an exposition. Each (save one) comes with pirate costumes, dropped on the floor as though after a show—or laid out ready for a performance that is yet to come? Above them, a large green flag with a white skeleton, the pirates' emblem. What has been spread out so matter-of-factly and indeed casually in the gallery's ground-floor showroom contains a wealth of historical and critical as well as ironic material that summons us to take a closer look.

Each of the "scenes" (see above) has its own subtitle, referring to seven historic figures or contexts. Contrary to what one might think, not all are pirates. Friedl invokes real as well as fictional, peripheral as well as more widely known characters in history. Characters in a larger play in which they performed their parts, they're now given a stage, though it's we if anyone who figure on that stage, or at least our searching gaze.

Here is Benjamin Lay (1682–1759): A Quaker with a small and malformed body, he was a passionate abolitionist who publicly spoke against slavery with great pathos.

Here is Rafael Padilla (1865/68–1917): Afro-Cuban by birth, he was the first Black clown and entertainer to rise to fame in Paris; his stage name was *Chocolat*.

Here is Joice Heth (ca. 1756–1836): The African-American slave was around eighty years old when she was sold to P.T. Barnum, the ruthless entertainment entrepreneur, who exhibited her as George Washington's 161-year-old nursemaid. To wring every last bit of profit from the story, Barnum sold 1,500 tickets to Heth's public autopsy.

Black Caesar (early 18th c.): A pirate from West Africa, he's a figure shrouded in myths, while little actual factual knowledge exists about him, as about most pirates.

Here, too, is the Dragon Lady, a minor character in Milton Caniff's comic strip *Terry and the Pirates* (1834), who became the template for a stereotypical character in numerous Hollywood films: the Oriental femme fatale. She's also an echo of the powerful Chinese woman pirate Zheng Yi Sao (1775–1844).

One plinth, titled *Hunt the Squirrel*, is a reference to John Gay's ballad opera *Polly* (1729). A frenzied plot chock-full of role switches, travesty, blackface, and piracy set in the Caribbean.

And there is *M*. The colors on the round plinth are taken from the Ethiopian flag. But who is *M*? That remains a mystery.

And then, finally, there is the green flag with the skeleton. Title: *King Death*.

The original pirate flags, also known as *Jolly Rogers*, were black. We know green flags from the Islamic world, including the Libyan flag between 1977 and 2011 and the flags flown by Hamas and the IS today. Muslim pirates were dominant in large parts of the Mediterranean world from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. In this way, Friedl's flag en passant raises questions about battles over limited spoils in the past and present that were and are no less real for being interwoven with myths of resistance and outlandish stories of rebellion.

No prey, no pay, the work's title puts it succinctly: that was the pirates' battle cry and their moral code. The abovementioned figures conform to this logic or withstand it. The cast and signifiers the artist has mustered are mostly drawn from Black history.

They are part of a (political) economy of bodies and their trajectories through time and subject to the larger forces of their period that continually buffet humans' physical and moral existence. They're characters whose shoes we can symbolically step into, whose podiums we might get up on amid this polyphony of historic voices to pick up on their example and—do what? Say what?

No prey, no pay. If you don't have money coming in, you've got nothing. It's a phrase that might be coined by the minister of finance, if for once he chose to be honest, and the installation may in fact be read as an allegory of neoliberalism. But the formula also takes aim at us, and it hits home. If, confronted with Friedl's works, you don't fight for (or else score) your experience, your reflection, your voice, you'll go home poorer than this history allows.

Teatro Popular, 2016–2017:

Four decorated fabric-covered cubes are placed in the gallery's upstairs showroom; their designs derive from the Portuguese street puppet theater known as *Teatro Dom Roberto*, whose history goes back to the eighteenth century. The small and simple stages, called *barracas*, concealed the puppeteers and enabled a critical play with fictional voices in the public sphere. These four *barracas* are accessorized with twenty-two highly individualized glove puppets, some hanging limply on the edge of the stage, others lying on the floor. The fourfold mobile theater awaits activation—or it will remain mute and without action, like a theatrical model arrangement.

This arrangement and the historic form of popular theater serve Peter Friedl as the basis for a tour de force across lives, themes, and contexts, continents and centuries bound up with the changeful history of the Lusophone world, a tour he realizes solely through his selection of textiles and the tableau of performing—or rather, available—characters.

Among those who might take the stage are the Sephardic Jew Abraham Zacuto (1452–ca. 1515), who, after fleeing Spain, rose to the post of Royal Astronomer at the court of King John II of Portugal until the incipient persecution of Jews again forced him into exile. His *Almanach Perpetuum* remained one of the most important theoretical works aiding navigators at sea for many years. He shares his barraca with Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba (1583–1663), famous for her diplomatic skills and her tenacity in resisting the Portuguese invaders, and others.

Also ready to play is the Armenian art collector and philanthropist Calouste Gulbenkian, who was allegedly the world's richest man when he died in Lisbon in 1955, having made his fortune in the oil business. Plus Isabel dos Santos, born in 1973, the African continent's first billionaire, and her father Eduardo dos Santos, who was president of Angola from 1979 until 2017 and led one of the most important liberation movements against Portuguese colonial rule in the 1960s and 1970s.

In Ricardo Salgado (b. 1944), we have the former head of Portugal's biggest private bank, Banco Espírito Santo, at our disposal. Or António de Spínola (1911–96): the general was Portugal's interim president following the Carnation Revolution in 1974. He might meet Ilsa Lund a.k.a. Ingrid Bergman, who, in Michael Curtiz's 1942 classic *Casablanca*, has fled Nazi-occupied Europe for Morocco and is waiting for a visa that will allow her to escape via Lisbon to the U.S. Or Bonga Kuenda, the widely revered Angolan singer (b. 1942). A monster and the devil, too, are on the scene. Their parts? Uncertain.

Friedl's installation may be read as the plain reality of complex and never straightforward or logical interplays of forces involved in historical processes (in this instance, within the "Portuguese" world)

Or, alternatively, as an explicit statement against populisms that construct cultural spaces and identities under whose roof the twenty-two puppets of this silent puppet show could never be united.

The Dramatist (Anne, Blind Boy, Koba), 2016:

In the gallery's smaller upstairs showroom, three marionettes are suspended from the ceiling so as to stand on the floor in the beam of a spotlight. Once again, though, no dramaturge or workable playbook is on hand.

From left to right:

Anne. Anne Bonny (ca. 1699–1720 or longer). Arguably the most famous woman pirate in history, Bonny led a swashbuckling life. She's said to have been born in Ireland and lived in the Caribbean. The bastard child of a plantation owner, she supposedly passed as a boy when she was young, married into the pirate milieu, signed on dressed up as a man and soon met another woman likewise dressed up as a man with whom she allegedly

struck up a lasting and widely feared business as well as private partnership. It's unclear whether Anne Bonny was executed or lived to enjoy her sunset years. More generally, we pretty much don't know if we have any actual facts about her. Biographies and portraits of pirates are almost always works of the imagination of later generations. Peter Friedl's Anne has Creole (or Métisse) features and bears resemblance not to a historic source but to an individual from Friedl's own life.

Koba. The protagonist of Alexander Kazbegi's novel *The Patricide* was a Caucasian bandit who is revered as a folk hero in Georgia. The young Stalin chose the *nom de guerre* Koba.

Blind Boy. This character resembles little Peter, Friedl as a child, but it's also a reference to another figure of the stage: *Blind Boy* was a puppet character in the unpublished manuscripts (*The Drama for Fools*) of the great theater reformer Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966). Craig's radical critique of the actor-centric theatrical tradition led him to develop the concept of the "über-marionette," which was to replace the human actor on the stage in order to do away with realism of any kind. Perhaps more than the other two, this last marionette underscores how adamantly the trio in the spotlight's glare resists simplistic readings, how much distance it produces—how much *aesthetic* space this work establishes.

Everyone is a conspiracy theorist, 2023:

Peter Friedl's newest work, created for this exhibition, is a shack-as-model. It hangs atilt from a wedge-shaped wall platform, on the verge of tumbling down. Friedl has painstakingly recreated the cabin in which Charlie Chaplin finds refuge high up in the snowbound mountains in *The Gold Rush* (1925)—and which, near the end of the film, crashes down from the mountaintop seconds after Chaplin and his fellow prospector Big Jim have escaped in a bravura slapstick performance.

Yet this isn't about Chaplin. Friedl repurposes a famous and widely circulating image. In reconstructing the film cabin, he revisits concerns he already grappled with in the architectural models in his *Rehousing* series (2012–19): if new structures are typically built after maquettes, though the finished buildings never quite resemble those models, model-like reconstructions of existing (and, a fortiori, of vanished) buildings are conversely never exact replicas of reality. They're approximations, in part imaginations—a critique of realism that cuts to the heart of art's role.

Friedl's approximation of the cabin from *The Gold Rush* further complicates the process. When the black-and-white movie was made a hundred years ago, film historians believe, different mockups of the cabin were used for exterior shots and, in the studio, for interior scenes. Friedl's shack, by contrast, is real and in color, meticulously executed down to the smallest detail. It's not a representation—it's an image. A very accurate image that asserts its aesthetic autonomy and indeed constructs it through the subtraction of context (film) and the reduction to visual contemplation. A stratagem characteristic of Friedl's oeuvre.

And so a small cabin hangs on the gallery wall and threatens to tumble down from its podium, though—being a sculpture—in the end it doesn't. Making its precariousness a permanent state of affairs, the work urges us to see it as an allegory.

It's a simple, humble dwelling; millions of its kind exist all over the world. That it's teetering on the edge of an abyss is something millions of people in 2023 would confirm, were one to ask them about their circumstances and future prospects, about the angle of inclination of their own shacks and existences.

In 1925, *The Gold Rush* gave a haunting portrait of precarious living circumstances and the capitalist dynamics that underlay them. The reasons for such precarity? Complex, then as now. And there is no single truth that explains it all. *Everyone is a conspiracy theorist*—because to explain such vast and varied imbalances we have no more than *models*. Approximations. Attempts to grasp the real and give a name to the positions of our own shacks. Something must have happened for so much to be teetering on the edge. But what was it?

History doesn't provide answers, or succor. Friedl's shack is empty, the door is wide open, whoever was inside has fallen from it. There's nothing left to correct or rebalance. Lopsided is lopsided, and crash is crash. It's a somber, a pessimistic work that Peter Friedl has made. Even the greatest precision in the (re)production of ostensible facts cannot but bring us back to the one reality that the shack is, and remains, atilt.

Alexander Koch