



Jean-Pierre Rehm A Conversation with Peter Friedl

Many of your works deal with childhood: *Peterchen* (1992–95), *Playgrounds*, *King Kong* (2001), the book featuring children's monologues, *Four or Five Roses*, and many others. Childhood is, as we know, on the one hand related to a romantic topos of innocence and origin, and on the other, linked today with a market that targets a new field of consumers, the end of childhood as a terra incognita. Why is there such an insistence? And how could this be part of "critical" art if one thinks of recent art works focusing on children, which are imprisoned by, let's say, "post-pop"?

I would say instead that some of my works are dealing with the representation of childhood rather than with childhood itself. They make use of it and the questions involved. This might be a strategic choice since I have decided to make use of positive misunderstandings. It's always funny to start with something such as a linguistic problem. I mean, what happens if you take relatively complex questions and, before they get too complex, deal with them on another, more inadequate, level? For example, a child level as opposed to an adult level; the subaltern opposed to whatever, with all the crazy desires behind it. There are also many other levels to work with, such as the politically self-opinionated level, or the level of documentary rigor. These are, in my understanding, genre-specific solutions. Aesthetic problems can only be resolved when you're able to put them in parentheses; when you "exhibit" them (which is never normal); when you somehow make it a strategic program. They are certainly not there to satisfy a persistent hunger for the unambiguous, for example, in this case, adequate expectations of "childhood," be they romantic or anti-romantic. On the other hand, there is no need to be worried about running out of content.

Can you be more specific about what you mean when you say, "aesthetic problems can only be resolved when you're able to put them in parentheses; when you 'exhibit' them (which is never normal); when you



Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, *France/tour/détour/deux/enfants* (*France/Tour/Detour/Two/Children*), seventh movement, video, 1977–78

somehow make it a strategic program”? Do you see three different ways of solving problems here? Is exhibiting a way of inserting the parentheses?

It’s like the Holy Trinity... I really don’t know how many ways there are to solve problems, or what sorts of problems, but yes, exhibiting is, in my understanding, a medium, and consequently it also has a history. “History”—or better, more history—isn’t necessarily a better option than “no history,” it just shows how things are considered to be related to each other, and what influences these relations could have. As we know, exhibiting means, among other things, that the display turns out to be more prominent. And display means: the various (visible and not) pedestals, frames, walls, projections, arenas, etc. I like to think of some of my works as instruments to be used. This doesn’t mean at all that form is relative or something to neglect. It’s a very specific relativity.

Could you give some examples beginning with *Playgrounds* and *Four or Five Roses*?

Playgrounds is an ongoing project: simply, color slides from public playgrounds all over the world, which I’ve taken myself. The commentary, discourse, and all the other background information are invisible and have become part of the series. You can say the pictures—all in landscape format (horizontal)—quote the genre of conceptual photography. They are supposed to be quite indifferent to interpretation and even to how they are being presented other than being projected from a DVD in a more or less kid-size format. Somebody once wrote that all these photos show empty playgrounds. That’s obviously not true. Here you see what people understand by contents and what they want as contents. Of course, some pictures show empty playgrounds because it just so happened that there were no people there, like if you have to take a photograph in the morning when kids are normally at school. There are two children’s monologues projects: *Kromme Elleboog* was realized in Rotterdam, *Four or Five Roses* in South Africa. As you know, these works exist only as printed texts, only in book form. This is already kind of a statement if “adequate” representation of childhood is

concerned, and especially when we are talking about visual arts. It’s about the children’s articulations; about something often misrepresented within the framework of visual representation. Think of another reference—that fits perhaps better to my notorious anti-pop attitude—such as *France/Tour/Detour/Two/Children* by Godard and Miéville. If you listen to and see Godard’s investigative questioning in these episodes you are able to understand that the girl he is talking to, Camille, must have felt quite uncomfortable about the whole situation. Somebody told me that Camille confirmed this recently—twenty-five years after the fact. The problem is that usually not just images (pictures) are overrated, but of course also text becomes overrated as a means for constructing truth. This is the general handicap of documentary aesthetics: You see people talking; you see people asking questions or you even don’t see them but you can hear them and you see again the face of somebody answering these questions. The man or the woman with the camera and microphone makes decisions about how much time this will take, what is cut, and it’s still about truth or at least reality... All this is a bit odd, isn’t it? If we talk about genre solutions, then conceptual photography, for example, was a technique to sound out the ideological gaps and other gaps in this process more precisely (and to produce other clichés). But in this way, articulations can only be realized as potential. Representing by omission is often okay, but not always. So this became a starting point for me to go back to a more theatrical and compromised technique and re-propose something such as the monologue (as text, transcribed and edited), now scaled down to child level. The original recordings took place at public playgrounds—as we know, very specific and at the same time un-specific sites. I am not sure if the children’s monologues have transformed the playground into a sort of field study. Perhaps these kinds of projects need to end up more fragile and less intentional in a way... I don’t know. Fragility is a strange thing to discuss.

I always thought of fragility as the real material of documentary. Documentary should allow ambiguity to happen and refuse a simple talking head type of truth. It should escape the enclosure of a self, be it the so-called “theme” or the film. How do you deal with the irony of an artwork that is the heritage of conceptualism and pop? I know your research for *King Kong*, for example, was very accurate and extensive. Yet, this research only appears in your text *King Kong in Triompf*—apart from the show. If fragility is the opposite of irony, where do you stand? Is there a strategy to keep the possibility of such fragility?

But the way I use fragility is often ironic, isn’t it? I am afraid that irony is also something I cannot discuss seriously.

According to Deleuze, irony presents a futile situation, but the person at the center presenting this situation is safe, laughing at it, free. Humor describes the same kind of situation, yet the one in control, the one describing, is not safe or free nor are they safe or free from this very situation.

Anyway, documentary is not what has destroyed visual or pictorial intelligence; documentary is just a less prominent victim. What leads you to believe that my research appears only in the text? That’s

clearly wrong, otherwise *King Kong* as a video installation would not exist. *King Kong in Triomf* is another work, a text piece. Many of the things mentioned there can be found in the video if you look closely enough. Apparently, there are different expectations for how to find them; a different understanding of visibility and knowledge; a different concept of art and how art works.

What role does time play in *Playgrounds* and *Four or Five Roses*? Time for collecting the material, for instance, which is also an open time as more images will be added to *Playgrounds*. Does what you call the “documentary rigor” start here?

Playgrounds was started in 1995. It’s not exactly an anthological project, but it looks like that. More likely, it’s an anthropological project. Playgrounds are practically everywhere; at the same time they seem to also be somehow neglected, theoretically and aesthetically. After all, I find them quite okay as public art compared to the more ambitious and much more disastrous public art projects from the last two decades. It’s easy to say: there seem to be consistent worldwide regulations for the design of playgrounds; and then to make a case study of globalization—again on another “inadequate” (or even metaphorical) level. Other issues from urbanism to sociology and education are equally obvious. But I think it is mainly a study in narration. The pictures shown in the series are as important as the pictures not shown, not existing... *Playgrounds* doesn’t aim at statistically documenting a fixed number of playgrounds from somewhere. In this sense it is completely open; casting a critical eye over established conceptual standards. One could argue then that it is structured by biographical movements, which sounds a bit romantic and “drifting.” Perhaps I never photographed some of the best playgrounds because I had no camera with me, or I didn’t find any playgrounds, or I forgot my mission. Do you know Aldo van Eyck’s playground obsession? There are many “before and after” black-and-white shots for many sites in Amsterdam where Aldo van Eyck designed playgrounds. Incidentally, these are completely different photos than mine: shots taken from high up, before and after the architectural intervention (whereas I choose same-level photos). Thanks to a real playground fashion—“people’s parks”—started in the 1950s, they reached a total of more than 700 playgrounds in the end. So this tends to be an anonymous project, which is the typical double-edged side of modernism. Of course, most of these playgrounds don’t actually exist anymore. In the meantime, the same thing has happened to me: five years ago, for example, I shot a picture of the playground at Madison Square in New York City. Now they have completely changed and rebuilt it.

Four or Five Roses deals in a specific way with time, narration, and history. You spoke to South African children who have grown up now after apartheid.

It took me three years to work on it. The title comes from an area in Soweto. When I first asked kids there for the name of their playground they said “Four Roses”; probably only teasing me. It’s “Five Roses.” When I went to Johannesburg in 2001—actually my second trip to South Africa—in order to shoot the *King Kong* film with Daniel Johnston sitting in Triomf Park reciting his song,



Aldo van Eyck, playgrounds,
Amsterdam
Manenburgstraat, 1950
Nico Snijdersstraat, 1956
Prins Bernhardpark, 1968

I decided to start recording “interviews” with kids on playgrounds, first in Johannesburg and Soweto, then in Cape Town and the surrounding townships, such as Gugulethu. According to its new constitution, South Africa has eleven official languages, of which Zulu and Xhosa are the most widely spoken. I always went to the recordings with assistants and friends who spoke the languages I don’t speak; we also discussed the transcriptions and translations into English. Actually, *Four or Five Roses* consists of texts in English only. This was my decision. No easy decision, especially in the post-apartheid South-African context.

You are, quite surprisingly, talking of “genre.” Why do you continue holding on to this old term? How can one take it up again today, and why?

What interests me about a new concept of genre is how it can create a difference to the old politics of identity. It offers the freedom to look at things even more differently, which becomes again interesting in a political and aesthetic prospect. Things become a little strange if their (relative) autonomy is enforced. Probably I refer to the term “genre” more in the sense that it was used some time ago in film theory. As for the art world, there is still too much superstition going on. With regard to artistic work, there is a tendency to think that if somebody is interested in something, he or she will also be fascinated by it. In science, for example, it is permitted to have an object under investigation that is unspectacular or problematic or non-identical. I don’t want to fall in love with my material, or at least not always. Genre means to exhibit something; not necessarily to believe in something on the same level. It’s a way to disarm power when power uses identity or identities for hegemonic purposes. In other words: making things aesthetically more generic empowers the minor differences. It’s like a set-up strategy for better communication, without the neo-liberal backstage operator. Also history, or historicizing, is a genre option. If you ask me more specifically I would say: *Playgrounds* deals with the genre of conceptual photography; *Four or Five Roses* with literature; *King Kong* with pop.

Talking about “genre,” I have the feeling that theater is either a model or at least something operative in your works. I think of how you use the stage in *Playgrounds*, the monologues, or the performance in *King Kong*. Is theater linked to a critique of modernism, with a way of questioning the public in general, and in particular vis-à-vis art forms? Is it a way to make something like a phantom community emerge?

Theater is the enemy but the concept of genre is not afraid of it. Good enemies are always helpful; if there is no other choice I am not against a bad choice, either. We are talking about theater, not just about the theatrical in art (a more historical debate). As the cheapest life-size picture of the whole representation complex, theater is a much compromised thing; and it is really compromising and contagious. But apparently this makes it also so appealing. It is always the same attraction, I imagine; always a little bit on the edge and slightly pathetic. I have only performed once myself, in *Dummy*, the short film produced for Documenta X in 1997. I was not particularly keen on it but



somebody had to do it. Projects like *La Bohème* (1997) and *Peter Friedl* (1998) come very close to theater, or to staging, and I am planning even much closer links for the future. I have serious doubts about theater positively invoking a future community. I would agree with you as far as a specific project is concerned: the aesthetic ethnography of *Playgrounds* is meant to explore the playground as the stage for the first institutionalized, public experiences of “small” subjects (children).

Through the series of images and playing games with repetition and difference, this stage is being defined as a topography for possible experiences. And in this sense, perhaps, also as a scene for a rising community. Otherwise, I think the more interesting part of the theater question for me is emphasizing the difference between the stage and the public and how it works under perverted circumstances.

What are these perverted circumstances?

The circumstances we have. When everybody wants to be a spectator and protagonist at the same time—certainly without any revolutionary romanticism—, and even something like Pasolini’s despair looks like some role model to be picked up by any hysterical video artist (male or female); circumstances are definitely perverted. The real scandal is complicity. Let’s talk for once, for example, about the other side, about your business and responsibility: curatorial practice, critique... If we have to accept the fact that “cinema” was chosen as a paradigm for visual arts within the last decade, we also have to discuss the real significance and consequences of that. What concept of cinema was chosen? And why exactly? To be practical, during the past ten years there has been no real development of acceptable curatorial practices dealing with film (time) and space within art institutions. Mission failed. They really think it’s enough to convert public space—if it’s still public—into black boxes. Parallel to this mysticism, every corrupt idiot now knows how to make exhibitions that look somehow political. In simple terms: it seems that today even the best people cannot curate better exhibitions than the others. That’s very serious, it’s close to surrender. However, for the hedonistic illusion it probably looks like progress.

It seems as though you are nostalgic for an era when (collective) exhibitions had faith in creating a world, a unity of production, understanding, and time; when presentation was a work in itself, like a movie, like in 1997 when you put the word KINO in large illuminated letters on top of the roof for documenta X. Don’t you think exhibitions can simply be proposals nowadays? I remember that editing was one of the most important points in cinema several years ago, just look at Godard or Artavazd Pelechian. Today the issue has become more one of collage, which is definitely moving in a different direction than montage.

Sure, the montage technique did not defeat capitalism. As much as we know, capitalism is the most brilliant contemporary artist—a true genius of dividing, on the one side, and converting, on the other, simultaneously. When I watched Pelechian’s *Our Century* again, in Paul Virilio’s show at Fondation Cartier, I was also wondering, what happened to aesthetic strategies like *montage à distance*; or

to Glauber Rocha’s individual nuclear montage, for example, in his *História do Brasil* film essay from the early 1970s. If we talk about the exhibition as a medium, we have to speak seriously about autonomy and control. *KINO* remains, among other things, also my only real homage to one curator and her autistic courage. Wasn’t the 1990s called the decade of the curator? What follows, parallel to the birth of a society of control, is that the curator—if the term still makes sense—becomes a corporate agent and cultural global player in relatively strict harmony with the usual economic-political power agenda, no matter what the content is, no matter whether these are good guys or bad guys. That’s nothing really new in and of itself, of course, but it exemplifies the totalitarianism and nonsense of today’s symbolic camouflage. So the exhibition question is not about faith and unity, but rather, about meaning and aesthetical ethics and how things are done. You cannot simply localize power as being there, on the other side. Power meanders through all levels and its ramifications continue on every level. Everybody knows that, and no one does anything about it. I don’t believe we will get much further by simply producing more exhibitions on governmentality, power, distribution of the sensible, and so on. I am interested in a sort of ethics similar to the way that in an era of no nostalgia, narration was probably once an ethical position.

I was wondering if there is some sort of link from one work to another. Is this important for your way of working or looking back on your work in a retrospective way ?

For a certain time in the past, I felt quite uncomfortable with breaks and gaps and difficulties in my work. Now there’s no individual failure in a certain sense. I like to travel and I like concepts to travel. There are limits, so a clear understanding of limits is necessary, but also a clear understanding of history. The retrospective view allows you—besides corrupting the absolute or getting corrupted—to enthusiastically embrace history, at least. When I was eleven or twelve years old and imitating paintings by Pollock, Matisse, or drawings by Raphael, I got to see Tarkovskij’s film *Andrej Rublov*, which I have never forgotten. I have never seen it again and really don’t know what to think of it today. Tarkovskij’s two-part epic on the medieval icon painter Andrej Rubljov was in black and white. After all the atrocities and insanity of history, one could view, a couple of hours later, the triumph of the work, the icons—in color. It was so easy.

There are at least two ways to deal with your drawings in the context of a retrospective. One is to say: Peter Friedl also does drawings. Then your drawings become another section, in a traditional way of exhibiting. The other is to ask how these drawings echo the rest of the work. Drawing as conceptual proposals. Yet, including work from when you were a child seems a gesture meant to blur these borders, blurring even the borders of time: when is an artist actually an artist? Do you fight for or against any myth if you make such a choice?

Your first theory is quite evident: it is true, there are also drawings in my oeuvre. But now, there are frames with drawings. Framed drawings and they get installed on a wall, vertically. This is more about staging. It is this explicit verticality to which the classical genre of musealizing biography and

a fan of the general (self-)mystification of conceptualism, especially if this very fragile aesthetics of the 1960s is concerned. We have to make clear that their solutions, too, were part of the problem, a bit similar to the comedy of psychoanalysis, deliberately or not (good bad mirror jokes!). On the other hand, it's true that problems in art history tend to disappear (into the museum) rather than be resolved. Call it theory of justice if you want. Well, *Homes for America*—as a text—belongs to the genre of art magazine text pieces; the twenty (if I am right) images belong to the genre of slide pieces: the new 24 x 36 mm camera instead of Smithsonian's Instamatic. Things got a bit lost and mixed up over the years. I just remember the images as photo prints. As far as I know, a reconstruction of the more original slide version was undertaken in 1997 or 1998, with additional slides by Dan Graham from the 1970s replacing some lost ones, but I never got to see it. The specific art world view on the U.S. first-world suburban context is crucial—and maybe a historical limit—for that kind of art. That's the genre behind the genre in *Homes for America*; there's a certain (stylistic) emphasis on the vernacular, which makes it look like somewhat of an affirmative action so to speak. Not just because the images have become more and more aura-like and “timeless” over the years, obviously; that's what usually happens to documentary photography. This is why we got a documentary fashion. Perhaps it is for the same reason that people want to see my playgrounds as empty. The void is safe. I guess there are more specific “histories,” for example, in Helen Levitt's photographs and film, although her images could look more old-fashioned. As for the *Children's Pavilion*: I still don't like it. It's just monstrous, this Dan Graham/Jeff Wall collaborative project. Dawn of the Dead. I think their use of the rhetorical (universalism, etc.) doesn't go anywhere beyond academic perversion and usurpation. You'd be better off putting *Las Meninas* in the Panthéon in the Latin Quarter. The heritage question makes me feel a bit destitute, so I should try to be more class-conscious... I'd love to say that I don't really like the critical element in art. Unfortunately, it seems it is still difficult to speak about such distinctions in a non-paradoxical way even if the matrix for these distinctions should be—and somehow is—a commonplace today. My work consists primarily of emphasizing and extending creative control to all involved parts of production. I understand your question regarding modernism, but I also feel there is nothing really new to say about it. This question/answer dramaturgy itself has achieved a classical and self-fulfilling status. Making brackets around it *is* an answer. It's up to you if you're happy with that. “The importance of being modern is overrated” is a true sentence. “The importance of being modern is underrated” is also true.

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