

Peter Friedl
Work 1964–2006

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Bartomeu Marí

A Retrospective

Who said that beauty was back? Who certified its disappearance? Who advocated its return? In the twenty-first century, art history should refer back to previous centuries with a natural constancy, although the intention may be to rewrite art's emerging moments and faults, its valleys and underground currents. A certain kind of cartography is needed, one that includes the economy and history of political ideas alongside relationships between aesthetic forms, all complemented with the meteorology of culture. Art will become less physical and more atmospheric, that is, it will probably include plausible, yet unpredictable phenomena, alluding to whatever is beyond the borders of immediate perception while still remaining tangible.

In bringing together an artist's œuvre and projecting present-day fantasies onto it, the prevailing tendency is to include and exclude, to eliminate, with the persistent aspiration to recreate: to reproduce feelings and connotations we imagine or presume that the work bore when it materialized. The present exhibition, however, has no ambition of reconstructing the original qualities of the works. Instead, it is a revision of the potential embodied within their basic logical structure, that is, the set of rules the artist established for their creation. Having rejected a purely historiographic or hyper-pedagogical approach, and instead, having chosen to provide additional information to counteract certain enigmas, it seemed important to emphasize the visual and material condensation of this information. The information is there, however, recipients are not—or at least not initially—given all required or possible clues. It also seemed important to minimize the exhibition architecture: to highlight the museum architecture, that is, to start off by acknowledging the physical qualities of the museum, the concept of every museum, as a page upon which the work is written and inscribed. Although the intention is by no means for the museum to stand on its own: for the work to beautify a space that was initially intended to enhance the work. Museum walls are not blank pages: regardless of the architecture, history is always visible.

In most of his works, Friedl emphasizes their sense of being exhibited so as to distort their status as completed, enclosed, uninterrupted facts. What is an exhibition? What does “retrospective” mean? Is it the natural place for a work of art or a mere coincidental arrangement? A retrospective is a visual and critical projection moving from the present to the past. In this case, we are referring to a recent past that has not yet solidified; still too near to be remote and yet distant enough not to dampen appreciation on a conceptual level. Facts and their sediments are superimposed, consecutively adding layers to the various interpretations. Musealizing objects and artworks is an attempt to establish their present existence within a framework of interpretations that allow for optimal communication in order to facilitate understanding and provoke experiences. Gradually, time will furnish the works with new meanings. Does the exhibition elucidate or obscure the components of this *œuvre*? What does “understanding” mean with reference to art? Peter Friedl is a climatic artist, that is to say, he is both plausible and unpredictable. He has a rather problematic relationship with modernity and a no less intricate one with the present. When contemplating his work, it is even possible to eschew the dichotomy between understanding and enjoyment. Viewing these works as a whole may be disconcerting for those who look for an artist’s mark in stylistic or material unity. Although Friedl may reject unity with respect to form or materials and techniques, arguments stringing the works together as well as the readings and approaches to their *raisons d’être* are clearly evident.

The exhibition comprises works and information about works that, despite playing an outstanding role in Friedl’s production, cannot exist within the format of an exhibition. These are projects realized in public spaces, specific works intended for a particular space, at a certain time. They would be impossible to reconstruct since interpreting and re-exhibiting them would create a new focus of attention. Their documentary presence in the form of designed posters, emanating graphically from the pages of this catalogue, allows them to exist in the exhibitivistic grammar constructed for the display. The catalogue leaps onto the museum walls, taking its place alongside the other works, and yet it also fulfills another function; providing more information on something that is absent. A kind of reciprocity has been created whereby both elements rely on each other. In terms of the works, their stylistic and material diversity and methodological similarity have already been mentioned, as well as the notion of swimming against the tide of gestures and trends belonging to certain periods or situations, stretching the boundaries of artistic production’s typologies, a graphic refinement that is as unusual as it is spectacular, and, finally, in terms of signs and contents, (especially those referring to politics) an articulation of degrees in meaning and their relation to the history of ideas and to those who generate and convey them. The selected works can be seen as a constellation organized by specific criteria relating to the whole. The chronology, titles, alphabetic order, and so on, are intensified; acting as rules of positioning and arranging for visual articulation. Friedl has rehearsed his artistic activity with resolve from the moment he began producing his more mature work in the late 1980s. After a long stay in Italy, where he lived mainly as a peasant, he was able to choose the instruments that would define him as an artist. Rather than materials or production

techniques, the instruments he chose comprise an intellectual position forged from reactions to specific, relevant goals.

There are several conceptual elements that stand out in Peter Friedl’s work. For example, “scandalization” or the supposed fracture of classification codes that have established reading habits—and, therefore, the ability to critique and shape art history. This could be defined as a set of genres, artistic categories, or typologies that the configuration of the works decisively interrogates. To a certain extent, Friedl takes his notion of genre from literature or film, although sometimes the linking of certain genres may not derive from a clear consensus. Friedl hereby expands the meaning of genres, i.e., the instruments of classification and the knowledge of art, by muddling them, twisting them, wringing them out. An exhibition as a representation technique (on the same level as language, color, or paper) is included in the ever richer vocabulary of expression and reception. As Friedl says, “aesthetic problems can only be resolved when you’re able to put them in parentheses; when you ‘exhibit’ them (which is never normal).” By breaking open the canons of discrimination between genres, Friedl likewise forces open the process of placing value on and interpreting his works. He reconstructs hierarchies, however temporary, and re-enacts conflicts. “It’s true that problems in art history tend to disappear (into the museum) rather than be resolved.”

This exhibition sums up the artist’s critical stance regarding the canonization and conventionalization of certain perceptions of art in general, and the dominance of the image, which emerged and then took control in the 1990s. Not only was the twentieth century the century of the image, but its last two decades brought an avalanche of images intended to erase the real meanings they supposedly represent.

In Peter Friedl’s work, constant, clearly distinguishable components continue from and mix with each other year after year: an interest in and cultivation of an atmosphere enveloping the world of childhood, and a strong connection with the core of twentieth-century ideology’s origins; in other words, the ideology we end up inheriting, even if unconsciously. His work likewise demonstrates a careful approach to the culture of design as a sphere from which particularly subtle works can be extracted, where their precise qualities (color, shade, dimensions, typographic elements, etc.) still desire inclusion in a certain communicative system. Included in the artist’s methodology and vocabulary are also strategies of neutralizing, correcting, upsetting, and even scandalizing notions, references, or concrete data. His relationship with his ideological environment is not, in any way, comfortable.

For the first time in his career, Friedl is exhibiting an extensive selection of drawings in a museum display. Presented in strict chronological order, they could almost be considered the backbone of the exhibition. Chronology is simply another convention among the many to impart some kind of order on a set of works. The experienced beholder will quickly observe that Friedl already began his artistic career at the age of four. Some of the drawings recovered from his childhood allow us to see that his stylistic development, or the iconographic heritage he has accumulated over the years, is minimal or possibly even non-existent. The same cannot be said for the variety of themes he unfolds. Furthermore, the first “recoveries” taken from this enormous personal file will be enlarged images,

such as, *Map*, 1969–2005, which has a chromatically distorted background that profoundly complicates the “readymade” idea.

The representation of childhood seems to have no connection whatsoever to his critical position with regard to ideologies. A more detailed analysis of the presence of childhood and the sphere of political ideas, however, reveals that Friedl outlines a minor history of exclusions and the fringes of universal daily routine. *Playgrounds*, a component of the MACBA Collection since 2004, is a work in progress comprising photos of urban play areas taken by the artist in cities across the continents he has traveled through since 1995. The work consists of digitized and projected color slides, arranged alphabetically according to the name of the city where the image was taken and written in the local language. The series is constantly expanding with each new image that Friedl adds. These playgrounds and recreation areas are mostly empty as the photos have been taken at times when children are not normally there. In *Playgrounds*, Friedl analyses an urban typology situated somewhere between garden, park, and parking lot: places of controlled play. He also reacts to the tradition of documentary photography that conceptual art adopted as a representation strategy in the late 1970s. The uniformity of the tools of play can be seen with utmost clarity, along with the stridency and recurrence of colors, layout of clay and grass, erosion that use has imprinted on the different playthings; the photographer’s tenacity and systematic nature; and the verification of tremendous desolation, a barren piece of land that is nonetheless in use. To what can we attribute a child’s loneliness? The work is not concerned with utopian urban space nor does it emphasize the decline of public services.

The world of childhood has materialized in a variety of forms in Friedl’s work, and like all of his beginnings, it can be found in his drawings. Writing, the portrait, the sign, the image of the animal or symbol emerge and gradually merge together. Further on down the line, they lead to works of a very different nature. There is an explicit re-creation of the world of childhood in *Playgrounds*, as well as in the drawings, puzzles, photos, and videos; either seeming extremely meticulous, anesthetized, or extolled. The gestures referring to childhood continue in appearance only. The artist’s own writing, his son’s, or the improbable writing that appears in his neon works, inscribe his work in the world of manual lettering at the same time as making it possible to read the selection of drawings that take a prominent position, both spatially and discursively.

Contrasting this manual lettering are more expressionistic elements, tasks sustained by materials that clearly belong within the field of graphic design. As the author of miscellaneous written works—a considerable selection can be found in this catalogue—Friedl has referred to these themes in texts such as *Dream City*, a title he used for a work, which is also the name of the exhibition in which he was invited to participate. Quite frequently, he ends up using his texts as catapults to express ideas or opinions that have not yet been translated into works. Friedl began his literary production ca. 1980 with what could be categorized as avant-garde theater critique. Subsequently, he returned to writing proto-fictional texts. Texts such as *The Curse of the Iguana* and *Avenida Glauber Rocha* are true parables capable of grafting fictitious stories onto contemporary readings of a history of political ideology within the field of art. He has also explored the genre of monologue

as a means of communication in book projects such as *Kromme Elleboog* and *Four or Five Roses*, containing children’s monologues. The children were interviewed by the artist in Holland and South Africa, then, if necessary, the texts were translated into English and minimally edited. The children’s words recorded in urban playgrounds in Rotterdam, Johannesburg, Cape Town, are like a typology of monologues, similar to those found in the theater section of English bookshops intended for actors preparing for rehearsals or castings.

It becomes evident in the exhibition that Friedl reacts to recent history with phobias and phobias by moving closer and then distancing as he chooses. These critical choices are precisely what help him settle or resolve a major portion of his work. These choices also refer to different artistic traditions and facts that have arisen in political spheres, language in public space and public conscience, as well as in ideological, occasionally even personal spheres; often, they are anecdotes expressing hidden universalities. What makes up the nature of an *in situ* work? How do the means used determine the work’s expressive abilities? How is it possible to avoid the exhibition system’s inherent determinations?

A large number of video works have been “restructured” for presentation in this context. Regardless of the original presentation means (monitors, projections, and so on), these works can be seen on identically-sized flat screens. Owing to its two-dimensional nature, the screen makes the work move closer to the status of “photography in movement” and the distance of the usual video device. Only *King Kong*, a video piece realized in 2001, has remained as an installation, occupying an entire room.

Peter Friedl: Work 1964–2006 also provided the occasion to carry out a new project, *Theory of Justice*, which contains references to modern art’s half-buried history. Probably inspired by something that Walker Evans practiced for many years, Friedl reconstructs the idea of selecting and collecting newspaper images published in the daily press from 1992 onward. The title clearly refers to the goal of renewing the notion of social justice as proposed by the liberal ideology of American philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). Rawls considers a well-ordered society to be a structure that is regulated by a public and objective concept of justice: “Justice as fairness is a political conception of justice for the special case of the basic structure of a modern democratic society.” As pointed out in a press release obviously written by Friedl himself: “If it is true that the contemporary global drama is one of expulsion and exclusion, then justice and distribution theories are out of touch with reality. In grasping the logic of the political as opposition to the dispositifs of administration, of police repression, and institutional regulation, conflict takes the place of consensus: politics as resistance by those social actors for whom no voice is foreseen. The question: ‘Can the Subaltern speak?’ includes the questions of potential (speaking) pictures for this conflict. The site of these new pictures of history can be found between visibility and discourse.”

Theory of Justice materializes through “original” images cut out of different publications and arranged in strict chronological order according to the date of publication (rather than the date the image was captured) in a series of display cases designed specifically for this work, a publication

comprising a personal selection of images taken from the artist's collection, and a wall-presentation of the uncut, unfolded, printed sheets of the book. The fate of the three forms of presentation corresponds with the material fate of all images, that is, disappearance through erosion: the "originals" will vanish before the images rescued in book form, but the printed sheets covering the museum walls will be destroyed as soon as the exhibition is over. Degeneration, corruption, and a prolonging of the images' death throes are all part of the gesture of presenting a comprehensive showing of works. Recovering and re-exhibiting these images will delay, at least relatively, their inevitable disappearance.

In short, *Theory of Justice*, similar to *Playgrounds*, is a work in progress, which cannot be placed easily in a museum. Thus, it is necessary to ask whether the general actions that a museum associates with perceiving exhibitions and art is possibly the object of inversion of those who take on the responsibility of maintaining artistic convention. Furthermore, in addition to considering the necessity of beauty, it should be crucial to carefully consider the importance of the necessary relations to the use of facts, knowledge, and pleasure in art.