

File 3
Critical text

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**In response to the
exhibition: Peter Friedl
The Dramatist at Artspace,
March–April 2014**

Peter Friedl's practice has been informed by being a traveler and his interest in a typology of history, which cuts across narratives, geographies, and time. In his exhibition at Artspace, he intricately entwines materials, references, and experiences following a chronological order, while focusing on creating content that subverts established discourses, meaning ideological accounts product of social, historical and institutional formations which guide our conception of the world. In the main gallery a series of ninety drawings is installed in progressive order with works made from 2012 to 2014. In them, micro and macro narratives are interwoven; political characters are presented alongside personal stories. The first sheet of the series is the artist's self-portrait, followed by a plethora of images which includes: a gleeful representation of the iconic Westinghouse poster *We Can Do It!* (1942), by J. Howard Miller; three

quarter graphite portraits of Mao Tse-tung, Lenin and Stalin; a sketch of Anne Frank's family; a bird with orange feathers; Syria's president Bashar al-Assad; a multicolored crayon-drawn woman accompanied by an excerpt from an Edward Dyer's poem; a portrayal of the American business magnate Warren Buffet; a sketch of Māori leader and activist Whina Cooper; a blue crying eye; a depiction of convicted Russian weapons smuggler Viktor Bout; the Chinese flag; and a hand print on which MONEY is inscribed.

In this personal journey of socio-political history, heterogeneous contents are matched with varying techniques: a colorful watercolor of a young Hitler juxtaposes to a free-hand graphite drawing depicting two women kissing. Differently from other conceptual artists exploring history, Friedl doesn't provide any explanatory text to read his works, appealing to

the viewer's analysis through free association. As in dreams, the connection between the imagery presented is not easily understandable; it opens up vast possibilities. The absence of a recognizable style in the drawings might suggest, on one hand, changeability and volubility, perhaps reflecting the artist's psychological moods while executing the drawings (some look meticulously energetic, others loose with a certain air of immediacy or depression). On an aesthetic level, this freestyle gesture can be read as an act to disclaim authorship. This undermining of the artist's authority serves the purpose of questioning representational systems, as well as a provocation to the viewer to read this constellation of images not only as familiar historical illustrations of the past but as flexible, malleable documents that can be neutralized by creating new potential narratives. In the act of reading them in innovative forms, far away from estab-

lished or dominant discourses, Friedl explores the possibility of destabilizing an image by creating complex models that blend different lines of thought. Therefore it is through critical intimacy rather than critical distance that political and familiar representations might spring an invisible act of consciousness.

The notion of history as an ongoing process, as a sequence in time, is also present in Friedl's work *Playgrounds*, 1995–2014. Aligned alphabetically according to locations, over one thousand landscape color slides of playing fields collected in different journeys can be appreciated in six different projectors. Through these photographs it is possible to realize that areas designed exclusively for playing have assumed similar standards: most playgrounds are sheltered; there is a deployment of safety and durable materials in diverse colors; geometric forms are a

constant; dynamic equipment such as benches, swings, slides, trim trails, ladders and climbing bars are there to create sensory experiences. From Argentina to Praha, Qalqilya to Yokohama, all parks look similar in their form and function; their main objective is to develop child's play. However, these images don't refer to the act of playing as ludic creative freedom, but as a staged institutionalized experience with a scheme of rules that facilitate sociability and adaptation to a system, a globalized one, which is mirrored in ubiquitous playground urban aesthetics.

Friedl's interest in the representation of childhood has been articulated in numerous projects such as *Four or Five Roses*, 2004, which consists of a series of interviews with children in playgrounds in Johannesburg, Soweto, and Cape Town. His interest in infancy and its visual misrepresentation link him to modern thinkers

such as the Dutch architect Aldo van Eyck. Childhood was a theme that returned repeatedly in Van Eyck's career, he also consciously wanted to keep away infancy from the periphery of attention, which led him to write essays on the topic and dedicate an important part of his practice to the design and construction of more than seven hundred playgrounds across the Netherlands between 1947 and 1978. Public play fields for children were a major modern postwar innovation and he was one of the first visionaries that advocated for the democratization of children's play. Many of Van Eyck's designed playgrounds have disappeared; the only trace left is a series of black-and-white photos that register their existence. Both Van Eyck's and Friedl's photographic documentations serve to narrate the history of playgrounds, as well as typological studies on urban modernism. But there is a big difference between Van Eyck's photographic archive

and that one of Friedl: while the Dutch architect's play field shots are taken from high-up, the Austrian artist's photos are at a child's eye level. The implication of this gesture separates Friedl's images from being merely documents or distant critical sources. The artist pushes the viewer to have a more intimate or emphatic perspective, conscious that communication, as art interpretation, is more effective if people have the ability and openness to do it on different levels.

The Dramatist (Black Hamlet, Crazy Henry, Giulia, Toussaint), 2013—an installation that gives title to the exhibition—features four delicate handcrafted marionettes hanging from the ceiling of the gallery. The figures embody from left to right: Toussaint Louverture, the multifaceted leader of the Haitian Revolution and the first man of color to become a governor of a colony, in some historio-

graphical sources he appears as hero or as racist revolutionary; Henry Ford, the American alleged anti-Semitic magnate who perfected the mass production of automobiles; Antonio Gramsci's wife Giulia Schucht, to whom he addressed most of his famous prison letters in which he discusses gender inequalities; John Chavafambira, a Zimbabwean healer and diviner who was the subject study in the novel *Black Hamlet* (1937), by South African psychoanalyst Wulf Sach. Four characters that correspond to different historical contexts share the same space, perhaps linked by their psychological complexities and their involvement in discourses implying social inequalities. Deedless and inert, they appear as if waiting for a playwright to manipulate their strings according to his or her perceptions. *The Dramatist*, as all works on show at Artspace, brings into question the feasibility of recounting history:

the impossibility of achieving objectivity when shifting the sands of interpretation is evident here. By treating historiography more like a play or a dream than an objective document, Friedl liberates visual historical representations from their established conceptual standards, deliberately transforming them through the prism of art.

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