

Claire Tancons
**Portrait of the
Artist as a
Dramatist: A
Conversation
with Peter
Friedl**

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What can a contemporary dramaturgy of the image look like? How might the theatrical come to the rescue of context in exhibitionary modes of display? Are representation and identity mutually exclusive? As Peter Friedl wanders through the making and meaning of images, warns against the pitfalls of context, and discusses the respective features and failures of theatre and performance, the artist as a dramatist ponders silence and absence as a remedy to censorship in the puppet theatre of history.

Claire Tancons: Would you rather go to jail for your ideas or retreat to a monastery?

Peter Friedl: From my point of view, contemporary art is a prison. Can I opt for the monastery? Tolstoy's very last getaway in November 1910 began with a monastery. He was heading south and wanted to find a hideout in Bulgaria.

CT: If given a choice, would you rather go to a pre-Foucauldian or a more modern prison?

PF: Definitely not one of the outsourced prisons like the secret UAE-backed prisons in southern Yemen. Better a classical social-democratic lockup in Belgium or Germany, with television and a hopeless shrink ... Inherent in this kind of question is the illusion that culture might be linked to freedom.

CT: I'm asking about the prison in relationship to your longstanding reverence for Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*. For instance, you have depicted his wife, Julia Schucht, in many drawings and as a marionette. And I know that your own diaries, started in 1981, are central to your work.

PF: Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* is one of the great palimpsests of political philosophy in the twentieth century and, at the same time, an extremely individual document, his *via crucis* or passion. It's a document for how the mind works under aggravated circumstances, which I often pair with another unique document, Simone Weil's *Cahiers*. It's all about the fragility of thinking. I came to know the *Prison Notebooks* better in the 1980s when I lived in Italy. Yes, of course, this is familiar terrain.

CT: If you were to follow a church, would you pick an Eastern or a Western church? I'm thinking here of your interest in the icon and iconostasis as described by the priest, philosopher, mathematician, and polymath Pavel Florensky in the 1920s.

PF: Well, I'm also interested in Robert Fludd's attempt at picturing nothingness, the black square of *The Great Darkness* (1617) from his *History of the Macrocosm and Microcosm*. I remember worshiping in an Orthodox church in Sofia, Bulgaria, when I was ten or eleven years old. At about the same time I saw Tarkovsky's epic *Andrei Rublev* somewhere. As often happens



Peter Friedl, *Teatro (Report)*, 2016–18. Oak, MDF, plywood, brass, plexiglas, polyurethane resin, polystyrene, PVC, stainless steel, digital print, neodymium magnets, acrylic paint, 185 x 119 x 84 cm. Courtesy the artist and Guido Costa Projects, Turin. Photo: Cristina Leoncini.



Peter Friedl, *Report*, 2016. Filmstill. Single-channel HD video installation, color, sound, 32:03 minutes. Courtesy the artist; Guido Costa Projects, Turin; Galerie Erna Hécey, Luxembourg; and Nicolas Krupp, Basel. Commissioned and produced by documenta 14.



Peter Friedl, *The Dramatist (Black Hamlet, Crazy Henry, Giulia, Toussaint)*, 2013. Wood, metal, fabric, leather, glass, straw, oil paint, nylon strings. Dimensions variable. Collection Carré d'Art – Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes. Courtesy the artist and Guido Costa Projects, Turin. Photo: Maria Bruni.

in life, I never saw the film again, but it created lasting images for me. That's how imagination – whether it's a fiction or not isn't really important – and how the art of memory work. I recall that after all the turmoil and atrocities of history, depicted in black and white, there was the apotheosis in color: the works of Rublev, the icon painter. Masterpieces can be quite detached. Flaubert calls them dumb in one of his nocturnal letters. They have this tranquil aspect, like large animals or mountains. By the way, I find it very disturbing that the epic has disappeared from visual art. That's a real loss.

CT: Has culture turned apostate? Is art iconoclastic?

PF: The contrary is true: art has become completely self-indulgent, totally in love with and surrendering to images and information. I think the problem of art today is that it hasn't found very convincing answers to the dream life of the World Wide Web. Mimicry is not enough. I remember T. J. Clark preaching that. When it comes to my métier, the creation of complex images, I have the feeling that resistance must take strange paths and go far beyond any iconoclastic impulse. Saying “no” means to radiate negativity towards all sides, in order to save some positivity that isn't just self-absorbing. I find it important to close certain windows now. For example, I don't want to give away too much information about the alchemy of layering. This isn't about self-censoring or mystifying, it's about salvaging aesthetic substance that has become too fragile. My job is trying to become silent, for only silence cannot be censored.

CT: In which epoch would you prefer to live?

PF: I don't think I was born in the wrong century. I have to live now. The alternative is: better to not have been born at all. I have no nostalgia about loss, but it's true that composing a complex image has become a very solitary job. Although it's been captured by all the discursive tropes, we can still dream of it and desire it. There's a difference between claiming complexity and somehow fabricating something in a clever way that is supposed to look layered and complex. Rather, I consider myself a decontextualizer. First, I'm looking for as much context as possible, and then I want to kick it out.

CT: I'm interested in the invisible hand behind the many stages you provide for your works. Let's start with *The Dramatist (Black Hamlet, Crazy Henry, Giulia, Toussaint)* (2013), in which four handcrafted marionettes from different overlapping periods leave us anticipating action or motion, though they remain still. Gramsci's wife, Julia Schucht, stands for love and resistance in fascist Italy;

Henry Ford embodies the apex of classic American capitalism; black Hamlet comes from pre-Apartheid South Africa; and Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, belongs to another century entirely.

PF: All together they are the dramatis personae of an unwritten plot. Giulia and Henry Ford were contemporaries, as was John Chavafambira, the Manyika *nganga* and protagonist of the first African psychoanalytic study in Wulf Sachs's *Black Hamlet*. Long-lived Henry Ford, who once said that history is bunk, was of course much older. And Toussaint L'Ouverture, the hero behind one of the revolutions I like most, is the undead. It's an idiosyncratic Gang of Four. There's also another group of three marionettes, *The Dramatist (Anne, Blind Boy, Koba)* (2016) – a dysfunctional family of sorts. Anne Bonny, one of the most famous female pirates of all time, was Irish and operated in the Caribbean. Koba is young Joseph Stalin, who during his early years in Tbilisi adopted his nickname from Alexander Kazbegi's novel *The Patricide*. The blind boy is me, but he's also a character from Edward Gordon Craig's series of puppet plays. I'm floating through lives and times, but I don't think this is so unusual. Nothing is more forced upon us than belonging to a certain time. Achrony or anachrony makes more sense. When it comes to the past, especially in theater, shortcuts known as actualization are very common. I prefer distance. I like to look at old things in a museum. I even like theater as a museum.

CT: The overarching title of your solo show, “Teatro,” at the Kunsthalle Wien earlier this year and now at Carré d'Art in Nîmes, suggests that you're the dramatist here. Is staging theater inside a museum your way of supplanting it?

PF: I just take up certain elements from the history of theater and theatricality and look closer at the museum's alienating effects. To exhibit something is never normal; to exhibit history is even more problematic. The interesting thing about the past is precisely that it's a foreign place. They do things differently there. Yet, at the same time it doesn't look so different. It's this mobility or potentiality that I'm interested in. I don't see how something could be given any more value by selfishly classifying it as contemporary. You don't have to go so far to consider something more beautiful, more intelligent, and greater just because it belongs to the past. It's often lost, and nobody will get it back. This is one extreme. On the other hand, when you remember that people in the past also loved and mourned, then the difference doesn't look so disparate. Despite the fact that they had a completely different historical fate. As an artist, you don't have to worry too much about

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Peter Friedl, *Teatro Popular* (detail), 2016–17. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Lumiar Cité, Lisbon.



Peter Friedl, *Teatro Popular*, 2016–17. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna. Courtesy the artist and Lumiar Cité, Lisbon.

any of this; it's your material. I like to wander the many available streets on different levels. The notion of the archaeologist can quickly become a melancholic cliché, but it does have its merits. We're used to hearing Walter Benjamin described as an archaeologist of modernity, for example. For Freud, the unconscious was timeless and unchangeable, like a landscape of ruins. With its layers of architectural remains, Ancient Rome was his model for the modern psyche. You dig a hole somewhere and discover another city. You dig a little more and you find yourself in another epoch. Standing in front of all these different layers, simultaneously in space and time, this is how I am in history.

CT: Is your sense of a lost past reflected in certain forms of absence?

PF: The past isn't lost. The past is part of the present. Or I could also say: there is no present.

CT: How does absence manifest formally in a work like *The Dramatist*?

PF: There is no performance and there is no puppeteer. It's like freezing a specific situation: the moment before or after a performance. The performance itself is omitted, which is, of course, a very conscious decision. In fact, I hate the dictate of immediacy. The theatrical in art became prominent once as a form of resistance against a certain understanding or misunderstanding of modernism. A lot of arguments seem to be based on relatively unproved theorems and assumptions, for example, the way in which theatrical space and time are relational – in relation to the viewer. Or immediacy as opposed to the distance that separates thought and speech, purity as opposed to an impure theatricality. One can say that performance is a sort of rebirth of the Passion, without a script. The fact that in theater, speech creates space must have been a lure to visual artists, around 1917. But I'm not aiming to restage the Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns. Actually, I'm starting to develop more sympathy for certain positions and ideas attributed to more backward or dogmatic forms of classical modernism. Impurity isn't necessarily more subversive than purity. The rather melancholic or classical atmosphere that I'm trying to create has a lot to do with my desire to start from an aesthetico-historical situation in which certain things already coexist in a kind of synthesis. From there, I want to push everything toward openness by means of various genres to find other forms of narration. *The Dramatist* doesn't have much to do with any romantic ideas of paradise lost or regained as far as the famous essay "On the Marionette Theater" by Heinrich von Kleist or Craig's über-marionette and *Drama for Fools* are concerned. My question is how such

a configuration – through aesthetic contemplation – can open another way of thinking about history differently. It bothers me when context gets reduced to mere text. Of course, if you don't know the four characters at all you can ask: Where's the text? How much text do I need to decipher it? But this problem occurs in front of any phenomena. Immediacy is no salvation. The theatrical helps to simultaneously enforce and mitigate the erratic aspects in my work.

CT: In *Report* (2016) you staged a largely amateur cast, dressed in their everyday clothes, reciting excerpts from Franz Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" (1917) on an empty stage stripped down to the firewalls. The twenty-four actors speak in their native tongue or in a language of their choice: Arabic, Dari, English, French, Greek, Kurdish, Russian, or Swahili. With the exception of Maria Kallimani, a well-known Greek actress who chose to speak in English, they share complex histories of migration, exile, and displacement. Yet, *Report* is not "about" the so-called migrant crisis in the Mediterranean.

PF: *Report* mirrors a specific historical situation when art about refugees and migrants started to abound. I wanted to put an end to the bad habit that artists and the art world have of permanently running after world crises. They should pay for it instead. As Godard said with regard to *Apocalypse Now*: Coppola should have paid Nixon something since all his ideas about Vietnam came from Nixon, not from anywhere else. So, I wanted to offer one of my classical solutions. As much as the actors or participants in *Report* are part of the movement of global migration, being a migrant or a refugee isn't a profession. I also try to bypass the question of exploitation. There's always some sort of exploitation in art. Are we exploiting the Passion of Jesus Christ when you make a religious painting? Or, are you exploiting colonial history, your own family, and your love stories.

CT: If no material can escape exploitation, how much distance do you have to establish between yourself, your material, and your work?

PF: I feel like the aesthetic material available today is rather mediocre, but there's nothing else, so I try to find my way through it. Clearly, I didn't want to focus on the TV news stories about migrants that you get when you put a camera in front of someone who has just survived a dreadful passage across the Mediterranean, who maybe saw their friends or kids dying and, with tears in the eyes, in another language, says something that's considered authentic. This is just pornography. Choosing Kafka's canonical "A Report to an Academy" as if it were a biblical text in various translations was a way out. How can I understand someone if I

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don't know their language? *Report* is about shared fatigue. I had the feeling that it was time to put an end to documentary truism. But again, this isn't too ideological. From time to time, one has to equilibrate things differently. From the very beginning the filmic image started with fiction and documentary coming together. The Lumière brothers knew that to film a street scene in Paris, they had to find a certain angle if they wanted to capture movement in its entirety, on a limited reel. A film lasted two minutes in 1896. Now, it's two hours. I remember a slightly anachronistic TV documentary that Éric Rohmer did in 1968. He invited Jean Renoir and Henri Langlois to talk about Louis Lumière. It's interesting to see such a sublime film director as Renoir indulging in "I still remember" anecdotes, whereas Langlois insists on the political and artistic choices behind that kind of filming. If you look at things differently, they suddenly become a bit strange or look a little odd. This is how I regard working with genre. Genre means that you put parentheses around something. You exhibit it. That's exactly what I like about the museum: it decontextualizes. If you're concerned about the correct context, you can always try to reconstruct it. That's easy. I'm interested in how narration works, and my use of the theatrical has a lot to do with being conscious of the fact that narrating history is always problematic.

CT: Historically, theater has been the arena where politics is examined. I am thinking about your work *Teatro (Report)* (2016–17), a model of National Theatre in Athens, and a companion piece to *Report* which was shot entirely in the National Theatre. I wonder if you believe in theater as an adequate place for the representation of democracy?

PF: I don't know much about representing democracy. In my view, theater's impuissance is evident. Once it had lost its significance as a place to debate power to cinema, then to television, and finally to all other screens, the tricks and methods of theater became available to everyone. If at all, my theater model is haunted by other ghosts coming from the esoteric parts of Renaissance philosophy. I'm referring to Giulio Camillo's *L'Idée del Teatro* or to Fludd's *Theatrum Orbi*, but not to Greece as the cradle of democracy and tragedy. Sure, the Acropolis is just a short walk from the National Theatre where the scenes of *Report* were shot. The classicist National Theatre was built by the German architect Ernst Ziller and opened in 1901. Usually, you wouldn't see the people I invited on stage there.

CT: Would you agree somehow that the actors in your polyphonic cast are the contemporary face of a people that is missing?

PF: Oh, I'm not sharing any sentiments or

expectations of a coming community. I can't really evoke it and don't want to flirt with it. I'm afraid I won't be part of any community, I'm not good at that. The people in *Report* are first and foremost individuals who got stranded in Athens at some point. My job was, perhaps, to celebrate the beauty of their faces. If someone speaks Kurdish or Swahili, I can look at the face, the body, and gestures, but of course, there's a barrier. *Report* doesn't celebrate fraternization or nonverbal theater. I know some of the life stories of most of these people, because we were talking during the casting and shooting. Why didn't I publish them? Because I have no form for them. So I decided to preserve their stories. I'm not censoring or mystifying anything, they probably told their stories to others or they can tell them at any time. I don't have to be the medium for their stories in their own words.

CT: *Report* is as much about film as it is about performance, conflated, in fact, in a filmed performance. You've adopted this tactic before, for example in *Liberty City* (2007) and *Bilbao Song* (2010).

PF: A filmed performance offers just another possibility of using and, at the same time, avoiding live theater. I don't want the histrionic and the cult of immediacy to take over. In fact, I've always been attracted to close encounters of the third kind between film and theater, and there's a very long and rich history of them. *Liberty City* was epic theater in the genre of documentary aesthetics – actually in the form of a short loop, taking the infamous Arthur McDuffie incident and the dramaturgy of the 1980 Miami riots as a reference. It's very much in line with Brecht's *Street Scene*. The tableaux vivants of *Bilbao Song* – a phantasmagorical allegory inspired by Basque history – were specifically staged for the camera in a theater near Bilbao. *Report* is different because it resorts more than any other work to speech and language.

CT: You lay out another stage awaiting activation in *Teatro Popular* (2016–17) by introducing elements from Portuguese street theater that go far beyond the traditional repertoire and set into motion a myriad of narratives. Here, too, like in *The Dramatist*, you created a cast of idiosyncratic characters which, in this case, relates to the history of the Lusophone world. Why did you want to use glove puppets to address Portugal's colonial era and its aftermath?

PF: The traditional Teatro Dom Roberto is a *minor* art, based on typecasting and repetition, with a very restricted repertoire and cast. Its stage, the *barraca*, is a minimalist DIY construction covered with cloth, which conceals the puppeteer inside from the public gaze. My

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Peter Friedl, *No prey, no pay*, 2018–19. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Installation view, Sharjah Biennial 14. Performance by Johnathan Lee Iverson. Courtesy the artists and Sharjah Art Foundation. Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation.



Johnathan Lee Iverson in *No prey, no pay*, 2018–19. Production still. Opening performance, Sharjah Biennial 14. Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.

barracas are prototypes that can be set up and dismantled without any tools. I use them and the hand puppets to create my own idiosyncratic Lusophone universe, peopled with characters from different centuries and continents. In it, you can find, for example, the Sephardic astronomer Abraham Zacuto (1452–ca. 1515), a refugee from Spain who became Royal Astronomer in Lisbon until he had to leave for Tunis due to the persecution of Jews in Portugal. His *Almanach Perpetuum* revolutionized ocean navigation. Then, there's Queen Nzinga of Ndongo and Matamba (1583–1663), who held off Portuguese invaders for many years. Or, in the immediate present, Isabel dos Santos, Africa's first female billionaire, as well as her father, Eduardo dos Santos, who was president of the Republic of Angola for nearly forty years. Art collector and philanthropist Calouste Gulbenkian ("Mr. Five Percent"), one of the first to exploit Iraqi oil, isn't missing. The promise of royal glamour is embodied by the unfortunate king Dom Sebastian I, whose ideas of a late crusade led him to embark on a fatal military adventure in North Africa in 1578. Dom Nicolau (ca. 1830–60) was a prince of the Kingdom of Kongo who published letters protesting colonial economic policy. Other characters are Stanley Ho, Macao's "King of Gambling," born in 1921 and still alive, Angolan songwriter Bonga, and Olga Mariano, a tireless defender of the rights of the Romani in contemporary Portugal. There are also fictional characters, such as Ilsa Lund (Ingrid Bergman), who wants to escape Morocco on a plane to Lisbon in *Casablanca*. The figure of Maria can be read as a little homage to the 1962 film *Dom Roberto* by Ernesto de Sousa. Floripes comes from a Carolingian legend which can be tracked to the island of Príncipe. I made all of the figurines with the help of a local puppeteer in Lisbon.

CT: Are the motionlessness in the display of the four impenetrable *barracas* and the array of unused puppets meant to dismantle certain conceptions of power in the representation of history and its protagonists?

PF: *Teatro Popular* is a sort of shadow fighting with realism and mimesis. This theater gives the impression that it may start to perform at any moment. Instead, it remains silent and still as if the fall of individualization and historiographic fixation had cast a spell on all these heroes and heroines. There's no action, no plot. But there are no people either. The people are missing, as Paul Klee said. I think in the traditional genre of popular theater, the *dramatis personae* were more protected. It was a place to find refuge from the excesses of history. I try to explore how history works.

CT: I'd like to talk about one of your more

recent works, through a discussion of piracy. *No prey, no pay* (2018–19) was produced for the Sharjah Biennial, in the Persian Gulf, formerly known as the Pirate Coast. I know that, for you, piracy isn't really a political alternative to good governance. This is how we differ in our interest in piracy. I've always been intrigued by the way in which anarchists such as Peter Lamborn Wilson aka Hakim Bey looked back at the historical manifestations of piracy as autonomous forms of self-governance. I've also been following the way in which piracy has blossomed into political parties from Norway to Tunisia and, recently, how it's been invoked by far-right Italian politicians and media to criminalize the rescue maneuvers of Captain Carola Rackete, dubbed "*la piratessa*."

PF: The fascinating thing about pirates lies beyond genre-specific fandom. All histories and biographies of piracy get close to fiction. There's no reliable portrait of any Golden Age pirate, just as there's no truthful portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture. The history of piracy is fictitious, and the images circulating around it are even more so. I don't know how much truth there is in Exquemelin's *History of the Buccaneers*, which was first published in 1678. The woodcuts and engravings in the various "who's who in piracy" books are imaginary. Yet, inadequate, imperfect documents show how imagination works. Just take, for example, the sketches done by Harro Paul Harring, a professional German-Danish revolutionary and a bad poet, who in 1840 traveled to Brazil to fight slavery. Or think of dreams as documents in a broader sense, which was the case in Charlotte Beradt's *The Third Reich of Dreams*. Every history is open to projection, but the history of piracy is wide open. It's a good example for how history is being staged. This goes far beyond the question of whether such projections are right or wrong. It also goes beyond celebrating supposedly forgotten or hidden counter-histories of the revolutionary Atlantic.

CT: What makes *No prey, no pay* so appealing to counter-historical narratives is precisely its strong piratical subtext. In this multipart work composed of an Islamic green flag with a white skeleton stitched on, circus plinths, and fancy pirate costumes, a global history of piracy is hinted at, but never fully revealed under the garments of the grotesque.

PF: Well, as far as we know, Edward Low (1690–1724) used a red skeletal figure on a black background for his Jolly Roger. But he also used his Green Trumpeter flag to call his fleet's captains on board. Low is remembered as one of the most notorious and murderous pirates. Anyway, I think the concept of counter-history is a little schematic. It's based on a rather simplistic image of history, similar in some ways

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to certain leftists' notions of the turn to immaterial labor as the big paradigm shift and which exposes a strange concept of historical capitalism, one which doesn't take into account how the term "immaterial labor" is insufficient to accommodate forms of work that have long existed and continue to alienate people, such as what was called "women's work." In order to propose an alternative, one has to reduce and simplify things. It's the desire for a clearly identifiable enemy. That's why long-lasting monoliths such as colonialism and the Shoah remain so popular and successful. I think the idea of a pirate ship as an anti-state model for multicultural or multiracial coexistence is naive. It's as naive as the ignorance of all encounters between Africans and Europeans before the Middle Passage.

CT: The circus plinths are named after fictional and historical figures. They are all personifications of sorts, between Robin Hood antiheroes – or heroines – and sans-culotte martyrs, struggling for agency and autonomy. My favorite, entitled *Little Ben*, the square black plinth which looks like a soapbox, doesn't actually depict a pirate. Neither do *M.* or *Chocolat*.

PF: *Little Ben* is a monochrome portrait of Benjamin Lay (1682–1759), the Quaker dwarf who demanded the total emancipation of all enslaved Africans around the world. *Chocolat* refers to Rafael Padilla, the Afro-Cuban clown who around 1900 became one of the first successful black entertainers in France. *Joice* stands for Joice Heth, obviously. When P. T. Barnum exhibited the elderly, blind African-American woman in 1835 as the 161-year-old former nurse of George Washington, his showman career in antebellum America took off. *Black Caesar*, *Dragon Lady*, and *Hunt the Squirrel* are distinctly piratical. Each of the plinths looks different and can serve as a relatively autonomous sculpture at the same time as a fully functional display object – something between pedestal, tiny stage, and speakers' corner.

CT: But the main formal reference remains the circus plinth. You once wrote to me that *No prey, no pay* is about "the history of showing and showing off." Did you intend to allude to the freak show and lead towards the notion of exhibition as entertainment?

PF: My motley crew isn't a freak show, no matter what the real or fictional characters look like. I don't want to talk endlessly about the common thread that connects them. For sure, the age of Barnum continues to be reincarnated and prevail. And context is always a construction. People often think that there's an artwork that can be considered the text, and this text seems to be embedded in and protected by

context. This formula suggests that the "text" – an artwork – needs to be deciphered, whereas the context can be immediately understood. Yet context is also text and embedded in the history of texts. It's not like Russian dolls, but it does mean that more effort is needed. The same happens with history and counter-history.

CT: Can we discuss *No prey, no pay* within the context of the Gulf and the "New Middle East"? I was wondering if you see any relationship between your project in Sharjah and *The Zoo Story* (2007), with the stuffed giraffe that traveled from Qalqilya, Palestine, to Documenta 12.

PF: Wasn't the "New Middle East" an invention of the last Bush administration? You can't really compare *The Zoo Story* with *No prey, no pay*. The so-called Israeli-Palestinian conflict played an important and deadly role for the giraffe. Instead of exhibiting any media images, I wanted to show the original. The giraffe was meant to function as a narrative model. It was clearly propaganda for the Palestinians. I considered Palestine the last region in the world where images are needed from artists. Normally, I would rather avoid such hot spots. In the case of *No prey, no pay*, I wanted to very consciously keep my distance from any local context. I found the Sharjah Biennial quite compromising and problematic, with no freedom to maneuver. Whereas in the case of the giraffe and Documenta, I had the feeling that I could control everything – the question of transport and of using a loan as my medium – once the giraffe was permitted to leave the West Bank. That's totally different from the biennial circus in an Emirati biotope. What can you do there? I chose the colorful forms of my circus plinths and a slightly mad atmosphere to mark the territory – not exactly in a satirical mode, but by way of suspending meaning. The *No prey, no pay* scenario isn't claiming at any moment that it could be a place to negotiate truth. The giraffe was also a prop, but in a very realistic drama that you might follow in the media – or that most likely, you don't want to follow anymore. The props in *No prey, no pay* are highly hermetic. It's an alternative folklore of sorts.

CT: So, the hermetic nature of the plinths and the crypto-piratical camouflage of the project were part of your plot against the diktat of site-specificity from the very beginning?

PF: Yes. In any case, I have my doubts that there were ever-glorious days of site-specificity. To formalize things is always an effort. I'm now not only tired, I am exhausted, to quote this beautiful text by Deleuze on Samuel Beckett, "The Exhausted." Exhaustion of all possibilities is a necessity. I feel quite at home there.

CT: What is the role of live human presence

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in your work, whether filmed, performed, or suspended?

PF: There are artworks that do not require any beholder. They communicate among themselves through time and space, comment on each other, and try to combat and annihilate or fulfill one another. This could be a post-human world with no human beings anymore, just sleeping beauties somewhere in an abandoned museum. Then there are other forms of communication. A classical form of performance is a visitor in front of a painting moving from left to right and a little closer, mimicking the role of the painter. Remember the funny sentence in C. L. R. James's essay "Picasso and Jackson Pollock": "*Guernica* is to be looked at from the right and the whole picture moves visually from right to left." There are artworks that should be seen from a certain perspective. Performativity is part of architecture, is part of an encounter between body and space. I'm not saying that everything is performance. Performativity doesn't bother me per se, I just wouldn't single it out in the continuum of artistic possibilities. Performance today makes me feel quite uncomfortable. Yes, I think it's a fashion, which has a lot to do – when there's nothing better to do – with the capitalization of the body and gestures of estrangement and alienation. Working with one's own body has become a kind of self-optimizing exercise, close to complicity with capitalist positivity. Performance has become the mainstream model of social behavior. Now everybody's performing, every chief executive expects you to perform. I don't understand why the art world – always so keen on "resistance" – has embraced this deformation so wholeheartedly.

CT: *No prey, no pay* is an open stage that offers the possibility for performance. Given your desire to distance yourself from performance, can it be understood as a pastiche of sorts?

PF: It's very much a caricature. It could also grow and become an opera. Due to my animosity towards theater as an apparatus, I've always refused to put my head in the lion's mouth by working in a regular theater. But, I have to say that I could do it now. Give me an opera house and I would do it my way. I'd accept the actors and opera singers, the musicians, the arrogance of the technicians, everything.

CT: Could you really accept the whole theater apparatus?

PF: I think I could neutralize it now, like I try to neutralize curators, with varying success. We know a lot about form, and still, I believe that art functions best through forms we don't totally trust. It's become so incredibly easy to imitate and counterfeit a layered artwork. Around 1900, in Europe let's say, every girl in a bourgeois

household could play Beethoven or Chopin. And around 1970, every second French household had an unpublished novel somewhere in a drawer. Something similar is happening now. Since contemporary art has become so popular and successful, it probably isn't really needed anymore.

CT: For the opening performance of *No prey, no pay*, Johnathan Lee Iverson, a professional African-American entertainer who proudly presents himself as "the last ringmaster" (of Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus), lent his voice and presence to your display. How did you choose him?

PF: I didn't see the performance and I wasn't there for the opening. We also wanted to invite another expensive special guest, Kabir Bedi, who played the title character in *Sandokan*, the 1970s TV series, an Indian prince turned pirate, fearlessly attacking British forces. I imagine Iverson became a prop.

CT: Are you immune to potential criticisms of staging black performers as props? I remember the unease of one reviewer about non-Western actors taking turns to embody the ape Red Peter.

PF: Isn't Red Peter more red than black?

CT: Well, yes, but the association between blackness and apeness is a minefield.

PF: My aim isn't to represent blackness, nor to problematize it. There was once another red-winged monster, Geryon. Hercules came to steal his cattle and killed him with his arrows. I am Pink Peter.

CT: The impossibility of representing blackness is a recurrent trope in contemporary African-American culture. How do you position yourself as someone who works with such charged material in ideologically tense times of identity politics?

PF: I have nothing against sectarian struggles such as "if you're not black, you're not allowed to speak." But what can one achieve by establishing rules that won't function? At times, I'd also like to be more authoritarian or terroristic and decree what is good and bad art. I think I know what good art is, but everybody else would just laugh. We end up in a field where everybody can claim anything, but who can decree things without becoming the police? This is the problem in culture. So, one falls back on politically tinged empowerment strategies, but empowering of what exactly? Power in art or in culture is problematic because we never know exactly how real it is.

CT: Apropos colonial history, you once said that sometimes it would be best if no images were made at all. You've also expressed reservation about the notion of the postcolonial. But wasn't it meant to protect against the abuse

of images, a concern that you share?

PF: When it comes to the postcolonial, my simple question is: when was it? Isn't that a question posed by Stuart Hall and Ella Shohat in the early 1990s? To be honest, I haven't seen much progress since then in the art world. It seems that we continue to live in an ahistorical limbo. Anyone can come and tell me they're doing some work on the postcolonial. There's no proof, no criteria. This is what bothers me. The same applies to much identity discourse. I don't know much about my identity. I am a guest, an observer. I am nothing. Aesthetic substance is much more fragile than identity. I'm afraid it doesn't make much sense to control images or the fabrication of images. You may have images that are clumsy, such as an opera with the most beautiful music and a dull libretto and plot. If you can do it better, then of course this is a good argument for an ouster. Basically, the questions about blackness and the postcolonial imply that you don't merit the trophy. I wonder where this idea of taking away a trophy comes from. After all, being misrepresented or less represented and trying to defend a territory isn't so special. I can also be very much in favor of a Byzantine-like ban on images. Unfortunately, I don't believe in adequate images. As for my problem with the postcolonial label as an increasingly anti-historical and therefore dangerous notion in art, I would still say: colonizing is going on constantly, more than decolonizing.

CT: What artistic material is left then? And where is it hiding? You often say that you only want to work with material that's waiting for you.

PF: Sometimes, you feel there's a story or a constellation lurking, waiting to get redeemed, kissed, and to be woken up and transfigured. My expectations are always high. It must be something that probably isn't interesting for anybody else. Well, I understand why people place so much emphasis on counter-history or neglected history when talking about my work, but I'm not roaming the world in search of neglected stories. They can be found everywhere. It's some sort of contemplation or meditation in order to get in touch with the one neglected thing that's really waiting for me. I've always been skeptical about the intentions behind the idea of giving voice to the voiceless. Silence is much better.

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Excerpt from the catalogue of Peter Friedl's forthcoming solo exhibition at Carré d'Art–Musée d'art contemporain de Nîmes (October 25, 2019–March 1, 2020).

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e-flux journal #103 — october 2019 [Claire Tancons](#)
Portrait of the Artist as a Dramatist: A Conversation with Peter Friedl

Peter Friedl is an artist who lives in Berlin. He has recently participated in documenta 14 and Sharjah Biennial 14. His most recent solo exhibition is "Teatro" at Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2019). A new book project, *Rehousing*, with texts by Hanif Adurraqib, Dionne Brand, Renee Gladman, Annemarie Jacir, Mark von Schlegell, Madeleine Thien, Mike Wilson, among others, is in preparation (forthcoming, Sternberg Press).

Claire Tancons is a curator and scholar invested in the discourse and practice of the postcolonial politics of production and exhibition. Tancons was recently a curator for Sharjah Biennial 14: Leaving the Echo Chamber with Zoe Butt and Omar Kholeif. She is also currently the recipient of a Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant for her book *Roadworks* on processional performance.