

frieze

Luca Frei

Making room for learning and un-learning; jugglers and public space

As Öyvind Fahlström once sloganized, to manipulate the world is to take care of the world. This roughly summarizes the way the Swiss-born, Stockholm-based Luca Frei fuses pedagogical strategy with planetary concern. For him art-making, or creativity, is essentially part of public life. Currently there is a curatorial vogue around educational systems, and if we look a little way back in art history we can see how artists' involvement with education (apart from being a staple of art activism) has ranged from populism to parody – in Joseph Beuys' social sculpture principles of form were applied to democracy in a kind of macro-pedagogic effort – or how education has been the butt of Conceptual disingenuousness, as in Art & Language's School project from the mid-1970s, a spanner in the works of any edifying ideology.

Frei's approach in terms of mediating knowledge and the potential for social change is to create space, to open up means and ends. In *Space Jockeys* (2002) the line between art work, toy and motivational strategy becomes blurred in a situation with many authors and no beginning or end. The installation is simply an overhead projector placed on a table filled with coloured, transparent plastic pieces and various tactile and formal objects. It is a situation or a stage waiting for the audience to interact with it, to create and project new backdrops to their actions. *Space Jockeys* has that particular lightness that occurs when form and sensation are reduced and separated in order to meet again through surprising postulates or new syntaxes. In this way Frei's works are host bodies that invite parasitic activities, albeit in the form of modest proposals. They convey the suspicion that learning, above all, is the desire to energize social space through an emptying out of some of the stuff that culture habitually accumulates: a process that requires not larger syllabuses and tougher questions but a kind of holistic reconstruction.

About this article

Published on 02/09/06
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revitalization: that the transformation of knowledge into action can be synched into the very groove of life. In Frei this rhythm is sought in narrative environments, such as Tobacco Warehouse (2005), created for the 9th Istanbul Biennial. A collaboration with the art group Oda Projesi, based on their book *Neighbourhood, Room, Neighbour, Guest?* (2005), the installation consisted of an arrangement of walls combining domestic and urban architecture, put at the disposal of local stencil and graffiti artists. A number of triangular tables in recycled iron with mirror tops allowed Oda Projesi's book 'to explode in three dimensions into the architecture of the space', in Frei's words. In 2004, in another attempt to focus and disseminate collective energies, Frei founded Gruppo Parole e Immagini, a kind of public reading group whose mission is the free appropriation, elaboration and distribution of textual and visual materials. Accordingly, on one of the group's posters a quote by Pier Paolo Pasolini is

The terrain between unlearning and re-imagining is one in which Modernism sits squarely, with all the ideological optimism of its marooned adventures. 'Everything was to be done. All the adventures are still there', goes the emancipatory swing of a quote from Kodwo Eshun, appropriated in a work consisting of a giant blackboard and magnetic white letters that can be manipulated from a stepladder. Nodding to the built spaces and grand societal imaginaries of the 20th century, Frei also used the Eshun quote to full ambivalent effect by having it accompany a poster made from a photo of the Beaubourg Plateau in Paris before the construction of the Centre Georges Pompidou. The poster shows the plateau as an unsuspecting car park, to our eyes the image of a great absence laden with potentiality. (Sometimes one wishes there were policies against filling up urban space, rather than policies for building things, as both people and culture thrive quite well in the in-between.) The poster also refers to the Swiss sociologist Albert Meister's novel *La soi-disant utopie du Centre Beaubourg* (1976), a science-fiction scenario about a subterranean space for alternative cultural activities more than 70 floors below the foundations of the then newly opened Pompidou Centre.

In the slide piece *Balancing Acts* (2004) the outside of the Centre Pompidou is again the setting. In front of its transparent mega-tubes full of art-goers a juggler is seen rehearsing his routine with balls whose colours match the external mechanical systems of the centre: yellow for power, blue for air, green for water and red for the lifts. The juggler – an outsider removed from any kind of modernity but omnipresent in urban space – embodies an idea of itinerant creativity that for today's networked classes comes across as naked and naive. But in the slides Frei's street performer simply passes us by as an autonomous figure, inviting neither alms nor attention from people around him. Where urban planners such as Le Corbusier juggled whole cities, this guy simply produces a grammar of keeping the ball in the air, of perpetual motion and improvisation. The juggler's movements oppose the static and the finished in a play that is a kind of pure agency; according to Frei, a 'becoming that is no longer a secondary characteristic but an operating mode'.