

Projects 61 : Franz West : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 25- November 11, 1997

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61

franz west

projects



**The Museum of Modern Art
New York**

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The photographs are very strange. In the first a clothed man sits on a white cube, with an oblong white mass on his head. In the second a naked woman crouches near the ground with a similarly indeterminate white object on her shoulder. Is she a female Atlas laboring under a weighty asteroid? Is he a man captured by the camera in his last conscious moment before the impact of another such rock hits his head? Or are these curious lumps organic growths, like the burls on a tree or gigantic warts? Or are they garments? His, at any rate, might be a beret.

The analogies multiply with the consideration of related photographs—of a man holding a lozenge-like form at arms length as if he were delivering a mysterious package, and of another man mouthing the end of a S-curved shape as if he were blowing into a ram's horn—but they never quite pin down what we are seeing. What we are looking at, simply enough, is sculpture and various attempts to accommodate it by assigning some intelligible purpose to apparently useless "things." In other instances, we are seeing the attempt of bodies to directly accommodate themselves to an inexplicable and intrusive presence.

These "things" are the eloquently awkward handiwork of the Austrian artist Franz West, and the dynamic he sets in motion between them and the assortment of people engaged in these frozen pantomimes I will call *Westkunst*, or West-art, the art of living with art as if it were the most ordinary of extraordinary realities. From this perspective, West's sculpture is very much like a favorite book that one picks up and puts down while moving around the house, and, walking away from it one day, returns to the next day, or the following year, knowing that it still holds mysteries. A fanciful book, then, and one that is superficially unremarkable in perfect proportion to its intrinsic oddity.



Paper Wall, 1997. Twenty-three framed works on paper, dimensions vary (installed dimensions: approx. 120 x 99"); and *Deutscher Humor*, 1987. Papier-mâché, metal, wood, and paint, 78 1/4 x 22 1/2 x 11 1/2". Installation view at *Recyclages*, exhibition at FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, France, April 2–May 25, 1997. Photo: André Morin/FRAC Champagne-Ardenne

In part that sense of *déjà vu* is a matter of art historical memory expertly teased. By design, West's sculptures look a little bit like a lot of other sculptures. Giacometti's Surrealist plasters in some instances, or Dubuffet's "material" reliefs and Arp's antic biomorphs in others. Indeed, the sculptures in this exhibition were recently shown at a museum in Hamburg, Germany, together with corresponding marbles and bronzes by Arp, and photographs of the late Swiss artist and his friends clowning with art in much the same way West and his friends do.

As in all good clowning, there is a pronounced element of pathos in these carryings-on, as there is in the basic anthropomorphism of the shapes seen in isolation. Humans dream of fluid, coordinated movement but are prey to tensions and physical infirmities that defy their hopes by restricting their limbs and twisting their posture. Humans also dream of pure classical form, and, in projecting such idealized notions of the body onto matter, fantasize a transcendent equipoise. But matter is reluctant to assume such perfection, and gravity takes telling advantage of even the most incidental imbalance. West is the poet of this discrepancy between imagined grace and actual ungainliness. Not, to be sure, a tragic poet; even though their particular expression is wholly idiosyncratic, the aesthetic incongruences he concentrates upon are, fundamentally, too familiar, too much like what we know of our everyday selves to evoke dramatic sentiment. Partially inspired, the artist once said, by watching restaurant waiters struggle to maneuver overburdened trays, West's is instead the serious comedy of our acquired burdens and essential maladroitness.

Paßstücke is the name the artist has given to these anomalous sculptures. The best translation is "adaptives," either signifying something to which we accustom ourselves simply because it is there, or, less obviously, implying the physical evidence of the stress of otherwise hidden concessions we have made in our lives. In a 1980 text written in collaboration with his friend Reinhard Priessnitz, West stated, "The objects are to be used. They represent the potential attempt to give shape to neurotic symptoms," reminding us that he is a citizen of Vienna, city of angst and birthplace of modern psychoanalysis. The erotic contortions of Egon Schiele's work are part of West's heritage, as is Freud's preoccupation with the revelatory habits and quirks to which he devoted his 1901 book *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

West's process and product whimsically echo their concerns. Take, for example, the walking stick-like versions of *Paßstücke* that he invites people of pick up and stroll around with, aware of how the lumps that cover these canes will alter their gait and stance. (When showing these works, West often supplies a mirror, so that participating gallery-goers can observe the choreography of their sculpturally manipulated deportment.) Fabrication of these and other sculptures often begins with a found object that West covers with materials, rendering it unrecognizable; yet there it remains at the core of the visible form, like the irritable contents of a cyst, or the persistent



10 Sculptures. 1987/1997. Installation: papier-mâché, polyester, plaster, gauze, and paint, dimensions vary. Installation view at *Recyclages*, exhibition at FRAC Champagne-Ardenne, Reims, France, April 2–May 25, 1997. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York. Photo: André Morin/FRAC Champagne-Ardenne

trauma lying at the heart of compensatory but personality-distorting behavior.

"Sculpture itself," West once observed, "is form in repose." Repose, in this context, is a relative thing, since none of his forms rest securely in any one position. His shapes elude clear definition—they all seem on the verge of some new metamorphosis—and fixed deployment is denied them. Still, West offers repose in his fashion. Practically speaking, it is the viewer to whom he offers it, however, not the work of art, and there too the offer is qualified.

The concrete manifestation of this gesture is furniture: the chairs, benches, couches, and *chaises longues* that West started making in the early 1980s and has installed in museums, private houses, galleries, and public spaces for the convenience of anybody in the mood to stretch out. Thanks to West's intervention, rather than stand in front of a painting or sculpture, one may lounge and look, or perhaps lounge and not look, as if one were truly at home with art and could treat it with the same selective attention devoted to the other aspects of one's quotidian environment. Comfort is not West's primary concern, however. Constructed out of steel rods or rebar in combination with sheet steel or mesh, West's angular and more or less makeshift recliners yield little to those who sit or lie upon them.

Think of them as *Paßstücke* in domestic disguise. Better still, regard them as bases or platforms for displaying the living sculpture of the bodies slumped over them.

West's works on paper have a similarly casual quality. Glee-fully retrogressive take-offs on the Dada legacy of Kurt Schwitters and Hannah Höch, many of them are collages, composed of eccentrically cropped and crudely painted press clippings. Often West's sources are porn magazines or the racier pages of popular journals (unlike their American counterparts, German news weeklies regularly feature nudes on their covers and inside pages). Not only the sexual and consumer kitsch of the mass media, but culture heroes such as Alexander Calder, Barbara Hepworth, and the controversial Nazi hunter Simon Wiesenthal make their appearance. Generally these collages mock their appropriated subject matter in a tone that is all the more deflating for its absence of satirical rancor. West, his late brother and collaborator Otto Kobalek, and various friends and acquaintances rounded up for photo sessions also take part in these burlesque graphic "happenings," for that is what they really are, the pictorial equivalent of the performances animated by his sculpture. In sum, the collages and drawings may be read as the story boards for past or future actions, the objects serving as props and

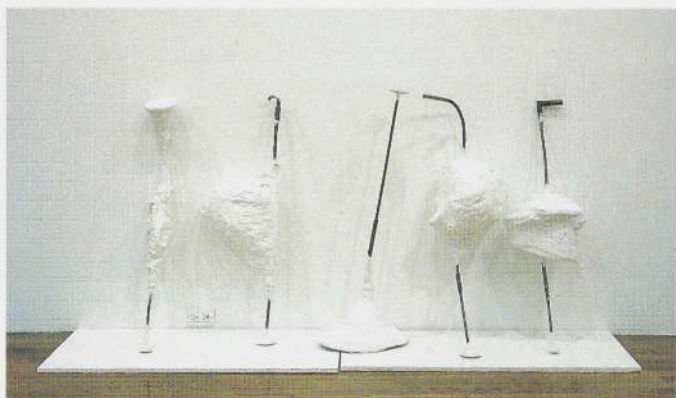
the benches as seating in West's itinerant theater of the absurd, to which the public comes as audience and remains as fellow protagonists.

The improvisatory spirit and avoidance of high rhetoric characteristic of West's approach makes it easy to underestimate his importance in current artistic discourse. Postwar Austrian art, particularly of the 1960s, has shown a violence and perversity extreme by almost any standards. The individual and collective work of the Viennese Actionists who dominated the Austrian avant-garde from the late 1950s through the early 1970s—Hermann Nitsch, Otto Mühl, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and Gëunter Brus—involved quasi-religious and sexual rituals of decidedly sado-masochistic varieties. Witness to their public performances before he fully devoted himself to his own work, West was deeply affected by the Actionists, but recoiled from their destructive anger. (Largely self-taught, the artist first exhibited drawings in 1970, but belatedly entered the Vienna Academy of Visual Arts as a special student of Bruno Gironcoli in 1977, at the age of thirty. He left it in 1982, by which time he was already a presence to be reckoned with in vanguard circles.)

In neighboring Germany, artists were excavating the buried past both recent and ancient, while agitating for future social revolution. Under the capacious aesthetic tent erected by Joseph Beuys, master of ceremonies of German cultural recovery and reform, Anselm Kiefer irreverently—and illegally—raised his arm in the Nazi salute performances and painted vast tableaux of his country's tainted history and myths. For his part, Jörg Immendorff rendered the same subjects in cartoon form after his apprenticeship as Alfred Jarry-like student rebel and subsequently as Maoist painter-politician.



Synchronie (Abriss) (detail). 1997. Installation, dimensions vary. "Feminine side": Mariella Simoni, *Grado* (1987/1997); Carla Accardi, *Arcadia* (1992/1997). Courtesy David Zwirner, New York, and Gallery Walcheturm, Zürich. Photo © FBM Studio, Zürich



Paßstücke (detail). 1996. Five unique sculptures: iron, plaster, paint, and glass, dimensions ranging between 40 7/8 x 7 1/2 x 14 1/2" and 38 1/2 x 11 1/2 x 11 1/4". Private collection, Germany. Courtesy David Zwirner, New York

Compared to these precedents, West's aesthetic anarchism seems utterly benign. Therein lies its unique power. To Beuys's heroic idea of "Social Sculpture"—the wholesale remaking of the world according to principles of collective creativity—West responds with his own modest proposal, a skeptical, antiheroic "Sociable Sculpture." If art is to achieve its long-promised integration with life, West's curious images and objects quietly argue, then rather than mold life to art's preconceived constructs—be they the Platonic geometries of early avant-gardes, or the ideological certainties of more recent ones—let art reflect the inconsistencies and mundane necessities and pleasures of life. It is a radical proposition that manifests itself in unusual and subversively irresistible forms.

For the Museum, West has created an ensemble work. In the garden hall outside the Projects room, he has installed a cluster of polychrome sculptures on traditional sculptural bases. Entitled *Recyclages*, or recyclings, they recuperate and reconfigure versions of works partially destroyed after the closing of a previous exhibition (and, as previously mentioned, they were exhibited earlier this year in tandem with a comparable number of sculptures by Jean Arp). Along the inner wall of the main Projects gallery are hung a selection of West's collages and drawings covering a twenty year period from 1977, when he first came into his own as an artist, to the present. Their essential disparateness and chronologically jumbled display nullify any attempt to read into them a clear stylistic progression. This calculated disorder underscores the degree to which West's art, informed by past experience but unrestricted by future-oriented, much less futuristic aims, is entirely of the ludic moment. *Synchronie*, the centerpiece of the exhibition, is itself an ensemble or exhibition. Not only does West arrange museum dialogues with artists of the past, but he carries on running conversations with his contemporaries by presenting works by those with whom he feels a particular affinity. Correspondingly, *Synchronie* incorporates the paintings, drawings, reliefs, objects, and videos of a wide-ranging group of West's friends, colleagues, and assistants. These include works by young Italian painters Carla Accardi and Mariella Simoni, and

a mirror by Arte Povera elder statesman Michelangelo Pistoletto, as well as collaborative projects by Marcus Geiger and Haim Steinbach; Jack Bauer and Axel Huber (their names reversed and combined in the title forming the commonplace Austrian name "Huber-Bauer"); and Viennese peers Ted Jelinek, the "outsider" artist Janc, and the "insider" modernist Heimo Zobernig. Hung on or positioned in front of a partition wall, these works are divided between those by men and those by women, so that one side of *Synchronie* is explicitly identifiably "male" and the other "female." Other than the structure itself, West's contribution consists of a massive white wall piece, a nearby plinth for Haim Steinbach's toilet-paper "ready-made," and two benches, one of which has as its seat an exact copy of the canvas by Carla Accardi suspended above it, which West commissioned from a professional restorer. The artistic, architectural, and sexual synchronies of the piece operate at a gentle hum in every dimension.

Two additional elements complete the grouping and round out West's all-embracing aesthetic. The first is a platform with two chairs and an attached table. During the work week, it is affixed to the wall like a Daniel Spoerri furniture tableau. On weekends and holidays, it is taken down and lain flat on the gallery floor, and visitors are invited to take a seat. If people prefer, they may go out into the garden and make themselves at home on the *chaises longues* that represent the second element. Covered with high-polish metallic foils similar to the insulation materials used by the aerospace industry, the six *chaises longues* have been dubbed the *Moon Project* by the artist. From intimate domestic spaces plunked down in the most heavily trafficked of public institutions, to couches upholstered like modern magic carpets under the open sky, from things by others with which West surrounds himself to things he actually made, from artful objects to objects-as-art, West's world is in move-in condition—and a movable feast.

Robert Storr

Curator

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