

# Franz West

## 1947-2012

PETER PAKESCH

**AS SOMEONE WHO HAS WORKED** in the field of art for a long time, and who sees art as an essential part of human identity, I have always found it a great privilege to be able to watch firsthand the gradual development of an artist. I feel especially privileged to have done so in the case of an artist as outstanding as Franz West. I knew Franz for many years, and for more than two decades I worked closely with him in a variety of roles: as a gallerist, friend, and museum curator. I was always amazed by the way he continually altered our notions of how art functions and what it means. For Franz, art was always interaction: an intellectual challenge as well as a sublime aesthetic experience. It is this combination that makes his oeuvre both so uniquely appealing and so radical.

In 1978, I went to pick up several of Valie Export's pieces from Vienna's Galerie Nächst St. Stephan for an exhibition I was organizing of her work at the Forum Stadtpark in Graz. In this venerable setting, an artist unknown to both myself and the wider public was installing a show. I was taken by his work, and we

struck up a conversation, fascinating and very particular to him, which continued for years throughout many exciting projects. St. Stephan was already a major Viennese gallery at the time, and it was reportedly thanks to the support of Reinhard Priessnitz, the poet who was a mentor to Franz and others in 1970s Vienna, that he was invited to show there. But the invitation turned out to be something of a misunderstanding. The gallery staff was not prepared for his way of thinking and acting, for his collages and what they meant. Franz fundamentally questioned the Viennese system and syntax of art. His works commented on recent art movements and other Viennese artists, which was not necessarily pleasant for a well-known gallery that had seen power struggles in its not so distant past. The selection of each collage was determined by a debate over cultural politics, and many were rejected. He immediately gave me—an unknown young curator—some of the pieces that were turned down, and I still treasure them. That was part of his generosity and his way of communicating. Understanding how objects and artworks come about and are exchanged was essential to him, because

Franz West, Moscow, 1991.  
Photo: Viktor Misiano.





he always wanted to transfer ideas, thoughts, and emotions in the most direct way. These obsessions fueled the kind of interaction that made his work so new.

Years later, in 1991, we went to Moscow when Viktor Misiano invited Franz and Heimo Zobernig to produce an in situ work in connection with one of the first international projects in perestroika Russia, "Apt-Art International." Franz fabricated one of his *Passstück* ("adaptives") sculptures and took it out into the street. There he asked people walking by to pose with the piece while he photographed them. Some weeks later he did the same, with the same *Passstück*, in Chicago. These moments of surprise created some of the most astonish-

**West's *Passstücke* created a mode of reception and engagement that we could only retrospectively recognize as "new."**

ing photographs: The passersby contributed to and became part of the artwork. This created an original, dynamic space of interaction for the viewer, a mode of reception and engagement that we could only retrospectively recognize as "new."

I can remember a vast number of such stories, in which Franz would activate artworks in situations and locations that were just slightly off the radar. In this way, he not only created some of the most stunning sculptures of the past thirty years, setting new boundaries for the three-dimensional, but also changed our

Below: Franz West, *Wegener Räume*  
2/6-5/6, 1988, metal, wood, papier-  
mâché, gauze, paint, plaster, collage.  
Installation view, Galerie Peter  
Pakesch, Vienna.







Franz West in his Sandwirtgasse studio, Vienna, 1988. Photo: Archiv Galerie Peter Pakesch, Wien Museum.

praxis of art. Franz reminded us that art's influence extended far beyond the gallery, that it could be a force with the power to define our existence.

Franz's passion for philosophy, language, and music should be seen with these broader interests and ambitions in mind. He would read philosophical texts "like fashion magazines," as Peter Noever once pointed out, and he related to a whole range of Viennese identities and traditions, weaving them all into an original system. Freud and Wittgenstein became part of this, as did Viennese Actionism and his reflections on Adolf Loos's architectural theory. In music, Franz was very early in appreciating the work of Giacinto Scelsi as well as in embracing the new electronic scene in his town, and so was far beyond the Viennese musical tastes of those days. And he constantly tested all this knowledge and experience of history through his encounters with the public and fellow artists. Again, *interaction* was the key word, and a process he continually scrutinized and refined. This process generated a wealth of unique friendships and collaborations, which made our cooperation in my gallery in Vienna in the 1980s and early 1990s so special. Giving and taking with the greatest generosity and the most fastidious reflection—this was the essence of Franz West. □

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## CHRIS DERCON

**IN THE SPRING OF 1989**, Alanna Heiss and I curated "Possibility" at P.S. 1 in New York, the first large exhibition of Franz West's work in a US museum. The project had been proposed to us by Peter Pakesch, then Franz's main representative at his eponymous gallery in Vienna. The exhibition seemed to be part of a surge of interest in Franz, not only in Austria but abroad, facilitated in no small part by Pakesch's strong advocacy of his work (he garnered major support for the show from the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts, and Culture). An exhibition of Franz's work titled "Seats and Sculptures" had opened just a few weeks earlier at the Koury Wingate Gallery in New York, while Pakesch had shown *Wegener Räume 2/6–5/6*, 1988—a work named after the balloonist, geologist, and explorer Alfred Wegener, in which Franz installed chambers and booths that interconnected individual objects to create sculptures of almost seismic proportion—in his own gallery from November 1988 until late January 1989.

Both Galerie Peter Pakesch and Koury Wingate Gallery contributed directly to the transportation of works for our show as well as the production of new pieces, which were made on-site at P.S. 1 by Franz and his assistant, master welder Mathis Esterhazy. With almost seventy pieces on view, the exhibition had a budget totaling some \$100,000, one-fifth of which went to the making of new works. Looking back, I am struck



by how incredibly economical this seems compared with the costs of mounting similar exhibitions today. "Possibility" was, I think, a pioneering example of a collaborative, perfectly orchestrated, serious international effort to introduce the work of an unfamiliar artist to a fresh commercial and cultural environment: a form of public-private partnership that is more and more common today. Franz could not have cared less about the ins and outs of this system of organization,

### **In adapting and overcoming the paradox between limitation and freedom lies the comical relief of Franz's work.**

but it did offer him complete flexibility and freedom in revisiting existing works and creating new work.

Franz worked in the basement of P.S. 1 on a daily basis for at least one month, although I remember him mainly staring through the barred windows and musing about the rogue scenes—huge pickup trucks and Chevrolets, Catholic Koreans and even more Catholic Puerto Ricans, wiseguys and flirting teenagers—in the street beyond. Program coordinator R. H. Quaytman made great Polaroids of Franz's smiling, inquisitive gazes. It was in the basement of P.S. 1, while joining Franz's fabrication efforts, that I saw a connection between his work and a problem that Wittgenstein posed in his *Grundlagen der Mathematik*: A man believes himself to be imprisoned in a room, because he

Fax from Austrian artist Herbert Brandl sent to P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center during preparations for the exhibition "Possibilities/Franz West," 1989. Inset: Polaroid of Franz West taken by R. H. Quaytman during West's time at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, 1989.

