

The New Yorker : 'Just For Fun, Timely Retrospective in Baltimore and New York', by Peter Schjeldahl, November 3, 2008.

THE ART WORLD

JUST FOR FUN

Timely retrospectives in Baltimore and New York.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Retrospectives of two veteran contemporary artists who make a lot of people happy, including me, have opened, as if on order for hard times. "Franz West, To Build a House You Start with the Roof: Work 1972-2008," at the Baltimore Museum of Art, and "Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone," at the New Museum, in New York, merit, besides praise, something like pledges of allegiance. Both artists affirm values beneath and beyond the market anxieties and affiliated buzz in the art world, where they have demonstrated sturdy integrity throughout career ups and downs. West, the Viennese sculptor, collagist, and furniture-maker, is a gentle anarchist whose audience-friendly works anticipated—and considerably outshone—the recent vogue of "relational aesthetics" in international art. (I have in mind the likes of food events by Rikrit Tiravanija and interactive environments by any number of other virtual-camp counsellors.) West's please-touch-me objects dependably entertain but never seem trivial. At sixty-one, he projects the disconcerting gravitas of a serious man who is constitutionally averse to taking anything seriously. The spunky, songful, subtly disciplined informality of the American abstract painter and ceramist (and also, recently, furniture-maker) Heilmann, sixty-eight, has provided low-profile joys in art since the late nineteen-sixties. Hers is the type of art you may cherish as a touchstone of your own private taste.

West grew up in postwar Vienna, where children played in bomb ruins. "It was more than dirty—filthy," he has said. His parents were Communists. The family lived in a housing project "full of old Nazis," where his father sold coal and his Jewish mother was a dentist, working in their apartment with primitive equipment. "Every forty minutes, a new patient was screaming." He studied art intermittently while leading a life, between the ages of seventeen and twenty-five, that he describes as "pretty catastrophic"—ridden

with drugs and aimless travels, amid café existentialists. He emerged on a scene dominated by the Vienna Actionists, who assaulted the complacency of their countrymen with determinedly horrific, sado-masochistic performances. In 1968, West attended an infamous event at the University of Vienna that featured the artist Gunter Brus stripping naked, cutting himself with a razor, smearing himself with excrement, and masturbating while singing the Austrian National Anthem. At the end, the Actionists solicited questions from the audience. It has very often been told that the young West broke a long, traumatized silence by rising to say, "Thank you very much. I enjoyed your performance enormously. I think these gentlemen have earned a round of applause." The tale may be apocryphal. (West says he doesn't remember it happening.) But its tone of devastating benevolence essentializes the funny, redemptive pivot that his art made in the mood and mode of Vienna's avant-garde.

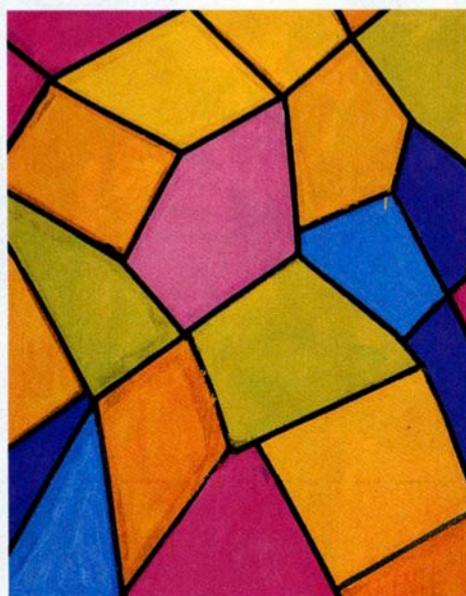
West is that rarest of birds: an urbane hippie. Reportedly, his studio in Vienna is part factory, part be-in. First among equals, he channels collaborative energies. (The Baltimore show's koanlike title isn't his; the curator Darsie Alexander thought of it, and West approved.) His art enlists, rather than addresses, its viewers. His best-known works are the "Adaptives" ("Passstücke," also translatable as "Prostheses"), which he started making in 1974: odd-shaped, white-painted lumps of papier-mâché on bent steel rods, vaguely Giacometti-esque in look. They are meant to be handled. To pick one up is to become a self-conscious performer, improvising ways to hold, wield, or wear it. At the show, you may take your selected "Adaptive" into a large booth that contains a mirror and is papered with pages of the Baltimore *Examiner* from the day of the opening. (Elsewhere, a bench is supplied with each morning's Baltimore *Sun*, emphasizing a Westian time

frame of incessant present-tense-ness.) West's startlingly comfortable sofas, in welded rebar and cushioned or carpet-draped steel mesh, precipitate a vision of society at once domestic and public, in which everyone is both a spectator and a spectacle. Huge floor lamps in rebar supporting paint-spattered fluorescent tubes within scratched plastic cylinders are gemütlich and grand. Sublimely witty collages of painted-over images from print ads and soft-core pornography unfailingly look amateurish (not easy after years of practice). Resistance is futile. West's libidinous civility conquers all.

West's recent abstract, painted-aluminum sculptures—successors to his coarse but fragile, galumphing forms in papier-mâché—may be the most energetic and affable art for public spaces since Alexander Calder. Made of overlapping, welded patches, and coated in shiny, chipper single colors, the works suggest children's Play-Doh inspirations, with slightly naughty scatological nuances. A new, colossal piece, created for Baltimore, is West's strongest yet. "The Ego and the Id," in two parts, deploys twisting, soaring loops in various toothsome colors, and sprouts stools for sitting. Contemplating the work's echt Viennese title, I wondered which of the sections was supposed to be which. Then it came to me. Sitting on one of the stools, I was the ego, dissolving into the properly wild but—since it was socially shared and con-

doned—undangerous id. I remembered the hippie era, when flailing sanguine visions of collective ecstasy sprang up and sputtered out. Forty years on, I thought, somebody has got it right.

Mary Heilmann, too, has roots in the bohemian fashions and Arcadian deliriums of the sixties. She testifies to having been a wannabe "Beat chick" and a bona-fide beach girl while growing up first in San Francisco, then in Southern California, and then in San Francisco again. She studied literature (she is a zesty writer), ceramics, and sculpture, in which she earned a master's degree at Berkeley, in 1967. One of her paintings, a parafit of



Franz West's "The Ego and the Id" (2008), top, and Mary Heilmann's "Lovejoy Jr." (2004).

splotchy stripes in pink, black, yellow, watery green, and magenta, is titled "Surfing on Acid" (2005). But art, not life style, fired her intense ambition. She was friends, early on, with Bruce Nauman and Richard Serra. She moved to New York in 1968 to hang out with Donald Judd and Robert Smithson and other "big boys" of minimalism and emerging post-minimalism, on the exclusive second floor of Max's Kansas City. But she was not a social success. Choosing to paint got her scorned in those painting-allergic circles, though persisting with it made her tough. This grounding accounts for a subliminal sense of steely intelligence in works of ostensibly carefree spontaneity. There

is a conjectural air to her enterprise.

Generally fast and loose, Heilmann's paintings have many looks: Abstract Expressionist, à la Mark Rothko or Joan Mitchell; geometric, in neo-Neo-Plasticist veins; color-fieldish; minimalistically grid-based; experimental, with shaped canvases and multi-panelled formats; and handsomely declarative, like something by the masterly Ellsworth Kelly (who recently was quoted as saying, "I've always felt that Mary Heilmann is the best of the new abstractionists"). She is a formalist impatient with formal consistency. When she lingers with any one sort of picture, it is usually because she is smitten by a certain combination of colors: seaside blue and white, punkish pink and black, Mexican-serape-like polychrome, or jangling tertiarries derived from the television palette of "The Simpsons." ("Lovejoy Jr." was inspired by the parody of stained-glass windows in the cartoon family's church.) Heilmann's most unmistakable quality is an insouciant disregard for the compressive limit of the canvas edge, which points up her experience as a glazer of the continuous surfaces of pots and cups, lots of which are in the show. Big, fluid strokes often seem to sail, albeit invisibly, into surrounding space. When she does emphasize the edge, with framing bands of color, it's as if she were observing the arbitrary rules of a rather silly but interesting game.

Franz West will surely like Heilmann's armchairs. Free for the sitting—and for the scooting around, on speedy casters—they are rectilinear, with wooden frames, in a direct steal from the punitively strict furniture designs of Donald Judd. But their inserted bottoms and backs, of interwoven cloth straps in typically surprising colors, are canted at body-welcoming angles. To sit in one is to feel, physically, a quiddity of the Heilmannesque. (A funny thing about chairs: to use them is to lose sight of them.) They are about style, while skittishly refusing to vote for one style or another. The show's title, "To Be Someone," comes into poetic focus: be yourself, be anybody, be everyone by turns or at once, relax into restlessness. ♦

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