

Arts

A sizable exhibit of Franz West's works

The BMA takes on the complicated task of reassembling Franz West's sculpture for this weekend's opening of his first comprehensive U.S. exhibit

By Edward Gunts

October 9, 2008



Darsie Alexander curated the Franz West exhibit at the Baltimore Museum of Art, pulling together 117 of his works, including this 20-foot-high installation, "The Ego and the Id." (Baltimore Sun photo by Elizabeth Malbby / September 30, 2008)

The next exhibition at the [Baltimore Museum of Art](#) won't open until Sunday, but it has already set one record.

The show contains the largest work of art ever installed inside the museum, a 20-foot-high aluminum sculpture titled *The Ego and the Id*. It came in 17 pieces that were bolted together and weighed 1 1/4 tons.

To complicate matters, the piece had to be shipped 4,400 miles from Vienna, Austria, where it was created. The overseas leg of the trip, from Bremen, Germany, to the port of Baltimore, lasted a month. After the sculpture arrived in Baltimore, it took nearly a dozen people another three weeks to assemble it on the museum's second level.

That only begins to hint at the difficulty of installing the exhibit, Franz West, *To Build a House You Start With The Roof: Work 1972-2008*.

Containing 117 works of art, it is the first comprehensive exhibit in the U.S. of the work of acclaimed European artist Franz West (pronounced Vest) of Vienna.

It's expected to bring national and international attention to Baltimore and the museum, which organized it. This month, for example, West's work is featured on the cover of the prestigious *Artforum International* magazine, with a cover story inside pegged to the show's opening. After the show ends in Baltimore on Jan. 4, it will travel to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

The task of shipping and installing so many pieces from different lenders, directors say, makes the West show one of the most complicated exhibits ever mounted at the BMA.

"It has to rank among the most complex installations we've ever had," said Darsie Alexander, senior curator for Contemporary Art at the BMA and curator of the exhibit. "There were so many people involved. His crew. Our crew. Private lenders. And huge shipping issues."

"It's hard to install an exhibit without seeing the artist's work ahead of time, but after a while you get inside his mind," said Karen Nielsen, the museum's director of exhibition

design and installation. "We're discovering the artist as we go along."

To tell West's story, the museum will display pieces created over a 36-year time span, including collages, sculptures and furniture.

The list of objects reads like a logistical nightmare to pull together. While many of the works came from the artist's studio in Vienna, others came from private collections in the U.S. and Europe - more than 70 locations in all.

The pieces range in size from small works on paper to large outdoor sculptures. Some were made with fragile materials, such as papier mache. They came by plane, boat and truck in 14 separate shipments. There were 20 overseas crates and 40 domestic crates.

Melanie Harwood and Mandy Bartram, the museum's senior registrar and associate registrar for loans and exhibitions, respectively, said the museum had to negotiate agreements with each lender before they could bring the works to Baltimore. The agreements cover subjects such as insurance and shipping.

"Getting works from so many locations and lenders was like herding cats," Harwood said. "We're sort of air-traffic controllers for art."

As complicated as it has been to pull off, this exhibit is consistent with the history and mission of the museum. A large part of the museum's role, Alexander said, is organizing exhibits that introduce audiences to significant contemporary artists. In recent years, the museum has mostly been presenting thematic exhibits. Franz West marks a return to the tradition of mounting a major show about one contemporary artist.

Alexander said she first began to notice West about 10 years ago and thought he would be a fitting subject for an exhibit.

Born in 1947, West lives and works in Vienna. He began his career in the mid-1960s when a local movement called Actionism was under way.

Starting with cheeky collages and small, portable sculptures called Adaptives, West went on to create works that are increasingly large in scale. Today he is known for giant outdoor installations that are environments unto themselves, often biomorphic or prosthetic in nature and imbued with a sly sense of humor.

"Franz is a very, very complex, very interesting person, who doesn't make one kind of art," Alexander said. "He makes many kinds of art. Nobody does work that looks like his. He has a totally unique vision."

Before she could proceed with plans for a Baltimore exhibit, Alexander had to clear several hurdles.

First, she had to determine that there had not been a comprehensive show of his work in the United States and that one wasn't in the planning stages elsewhere. Second, she had to find out whether the BMA would support her if she wanted to organize a show in Baltimore. Finally, she had to persuade the artist to cooperate with the museum on a show and an accompanying catalog.

After investigating further, Alexander said she was "shocked" to learn there had not been another U.S. show. When she took the idea to the museum directors, she received their unqualified support. With the directors' blessing, Alexander presented her idea to West during a series of visits that she likens to a "courtship phase," and he agreed. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art signed on as the West Coast location for the exhibit - a collaboration that enables the organizing institution to spread out the cost of mounting it and gives the project more visibility.

Once the BMA had West's support, Alexander was able to proceed with organizing the exhibit for the second-level Alvin and Fanny B. Thalheimer Galleries, since they have a

range of spaces that can accommodate large- and small-scale works.

Representing different periods of the artist's career involved borrowing works from owners throughout Europe and the United States, as well as the artist himself. Alexander said she expected to get rebuffed a few times because some of the art is fragile and hard to move, but only one prospective lender turned her down.

For the past several weeks the museum has been a flurry of activity as works arrived for the show. (The final piece is due by courier tomorrow.)

The museum acquired two large sculptures, Swimmer and Violetta, that it will retain after the show ends. They can be seen outside the modern wing, on the "West" side of the museum. In September, installers erected another large outdoor piece, called Dorit, near the museum's front steps to herald the opening of the show.

The best example of the exhibit's complicated nature is the installation of the largest sculpture, which was created specifically for the show.

West designed it to fit the dimensions of the Baltimore museum and fabricated it in his studio in Vienna, with the goal of disassembling it and shipping it to Maryland along with other works he was sending.

Part of a series of large abstract sculptures, The Ego and the Id is an extruded piece that loops up and down like a roller coaster. Although it's made of 17 components, each weighing 300 pounds to 500 pounds, the final composition appears to be two pieces standing side by side. One is pink and the other is multicolored. After the sculpture was finished, West and his assistants wrapped it in blankets for shipment to Baltimore.

The move involved taking the sculpture apart, placing the pieces in a container for shipping, trucking it to the port of Bremen, and loading it onto a ship for the trip to Baltimore. Upon arrival here, the pieces were transported by truck to the museum.

All but one piece fit through the museum's doors and hallways. The one that didn't fit was 18 feet long and too wide to get into the museum's main freight elevator. The museum's installation crew took it around to the east side of the building, where the Meyerhoff Auditorium has a separate loading dock.

Once all the pieces were on the floor of the gallery, the museum's installation crew lifted them in place using a hoist system built into the roof and hidden above skylights in the ceiling. Riggers had to remove some of the ceiling panels to drop chains from the hoist system to lift the pieces. According to museum installation manager David Verchomin, it was the first time the hoist system has been used since the building opened in the 1980s.

The bulk of the fabrication process took three days to complete. Once the pieces were in position, the installers removed the blankets that protected the painted surfaces during shipping. Then they constructed a wooden platform that viewers will stand on to get close to the sculpture.

The process was touch-and-go because the installers had to maneuver three large mechanical "scissor lifts" inside the gallery. The work was documented with time-lapse photography, which will be shown as part of the exhibit.

Another sign of the complicated nature of the installation was the artist's instructions for installing 70 posters he created to cover two walls of the gallery.

West assigned a number to each of the posters, ranging from one to six. He left instructions for the installation manager, Verchomin, to roll a dice to determine which poster to install, in which order. Whatever number came up, Verchomin was to take one poster that corresponded to that number and put it on the wall. After rolling the dice, he was to flip a coin to determine how to mount the poster. If the coin came up heads, it

was to be mounted with the lettering right-side up. If the coin came up tails, it was to be mounted with the lettering upside down. He followed those instructions for each poster.

Alexander said that West's instructions, though seemingly unconventional, are in keeping with the way the artist works. She said he wants people to interact with his art, even those who are installing it in the museum. At the same time, she said, it was a way for West to be involved in the installation, too.

To complete the installation, museum staffers added a few touches of their own. They designed distinctive green, pink and silver vests for a select group of docents to wear, in honor of "Vest." They scheduled courses to teach volunteers how to explain the art to viewers and encourage them to interact with it. And they created a lounge, called an "inactivity center," where visitors can take a break from viewing the collection and contemplate West's work, or not.

There was one complication that no one could foresee.

This summer, the artist contracted meningitis and has been unable to travel to Baltimore to take part in the installation or the exhibit's opening. He also was supposed to go to New York this week to receive a lifetime achievement award from the SculptureCenter.

Alexander said West is getting better and is expected to come to Baltimore as soon as he can. This fall, three of his assistants traveled from Austria to help install the exhibit. In addition, the staff in Baltimore has been e-mailing to him digital photos of the gallery during the installation, so he can monitor the progress.

When the exhibit opens Sunday, most visitors probably won't realize how much work went into mounting the show - or the complications that arose. But the staff may not forget.

"It's been an adventure for all of us," Nielsen said.