





Tools of Engagement

OVER THE PAST two decades, *Franz West* has gained renown for his boundary-blurring installations of sculpture, furniture, and their perplexing mongrel offspring. Less well known, however, are the Austrian artist's formative efforts within the fervent Viennese cultural scene of the late 1960s and early '70s, where he forged the participatory aesthetic and unassuming political tactics that have made him a touchstone for future generations. On the occasion of West's first US retrospective, opening this month at the Baltimore Museum of Art, art historian **CHRISTINE MEHRING** unearths these roots and explores their relevance to West's ongoing polymorphous production.

Opposite page: Franz West and Junc Szem performing West's *Passstücke* in front of Haus Wittgenstein, Vienna, ca. 1978. This page: Franz West, *Styphos IX* (detail), 2002, papier-mâché, Styrofoam, lacquer, acrylic paint, 68 1/2 x 59 1/2 x 44".





This page: Franz West, *Untitled*, 1977-80, stickers, colored paper, lacquer on paper, 24 1/2 x 35 1/2". Opposite page, from left: "Art and Revolution," with Franz Kaltenböck (lecturing at left), Peter Weibel (in goggles), Oswald Wiener (lecturing at center), and Günter Brus (masturbating on floor), University of Vienna, June 7, 1968. Photo: © Archive Peter Weibel. Franz West with *Untitled*, 1974, chipboard, lacquer, wood, swim cap, 31 x 69 1/2 x 2 1/2". Franz West, *Untitled*, 1974, rubber sandals, lacquer, wood, 50 x 31 1/2 x 1 1/2".

ON JUNE 7, 1968, the crowd in Lecture Hall 1 of the University of Vienna's New Institute Building was treated to an evening of "Art and Revolution," consisting of writer Oswald Wiener's lecture on the relationship between language and thought, as well as less decorous displays of onstage nudity, vomiting, and urination. These stunts, courtesy of Wiener's Viennese Actionist pals, later led an outraged public to dub the legendary event the *Uni-Ferkelei* (campus mess or ribaldry), while the authorities charged participant Günter Brus with defecating and masturbating during a rendition of the national anthem, and Wiener with reportedly instructing the audience to repeat these activities in Vienna's St. Stephan's Cathedral. At the close of the evening, sponsored by the Socialist Austrian Student Organization, Wiener asked whether anyone in the crowd would like to comment on the proceedings, a question that was met with a deafening silence. One young man stood up to break the self-conscious hush and politely replied: "Thank you very much. I enjoyed your performance enormously." Turning to the four-hundred-plus attendees, he proclaimed, "I think these gentlemen have earned a round of applause."¹ This was the twenty-one-year-old Franz West, and applaud the audience did.

Although this story is by now a well-known originary myth in West circles, its full import has hardly been grasped and extends beyond the general reaction of a young artist-to-be against the imposing specter of Viennese Actionism. West never considered his spontaneous remark "artistic," and he would only

begin to make art proper two years later, but we would do well to note that the ensuing clapping was directed not just at the stage but also at West as a member of the audience. In this respect, his impromptu "performance" prefigures the entwinement of art's making and reception that would become his hallmark. And while West's pursuit of participation gained ever-greater nuance over the following decades, we should likewise regard his increasing attention to the viewer's body and psychology—as well as to design, exhibition environments, collaboration, and humor—as both literal and figurative responses to that watershed year of 1968. When the union of art and revolution had run its course, West was at the forefront of a generation of artists who proposed more modest modes of social engagement. Thus his seemingly juvenile public pronouncement can be seen to have borne the seeds of a life's work, which by the 1990s had earned West a reputation as a pioneer of the then-emerging relational aesthetics and design art.

West's mature work as an artist began in the early '70s, with a series of lacquered monochromes featuring tiny, decorative stickers—duckies, florets, coats of arms, and the like. The panels' deeply cultural palette is informed by found period colors, resulting in part perhaps from West's confessed inability to handle color, but largely from his sensitivity to the design of his surroundings. "The lacquer colors are very common colors one sees everywhere, for example when one strolls through Ottakring [a Vienna neighborhood]," West remarked in

1980. "A majority of the population perceives the stickers as sweet [herzig]. The whole thing results in a gruesome effect, even for an old, dumb dame [altes, blades Weiber!]. But basically this is her world, with sweet pictures, with birdies and a pretty color. One could say with spiteful exaggeration that the pictures represent the soul of many people, of the nation."² The economic recovery and commodity culture that gripped Austria like its Western European neighbors had provided fodder not just for the '68ers but also for the young West, though he clearly looked back with a sense of caution onto the body of work that in 1977 had filled his very first exhibition, "Stultification and Semantics," at Galerie nächst St. Stephan, Vienna's premier venue for avant-garde art. Perhaps West regretted that he had not mediated and transcended what he saw more forcefully; perhaps a kinder, one-on-one dialogue could bring about change more effectively than a condescending, sweeping critique.

West had already begun to pursue this line of thought in earnest as early as 1974 with his series of "Objektbilder," which focus on an individual's relation to everyday objects. These "object pictures" consist of large, fragmented wooden boards lacquered in expanses of monochrome color and affixed with quotidian things that the viewer is encouraged to try on or to use: shoes to be stepped into, a swim cap to be pulled over one's head. In most cases, these items are secured to supports on the wall or floor, hampering the viewer's involvement to a degree that may have eventually caused the artist to give up this body of work. Incidentally, West, with characteristic dry humor, compares his ideal of participation to going swimming: "If you stand with your swim trunks next to the pool, you're outside. If you jump in, you're inside. One senses the difference pretty clearly. And that's how it is in art. It's about that difference: The viewer is optically perceptible in the visual realm and therefore his self-understanding is also."³ So while an *Objektbild* may let viewers don a swim cap, it may still leave them a bit too dry for West's taste.

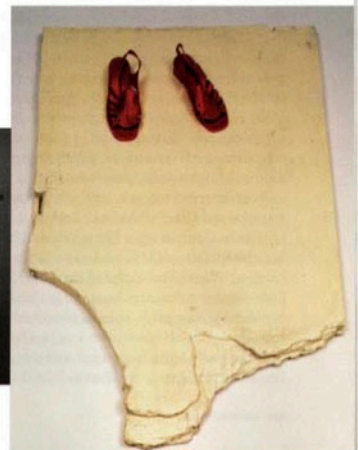
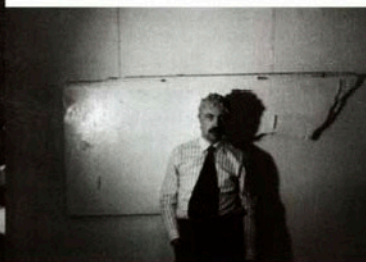
West attempted to answer this problem with his so-called *Passtücke*, which he has made since 1974. These "fitting pieces"—a literal translation the artist dislikes—are primarily white objects that turn traditional art viewers into "users." Their lineup of odd shapes alone—stuffs with swollen endings,

blobby volumes with or without protrusions, dented crescents, and tapering cylinders—elicits bewilderment and curiosity. Tactile desires are triggered by the coarse surfaces and jagged edges of the plaster bandages and papier-mâché that the artist stretched over wire skeletons in the earliest examples, an effect he subsequently emulated in polyester and later aluminum, which he adopted for greater durability. What is more, the *Passtücke* come with sticks, straps, loops, and levers that invite grasping and manipulation; they come with hand- or arm-size holes and head- or shoulder-shaped depressions that prompt trying on. The term *Passtück* suggests just that. West's friend, the poet Reinhard Priessnitz, coined it in 1980 to convey that these creations were only *Stücke*, pieces or fragments, that, in order to become whole, call for a process of *passen*, of fitting onto something. Given the objects' properties, the most obvious "something" is a body, and their sizes, accordingly, tend to be human scale. The "regular" *Passtücke* can measure a few feet, while the miniature versions West occasionally produces are small enough, in his words, "to put in your breast pocket, your purse, to take along, then put on the table wherever you happen to go."⁴

Use was not an option; it was a requirement integral to West's conception of art so that only by being used did the *Passtücke* become art in the first place. As West evocatively put it, "Without this active reception, the work would remain somehow wanting, unfulfilled . . . the equivalent of a lack."⁵ Initially, West simply invited friends to handle the *Passtücke* outside his studio door or to carry them down the street. But for the *Passtücke*'s first public exhibition in 1980 at nächst St. Stephan, he and Priessnitz penned an essay for the invitation specifically stating that "the objects should be used," a command that in later versions of the text was softened to "can be used," in order to allow more room for individual agency

and, effectively, for a more authentic model of participation.⁶ At the gallery, the *Passtücke* were leaning against the wall for anyone to take and touch, activities explicitly encouraged by the presence of a mirror, photographs of the objects in use, and twice-weekly demonstrations. For the exhibition "Westkunst," curated a year later by Kasper König (who with dealer

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Rudolf Zwirner "discovered" West for the international art world at Art Basel in 1980), the artist created pedestals out of pallets wrapped in packing paper, from which the *Passstücke* could be removed and to which they were to be returned. Yet West's modest attempt to protect the works from the throngs at this major show at the Cologne art fair was thwarted by eager individuals who spontaneously stepped onto the pallets to quasi perform the *Passstücke* for a photo op. West did not mind, but for subsequent exhibitions he nevertheless built taller plinths and small chambers that permitted only one visitor at a time.

Given that such mediation increased in proportion to the growing value of West's art, purists might charge that he has compromised his original vision. Yet the artist, in equally direct proportion, has over the years redoubled his efforts to ensure that visitors knew to take part. Most ingeniously, the two versions of the installation *3 oder 17* (3 or 17), 1992–93, played with the very object of the pedestal, inviting viewers to move a single *Passstück* around groups of three or seventeen plinths, respectively. And in later installations, West included videos of the *Passstücke* in use. In other words, we ought not condemn but credit West for recognizing that his vision of participation was so radical as to require meta-structures to overcome the psychological and creative inhibitions that most visitors bring to participatory work.

Formative influences from the '60s were the American environments of Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg and the *1. Werksatz* (First Work Set), 1963–69, objects by German artist Franz Erhard Walther—structures sewn from fabric to be unfolded, handled, and experienced by small groups of viewers-cum-actors.⁷ West's knowledge of these developments, however, was limited to what little magazine coverage he could get his hands on in a Viennese culture that he experienced as terribly isolated from the buzz of the postwar Western art world, tucked away as his hometown was in a fold of the iron curtain. Moreover, none of these precedents recognized and met art viewers' inherent wariness toward becoming participants as West did. By the same token, West's *Passstücke*, unlike

most of Walther's early works, have always created experiences that were individualized, and these experiences, unlike those engendered by Kaprow and Oldenburg, were about the body and its psychological makeup, as we will see. For this reason, the African masks, staffs, and headpieces collected by West's art-dealing uncle in London were the most decisive inspiration for his mode of participation. "I was amazed this was called art," he remarks, "made by a professional artist, but used by the people."⁸

The *Passstücke*'s call to participation depends in large measure on their abstraction. West's horde of contraptions pushes the powers of nomenclature, recalling everything from "execution instruments" and "aids for sadomasochistic pleasures," in the words of one early reviewer, to more banal items like bags and jewelry.⁹ What looks like a collar to one person might appear to be a vendor's tray to another; a hat when placed on the head easily turns into a violin on the shoulder. West happily mines this indeterminate middle ground between recognizability and abstraction, exploring the contextual meaning of forms. This is why he was fascinated early on with Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings on language, specifically with the discussions of meaning through the lens of use in the *Philosophical Investigations*. "What is supposed to show what [these words] signify, if not the kind of use they have?" the elder Viennese asked.¹⁰ Some of the early *Passstücke* were fittingly photographed in front of the house Wittgenstein famously built for his sister Margarethe on Vienna's Parkgasse—a choice of backdrop that reads as both interpretive hint and homage.

Theories of language vaguely derived from Wittgenstein's insistence on the contextual meanings of words were also central to the Viennese avant-garde after the war, particularly to the concrete poetry performances of the Vienna Group (not to be confused with the Viennese Actionists), which loomed large when West was coming of age in the late '50s. These poets posited that a conventional



Opposite page, from left: Reinhard Priessnitz wearing a *Passstück*, Vienna, 1975. Photo: Friedl Kubelka-Bondy. Fred Jellinek and Franz West with a *Passstück*, Vienna, 1975. Photo: Friedl Kubelka-Bondy. This page, clockwise from top left: Otto Kobalek and Reinhard Priessnitz with *Passstücke*, Vienna, 1975. Photo: Friedl Kubelka-Bondy. Ariane Proksch and Franz West with a *Passstück*, Vienna, 1975. Photo: Friedl Kubelka-Bondy. Franz West, *Arbeitsstudie im Aktionismusgeschmack*, 1974/1977, colored pencil, collage on paper, 8 1/4 x 11 1/4".



use of language was constraining and arbitrary: The established definitions of words could be distorted by fantastic spellings based on Austria's spoken dialect, and surprising visual layouts and aural performance could yield a wealth of new meanings. Wiener, the group's most notorious member, pushed their nascent critique of language to radical ends, proclaiming, "a revolt against language is a revolt against society. that uprising could begin with a rejection of polite tone."¹⁰ When in 1994 West discovered the English word *adaptive* as a possible translation for *Passstück*, he enthusiastically promoted its use from then on, not least because a "bio-adapter" features prominently in Wiener's landmark work, *die verbesserung von mitteleuropa, roman* (the improvement of central europe, novel, 1969). With an inscrutable combination of serious utopianism and biting irony, Wiener describes the bio-adapter as a "complete solution to all world-problems." He writes, "man—outside of his adapter a slime ball that is abandoned, activated by nerves, and miserably equipped (language, logic, mental power, sense organs, tools), shaken by fear of life, and petrified by fear of death—becomes, after putting on his bio-complement, a sovereign entity that is no longer in need of the cosmos and its management."¹¹

Like the bio-adapter, the *Passstücke* are extensions for the body that originate in part from the utopian vision of their creator for their user, who may wear and handle them to gain a better sense of his or her body and mind—and, specifically, the relationship between them. West has long promoted the *Passstücke* as visualizations of neuroses, writing with Priessnitz in 1981, "They form the potential attempt to give form to neurotic symptoms."¹² This term was loosely derived from Sigmund Freud, who, as

the artist explains, "was a very distant relative . . . and therefore brought inter-war culture and psychoanalytic thought closer" to him.¹³ In other words, in the course of using the *Passstücke*, our bodies begin to exhibit signs of a mental imbalance that for most users does not actually exist. For West, the question that then arises is "whether the exterior gesture of expression impresses itself on the inside. . . . Does one feel the way one looks?"¹⁴ This writer, for one, has experienced her balance off-kilter, her sense of movement restricted, her upright posture altered, her bodily boundaries extended. Although the *Passstücke* may not quite bring about a neurotic disorder, they do produce a sense of discomfort about one's body being altered or about one's performing in public. This can appear hilariously funny for those viewers waiting their turns (and even sometimes for those experiencing the objects), but West confesses he cannot bear to watch most people use the *Passstücke*, because he "feels embarrassed for them."¹⁵ If a sensation of awkwardness is so integral to the use of these objects,

this reflects once more how unnatural it feels for most of us to touch or handle art: The *Passstücke* reveal that any participatory art that denies this fact is to a certain extent naive. Yet this discomfort, as befits the work's utopian subtext, can also be cathartic, bringing about a greater sense of self-awareness, assurance, and even exhilaration. *Passen* means "fitting," but it also resonates with the idea of a passport's (*Pass*) encapsulation of an identity, and it derives from *passieren* (to pass), so that a *Passstück* can also function as a tool for transformation, for passing from one state to another.

West's ambitions for change, then, concern the individual, his psychic being and close social



surrounds; his goals are markedly modest and feasible. Art à la West is about you and me, maybe also about him over there and her over here, but not about everyone the world over. And so, that night in 1968 at the University of Vienna, West stood up not against change, not against the desire to overcome the conservative and bourgeois mind-sets that the actors onstage and most Austrian artists agreed were poisonously pervading their country. Rather, he stood up with the moderate "polite tone" that Wiener rejected—against the bulldozing shock tactics with which an older generation of artists pursued its grand goals. The loud, unspecific political activism that the Viennese Actionists began to espouse as the '60s progressed—and as the Christian Democrats governed from 1966 on—appeared a desperate placeholder for Austria's lack of a truly progressive student culture like that in much of neighboring Western Europe. For West, their arrogant, indiscriminate trampling of an audience appeared destructive rather than constructive: "One could either simply watch, or become an epigone of the artists, let them spray blood or shit all over you." It just wasn't useful, "like used toilet paper cannot really be used well anymore."¹⁶ (His series "Zeichnungen im Aktionismusgeschmack" [Drawings in Actionist Taste], 1974–79, lampoons his elders' scatological obsessions by portraying bodies at an amusingly belittling scale absurdly performing their business in empty white surroundings.) West's sensitivity to the historical failures of left utopias only intensified, one imagines, when he lived and worked in the '70s in Karl-Marx-Hof, one of the largest connected housing complexes in the world (counting around thirteen hundred units). It had become the most famous of Red Vienna's residential superblocks—built in the late '20s to bring Social Democratic voters and collective living to a conservative district—but by the time West moved in, the activist workers who had risen (in vain) against fascism there had turned into a passive petite bourgeoisie. West has always worked—both literally and figuratively—in the ruins of a political utopia.

All this is why by the '90s West had become a beacon for a younger generation of international artists sharing a kindred post-'68 mentality. Well aware of the limits of politically activist art, they searched for relevance on a smaller

scale, in terms of social interactions and intimate groups of people. Liam Gillick observes with admiration the way "a certain melancholy pervades [West's] practice. But it is a twisted melancholy. Not a simple case of ironic detachment. It is rather connected to an examination of the collapse of utopias. In light of this you might as well do something. A continuing debate about repositioning."¹⁷ It is also why West—and, following him, artists such as Gillick, Jorge Pardo, and Tobias Rehberger, to name a few—turned to the design of furniture and interiors: a practice by definition located in the "real" world and that might further their humble social aspirations.

West's involvement with design dates back to 1966, when he began studies in civil engineering, because, appropriately enough, he "thought that with architecture you could solve some problems."¹⁸ Although West was soon kicked out of the program, his interest in change through design stuck and was no doubt cemented by Vienna's thriving architectural scene, which he followed closely, particularly in exhibitions such as the 1968 "Super-Design" at nächst St. Stephan. Crystallizing around figures such as Bruno Gironcoli (eventually West's teacher), Hans Hollein, Walter Pichler, and, toward the end of the '60s, the collective Coop Himmel(l)au, this heady milieu was defined by a fascination with hybrid objects that crossed the boundaries between architecture, product design, and sculpture. Pneumatic elements, high-tech materials, and the isolation of users in chambers, helmets, or suits were inspired by space travel and utopian ambitions for the human psyche that mirrored those of Wiener's bio-adaptor—and that would later be evident in West's *Passstücke*, which

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would also riff on sculpture's relation to "applied arts," such as eccentric fashion accessories and furniture.

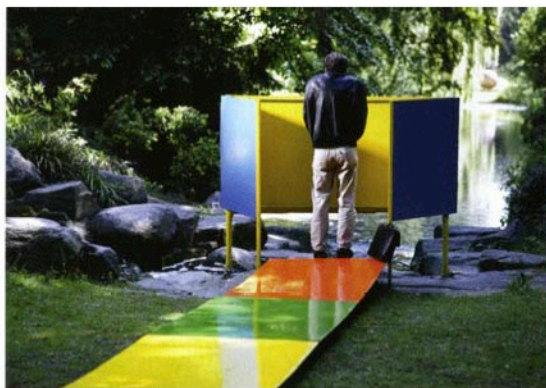
West's most well-known merging of the fine and applied arts did not begin, however, until the '80s, with his ongoing series of chairs, couches, divans, and tables. West made his first such seating arrangement, *Eo Ipso*—an amorphous structure of two facing seats connected by a winding strip of metal taken from his mother's washing machine drum and complemented by another stand-alone chair—for the second installment of Klaus Bussmann and Kasper König's *Skulptur Projekte Münster* in 1987. It is fitting that West's seating debuted in the context of a grand show such as Münster, since this body of work would really take off in the '90s, becoming a mainstay on the international blockbuster exhibition circuit, not least because it easily filled space, provided seating for the performances and lectures increasingly common at such events, and, above all, offered respite for overtaxed art tourists. The artist accordingly describes the genesis of his idea for *Auditorium*—seventy-two divans installed in a courtyard for Documenta 9—while strolling with König down the banks of the Main in Frankfurt: "We saw a yob with a portable radio lying in the grass, but he wasn't so comfortable. . . . I said to König: That's exactly how I imagine art. That one can think of art in terms of *Muse* [muse] and in terms of *Musse* [leisure, in the sense of time for intellectual and creative pursuits]." ¹⁹ West's furniture slows you down. It allows possibilities for contemplating art—the art that's around you and that you sit on—and is guided by a belief that we only truly exercise our mind, and become aesthetically sensitive, when relaxed. We might say that

West literally fulfilled Matisse's famous desire that his paintings have the effect of an armchair on a tired businessman.

If these seating arrangements function as actual and emblematic spaces for authentic, existential reflection about art, they also return us to West's peculiar take on critique. His furniture is made from metal frames covered with plain linen, metal wiring, plaster, and welded metal sheets, or, most famously, is bedecked with Persian rugs or cheap African fabrics, which the artist chooses for their "good, strong colors." ²⁰ West's appropriation of such non-Western textiles and the offhand way he throws them over their structures skeptically point to the shallow, tokenist manner in which global art, at least in the '90s, was all too often showcased within the frame of Western taste and money. At the same time, the haphazard, casual feel of West's furniture more generally—its visible welding and upholstery seams, its mismatched fabrics and oversize bolsters—was directed against, as he saw it, "deliberate German plainness and penitence." ²¹ In keeping with Priessnitz, who criticized cold-war design as "a symbol for the superiority and prestige of governments," ²² West's designs evoke the improvised, flexible living of youth on the go, a mentality that has stayed with the artist into his sixties, likely because it shaped him so much—as a teenager, Viennese coffeehouses were his second home; by sixteen, he had traveled unchaperoned through the Middle East for six months; and he lived with his mother until age forty, initially for convenience and later as a caretaker. So while West's interest in design suggests an earnest desire for change, his furniture's invitation to leisure provides a witty counterpoint to more strident conceptions



Opposite page, from left: Franz West, *Eo Ipso*, 1987, lacquered iron. Installation view, *Skulptur Projekte Münster*, 1987. Photo: Archiv Franz West. Otto Kobalek reclining on Franz West's *Untitled* (Divan), 1989, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Photo: Bernhard Riff. This page: Franz West, *Mao Memorial*, 1994–95, metal, foam, cotton, dimensions variable. Photo: Pierre Huber, Art & Public.



One is almost shocked that civic leaders would willingly allow West to publicly take the piss out of their most beloved monuments—and he seems all too happy to oblige.

of activist art. This attitude is poignantly captured in *Mao Memorial*, 1994–95, in which the colors of collective revolution—the blue of the military-style uniforms popularized by the chairman and the red of Communism—are made over into cheery cushions for ardent masses shrunk to a lolling few.

West's dizzying entwinement of art and design, the functionless and the functional, is particularly evident in his ongoing recombinatory installations of furniture, wall segments, and even complete rooms with "artworks" proper—be they his own or those of historical figures or contemporaries such as studio assistants, artist peers, and poets, who sometimes act as collaborators. These environments have their origins in the self-reflexive inclusion of photographs of the *Passestücke* in collages, as well as in the gallery happenings that he organized in the late '70s—featuring food and drink (cabbage with caraway seeds and gaudy cocktails), olfactory stimulation (bathroom deodorizer, hair spray, and ashtrays filled with water), and even a live concert. To some extent, these installations may emphasize the fault lines that, at least in the era of modernism, have divided art and design: They restore a sense of authenticity and autonomy to an art that all too easily turns into a tick on a checklist, and they draw attention to the benches, wall colors, and partitions that have long been staples of museum display.



But the shared visual vocabulary of West's design objects and his "art"—above all their touch of clumsiness—reveals an even greater ambition and daring. In the tradition of Viennese Secessionist *Gesamtkunstwerke* and pan-European avant-garde trends of the '20s, West's environments disrespectfully destabilize, and even level, the distinction between art and design. Art becomes design when he matches rugged chairs with rugged monochromes, or when he shows a "legitimate" sculpture on a coffee table, both on loan from the same collector's house. Conversely, design becomes art when he drops his shoddy divans and skimpy benches on pristine pedestals, positioned, for example, in front of the Vermeer in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum. The radicality of West's position lies not so much in suggesting that a couch can be a sculpture (or vice versa), but rather in his willful insistence on their shared formal vocabulary and on their shared display. This play with reversibility and common visual syntax reaches an irreverent climax in the 1997 repainted version of *Etude de Couleur* (Color Study), 1991–92, an Ellsworth Kelly-esque row of monochrome metal panels on the ground leading to a semienclature that, depending on its installation (and the gender of its viewer), can be used as a pissoir or regarded as an outdoor sculpture framing a view.

The absurdity of many of West's *mise-en-scènes* sends our minds spinning into conceptual byways and dead ends that generate open-ended meanings, which, according to the artist, transform viewers not just into users but also into thinkers. West openly courts this intellectual engagement by framing his best-known—and otherwise apparently autonomous—abstract sculptures with quotations taken from an array of poets and theorists whose aphoristic texts he sometimes modifies and features in his labels and publications. The elliptical relationship between



Opposite page, clockwise from top: Franz West, *Etude de Couleur* (Color Study), 1991–92, copper, metal, brass, lead, polyester. Installation view, Skulptur Projekte Münster, 1997. Photo: Romain Buisson. Franz West, *Les Pommes D'Adam*, 2007, epoxy, metal. Installation view, Place Vendôme, Paris. Photo: Gautier Deslonde. Franz West, *Untitled*, 2000, collage, 11 1/2 x 15 1/2". From the series "Homepage," 2000. Franz West, *Wegener Räume 2/6–5/6*, 1988, metal, wood, papier-mâché, glue, paint, plaster, collage. Installation view, Galerie Peter Pakesch, Vienna. This page: View of "Franz West: Recent Sculptures," 2004, Lincoln Center Plaza, New York. From left: *Meeting Point 3*, 2004; *Laube*, 2002; *Ypsilon*, 2004; *Dont*, 2002; *Double Ring*, 2004; *Couch*, 2004. Photo: Tom Power for the Public Art Fund.

these texts and their accompanying sculptures can be frustrating and, like the forms themselves, also strangely funny. Or not so strange, perhaps, for laughter frequently follows from a similar mismatch of knowledge and experience, expectation and actuality. And so we laugh at the flippant way West pairs philosophical musings with a lump of papier-mâché; or at the way he mocks traditions of modernist sculpture by balancing large abstract clumps on skinny poles and even spatulas; or at the way he updates the grand history of outdoor monuments, not only with his *Etude de Couleur*, but also with his signature amorphous, even turdlike, entities, which populate ever more public spaces. The incongruity of their tacky colors and blown-up biomorphic shapes makes them equally hilarious alien intruders in desolate agricultural fields or in grand public plazas like New York's forbidding Lincoln Center and Paris's venerable Place Vendôme, where several of West's pink phalluses shot up alongside the square's iconic column. One is almost shocked that civic leaders would willingly allow West to publicly take the piss out of their most beloved monuments—and he seems all too happy to oblige.

The humor of West's public blobs is rivaled in his oeuvre only by that of the collages he has made continually since about 1973. The inspirations of Pop art (particularly Richard Hamilton's collaged interiors, which West discovered in the early '60s) and of Dada (fellow Austrian *monteur* Raoul Hausmann features prominently in one) are most salient in his early *Visuelle Analysen* (Visual Analyses), which absurdly juxtapose found media images, and in parallel works

based on or directly worked over advertising brochures for clothes, furniture, lamps, and the like. By the early '70s, West had already developed his signature strategy of painting or pasting broad areas of solid color around objects and protagonists to isolate them and emphasize, in West's words, how "idiotic stereotypes . . . perform ridiculous gestures."²³ The critical edge of West's collages has not lost its sharpness as, over the years, he has introduced lascivious nudes taken from porn magazines and suggestive commodities turned into blatant sex fetishes—blond beauties enticingly grasping sausages and slick men modeling tailored suits with champagne bottles bursting from their zippers. The mind-numbing "culture industry," West's work suggests, has become so omnipresent that it can no longer be dismantled but only disarmed, with goofiness and bathroom humor. These days he avidly watches *South Park* in the middle of the night on Euro MTV, marveling at the ways in which the United States "amidst its slide to the right can produce such unbelievably black humor about its president."²⁴ For now, at least, West seems to contend, the slapstick and the slapdash may be art's most effective means of insurrection. □

²³ Franz West: *To Build a House You Start with the Roof: Work, 1972–2008*, organized by Daria Alexander, will be on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art Oct. 12–Jan. 4, 2009. *Travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Mar. 15–June 7*.

CHRISTINE MEHRING IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.

For notes, see page 407.

LIKE HER PRACTICE, Charline von Heyl's studio is split in two: One room is for painting and the other for works on paper. In this second room, by the door that leads to the other side, is a large-format Epson ink-jet printer, one of the many machines the artist has enlisted in her recent experiments with printmaking and collage. Although she is known primarily as a painter, von Heyl has been spending more and more time devising unexpected encounters between digital reproduction and archaic precursors such as hand-carved woodcuts, stencils, lithographs, and screenprints. Paper functions as a carrier for many techniques, each layered on top of the other in unorthodox sequences and mixtures. As relentlessly abstract as her canvases, von Heyl's works on paper are like travel posters for unpicturable, exploded destinations; they are pages of chaos. *Sabotage*, a book to be published next month by Xn Éditions and Christophe Daviet-Thery, in a limited edition of three hundred, is the latest project to emerge from the nonpainting side of von Heyl's studio.

Rejecting both written language and illustration, *Sabotage* is a sort of image-text that gets straight to one of the book format's most abstract possibilities: the material production of a sort of counterspace that exists beyond meaning. Interspersing transparent (Mylar) and opaque (paper) pages—a selection of the latter have been reconceived for publication here—*Sabotage* exploits the optical effects of superimposition while riveting the attention of its reader to the basic activity of turning pages. Isn't this every book's most

intimate desire—to be ransacked and explored by fingers and eyes? Each turned page makes and unmakes the next, and the book remains in a state of constant optical transformation.

Stéphane Mallarmé, too, was fascinated by the fact that a book is above all an optical device—he even addressed the way a volume poses in the glamorous space of a shopwindow. With *Sabotage*, von Heyl invents something strange and ultimately unknowable with the purely material and energetic qualities of the book: surface and movement, ink and action. She lures the viewer into a readerly relation with her two-sided images. Frequently appropriating fragments of vintage comic books, found photographs, and other ready-made visuals, von Heyl layers and attacks these in such a way that they lose any illustrative function. *Sabotage* thus pursues a notion of abstraction as a process that resists representation, but that is also cunning and ironic enough to be able to picture itself—rampantly quoting aesthetic histories and styles, striking poses on the page. It is formalism exploiting its own power to leap from one content to another, reprogramming the book as a machine for producing surfaces.

Sabotage is a book that amplifies and activates everything in itself that would normally be suppressed by the dominance of text. Happily illiterate, it provokes backward and forward movement while engaging the physical presence of the reader, who is immediately implicated in von Heyl's creative, rhythmic notion of sabotage.

—JOHN KELSEY



Interior of Charline von Heyl's studio, New York, 2008. Photo: Charline von Heyl.