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Franz West, David Zwirner Gallery, February 5 - March 17 1993

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FRANZ WEST : JUMPING IN THE BONEYARD

Franz West, David Zwirner Gallery, February 5 - March 17 1993

One of the unfortunate legacies of sloppy neo-expressionism is the pathetic biomorphic object, suggesting in its organic or semi-organic decrepitude the lessons of mortality, the bleak humor of decay and devolution, and a fashionable pessimism that runs against the fundamental Western, modernist tradition of progress through technology and a brighter future beaming towards us every day. Particularly in sculpture, where the canons of Minimalism had until recently defined a refined, geometric surface devoid of figurative connotation, it seems that the more fetishistically ugly and convoluted the sculpture, the more claims it can make to an enlightened, revisionist connotation with reference to Judd, Andre et al.

At first glance the sculpture, furniture and other objects of Franz West (at David Zwirner Gallery, 43 Greene Street), seem to adhere to this late 70s reaction to Minimalism. His ugly duckling pieces maintain a direct if amorphous relationship to the body, but are somewhat objectionable in their barnacled coarseness. The body suggested by West is not a healthy one. It is unclean and impure, with protuberances that imply the foul excrement of some unnameable disease: cancer, tumors, warts, blisters. West's skins are neither sleek nor smooth but dry, hard, and crusty, like the calcareous response of a blighted metabolism that is frantically throwing out its poisons. This metabolic metaphor is compounded in the lumps and mounds, which suggest a scatological reference similarly found in the work of John Miller and St. Clair Cemin. Perhaps more to the point, West's objects adhere to a prosthetic identity. They are not necessarily of the body, but resonate as psychosomatic projections of the body, as objects that adhere to the body in some hysterical or neurotic sphere or with some implication of debased functionalism.

What elevates West above the ranks of mediocre neo-expressionism, and what makes him interesting to this reviewer, is not his devolved biomorphism and perverse will to the gauche and awkward — traits fairly common to the current generation of artists — but a rarefied intellectual dandyism that seems to revel in the accoutrements of ultimate schmutz not as physical transgression but as conceptual trope. Like de Sade in *Salò: 120 Days of Sodom*, West starts with a scatological gesture and fetishizes it to the point of ultimate refinement, an ultraelegance only possible once one leaves the conventional bourgeois notions of prettiness behind and hovers over the boneyard with lockjawed hilarity.

This conceptual predisposition to unearth the hidden material of psychosis, and, as a sculptor, make it physically

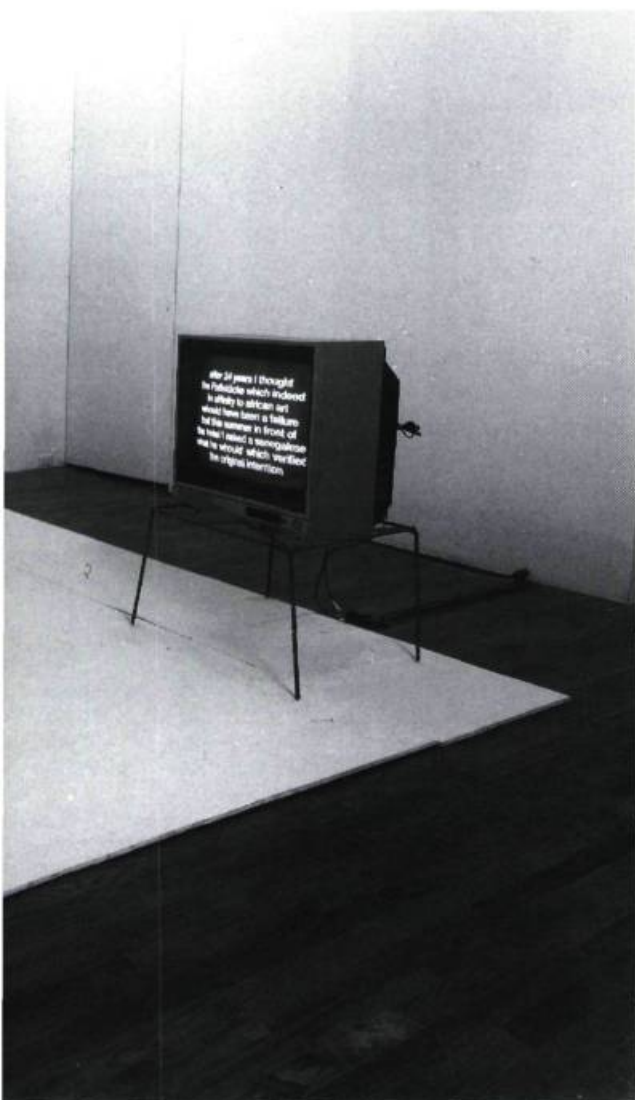


Franz West, installation, 1993. David Zwirner Gallery.

tangible, is perhaps appropriate to a native of the city of Freud. As a Viennese, West inherits an entire program of cultural assumptions, a particularly Austrian blend of intellectual curiosity, sarcasm and cynical gallows humor, hovering on the cusp between transgression and acceptance. Working in the legacy of the body and blood performances of the Viennese Aktionismus artists - Hermann Nitsch, Gunther Brus and Otto Muehl — West seems to accept their focus on ceremony and their narcissistic blending of metabolism, excrement and creation while dissociating himself from the primacy of gesture that is a cornerstone of

expressionism.

Although the ostensible aim of sculpture is the



production of objects, and West's objects can certainly be located on the axis of abstraction vs. pictorial representation, his ultimate aim is not the creation of virtuostic tours-de-force or manifestations of dexterity. West's makeshift and intentionally gauche execution lift us beyond the realm of the outwardly physical and turn us back to more inward, visceral rumblings, to a psychic charge that resonates from within, to an interior monologue that sculpture has with itself regarding its accommodations and purposes. This investigation of sculpture's interior space makes West an "ideal sculptor — one who unearths archetypal pictures

but does so with the greatest nonchalance possible," according to Kaspar König in a videotaped conversation with West that is part of the gallery installation.

If West is nonchalant in his production process, perhaps we should be less so in our analysis of it. The eight sculptures, on pedestals, that constitute the main part of the show all adhere to the same strategy of production: found objects that are slathered with plaster, gauze, paper-mache, cardboard and metal foil, so that the contours and identity of the original objects are rendered invisible. They are assimilated under a rough, gnarly coating and "ingested", a sly metaphor that conflates the production of art with the processes of human metabolism. Since we all know what the end product of human metabolism is, the "clean" Duchampian model of the readymade is besmirched, rendered useless as shit. In one fell conceptual stroke, West is able to satisfy his sandbox longings, kill the father, and equate art with excrement, while offering a sardonic judgement on the art marketplace that is, itself, so eager to ingest his sculpture. Which is one of the best earned examples of having one's caca and eating it too that I have seen in contemporary art.

By examining a typical piece, we can derive some idea of the associations and concerns that West brings to his creative process. In its essential shape, mass and height from the floor when displayed on a pedestal, *Untitled* seems to adhere to the human scale: a head, a hat. Its tuberous appendages suggest animal or vegetative biomorphism: a *hydra* or a *bladder*. Further examination might yield certain similarities to the crown of the Statue of Liberty. In fact, West is quite happy to allow the piece to resonate between all these associations as part of a continuing, open-ended conversation, as one reference dissolves into another in a series of metaphorical tropes. The meaning of the piece proceeds not just through its formal vocabulary of size, shape, color and the various physical properties of sculpture, but through the language — puns, wordplay, theoretical thought — that went into its development. West is constructing his objects as much from words as from plaster, but if he had to choose only one medium, he would seemingly be quite happy to remain with words, as evidenced by this excerpt from the videotaped conversation:

Originally, this piece was pink. And what I wanted to represent was the udder of a cow. Then I had the thing standing around in my studio for several weeks and began to think more and more of the Statue of Liberty which, as the name implies, is more or less a symbol of, well, a sign... but the leap from the udder of a cow to the Statue of Liberty came automatically. There's the milking of cow and there's America. And admittedly, I finally envisioned the head of Medusa, and then I had to think of the United Snakes of

America by *Public Enemy*.

Thus, what appears initially as a simple biomorphic statement becomes an internally charged mixed metaphor for the milking of America in the viper pit of false promises.

Continuing his dialogue with König, West states a continuing interest in African art, which "emphasizes less the formal element than direct connections, its embeddedness in everyday life". This penchant for demythologizing the art object and making it more accessible to public use is certainly one impetus for West's continued production of furniture: brute metal constructions of tables, chairs and couches, usually covered with newspaper, that caustically emulate the creature comforts of cafe society while offering an ironic commentary on Viennese sensuality or *Gemütlichkeit*. It also leads us to examine a unique amalgam, the *Paßstücke* or "fitting objects", which have been a part of West's oeuvre since the late 70s. Here, the characteristic roughness and gnarly tactility of West's sculpture achieve full realization in objects that are removed from the pedestal and are meant to be handled, to be held to the body, to be worn like a mask or harness, or to be played like a musical instrument. They incorporate a strong manual element and an implied ceremonial or performance function, as opposed to the merely visual aspect of conventional sculpture. Characteristically, the *Paßstücke* are white, plaster covered objects that inevitably recall a hospital cast or similar prosthetic identity: not of the body, but formed to accommodate the body, and exhibited with instructions for their use. In West's 1989 retrospective at New York's P.S. 1, for example, one room that contained *Paßstücke* also had a plaster booth and chair in one corner. The viewer was instructed to remove his or her clothing, take a shot of schnapps, and interact with the piece (Privacy was insured by museum guards). The results are often photographed or videotaped and then added to exhibition.

In the back room of Zwirner, a *Paßstücke* is accompanied by a videotape of a Senegalese handling the piece with complete comfort and familiarity, passing it over his shoulder, around his back, and between his legs as if it were a baton or soccer ball, a fluid performance executed with ease and dexterity. By contrast, Western handlers of the *Paßstücke* tend to approach it with trepidation or from an enlarged psychological distance, to clutch it neurotically to their chests or pose with it in static postures reminiscent of Classical statuary. Their response is less immediate or naïve, clouded by typically Western concerns for the sanctity and untouchability of the art object, which affect their reception not only of the *Paßstücke* but of all forms of art. Most of the viewer interactive art being made today is high tech, with computer modules, electric consoles, blinking

lights and pushbutton choices. In conjuring his decidedly low tech *Paßstücke*, West is able to conflate theoretical issues of plastic and performance art, highlight the preciousness of commodity in contemporary art usage, and, most powerfully, guide our racial memory back to that primordial, preverbal moment when human language was solely a language of gestures, when we were all playing with *Paßstücke* of one kind or another.

But West is not a primitivist, nor does he push the excrement in our faces for the simple thrills of transgression. In the attempt to create a new language for sculpture, a language that is at once self conscious, aware of its contradictions, and supremely metaphoric with regard to external experience, West might occasionally err on the side of dour sarcasm or dandified gamesmanship. But by enlisting our participation in the *Paßstücke*, by inviting us to recline on his chairs and couches of little ease, he is committing us to an ongoing dialogue on art and its discontents. As a final example, West has constructed a piece that looks like a large thumbtack, which can either rest on a pedestal or be hung on a nail next to the pedestal. He also leaves a note for the viewer: that if the piece is hanging on the nail, it should be put on the pedestal, and if it is resting on the pedestal, it should be hung on the nail. Either way, it's the same thing. And even if we are dismayed by the tautologies of modern art, West seems to be saying, at least we can have the pleasure of talking about it, and laughing through clenched teeth.

STEVEN KAPLAN