

BONNIE BARRETT STRETCH

## Franz West in the American Art World

When Austrian artist Franz West died in July 2013, he was reaching a new pinnacle of international fame. Just one year earlier, he had received the Golden Lion Award for lifetime achievement at the Venice Biennale. Exhibitions of his sculptures, furniture and collages were held frequently in major museums, galleries and art fairs across Europe, and he was gaining increased acclaim in the United States through his huge colorful installations in New York City at Lincoln Center in 2004 and Central Park in 2008, where children joyfully climbed and played among the works and adults sat on them and pondered their soaring heights or bulbous shapes.

The roots of West's vision were founded in post-World War II Vienna, home to the infamous Vienna actionists. Struck by their visceral power but alienated by their violence and dogmatic political approach to art, West turned to sculpture in the early 1970s, creating playful ambiguous objects known as *Paßstücke* (*Adaptives*), that invited active physical handling and witty improvisation—unique but akin in spirit to the pre-war dadaists and surrealists in Germany. By the 1980s, he began experimenting with spindly furniture with skinny legs of steel rebar and seats and table-tops of worn tapestry glued to cardboard or plywood, and then with new sculptures called *Parrhesia*—large abstract lumps of plaster and *papier-mâché* splattered with paint that resemble rough-hewn heads, each declaring its own truth.

West's public works shown recently in the US are decidedly different from his early concepts, embracing the dazzle of 21st-century size and color, yet still retaining a keen irony and sense of the absurd. The roots of his vision remain evident in the twisted sausage-like sculptures shown at Lincoln Center that reminded some critics of feces or sexual organs. The full story of his evolution was seen in the 2008 retrospective organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art that traveled to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2009 and left many critics baffled. Irony and absurdity have never blended easily with American optimism.

Dada, surrealism and postwar European art are still little understood here, and they were clearly front and center, so to speak, this past summer in West's monumental outdoor



sculptural ensemble *Les Pommes d'Adam*—the huge installation of West's towering pink phallic totems commanding the new Hall Art Foundation plaza at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (Mass MoCA), and which will be on view again from spring through fall this year.

The timing couldn't be better for this insightful exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA)—just eight minutes up the road from Mass MoCA—where the origins of West's works are on display until January 25. Visitors can explore how young West emerged in postwar Austria and measure

Opposite: Franz West, *The Monster of the Black Lagoon*, 2004, papier-mâché, styrofoam, lacquer, acrylic with metal base, 3 parts: 58 x 36 x 30", 60 x 38 x 26", 48 x 48 x 28". Right: Franz West, *Untitled (Lady in fur Hat)*, 1976–77, hand-painted collage, 13 x 9¾". Both images: Hall Collection, courtesy of Hall Art Foundation. © legal successor of the artist. Photo: Arthur Evans. Below: Franz West, *Untitled (Paßstück)*, ca. 1982, glass bottle, gauze and acrylic paint, 9 1/16 x 18 1/2 x 3 1/16". Hall Collection.

the importance of these roots and how strong they remain.

Lisa Dorin, WCMA's deputy director of curatorial affairs, explained, "A year ago we collaborated with Mass MoCA and the Hall Art Foundation to contextualize the works of Anselm Kiefer being exhibited in the new 10,000-square-foot building at MoCA built to house long-term installations of large-scale sculpture and paintings from the Hall Foundation. It was a great collaboration among the three institutions: Williams, Mass MoCA and Hall. Last spring, when MoCA and Hall were planning the installation of a large West sculpture, we embarked on a similar conversation. We discovered that the Hall Collection spans West's entire career—all the major modes in which he worked—from early *Adaptives* to the *Parrhesia*, to the furniture, to the canvases and collages. All major moments in his career. We were especially pleased to exhibit one of West's best-known and most complex lighting fixtures: *Hermo, Kobo and Prieso*."

Dorin added, "We also worked with the Franz West Privatstiftung (Archive) in Vienna

to borrow historical photography and video works showing the very early *Adaptives* in use by participants. Today they're too fragile and valuable to handle, but we borrowed two pieces that were made by West with the express purpose of allowing the public to have that experience today."

Aside from the works from the Franz West Archive in Vienna, all works in the Williams College exhibition, as well as the monumental West sculpture at Mass MoCA, are owned by the Collection of Andrew and Christine Hall. Andrew Hall, a major player in the Wall Street oil market, is head of commodities trading firm Philbro LLC and the head of hedge fund Astenbeck Capital, co-founded with Occidental Petroleum Corporation.



The Hall Art Foundation organizes exhibitions and projects and manages operations pertaining to its own collection and that of the Halls. In addition to operating an exhibition space on the couple's property in Reading, VT, the foundation has formed exhibition partnerships with Mass MoCA to present a long-term installation devoted to the art of Anselm Kiefer and with the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England, to present a series of exhibitions of contemporary and postwar art. The foundation also collaborates with public institutions around the world to facilitate loans from its own collection and that of the Halls.

Bonnie Barrett Stretch is a longtime writer and editor for a wide range of art publications. She writes frequently for Art New England and is a contributing editor to ARTnews.

#### Franz West

On view through January 25, 2015  
Williams College Museum of Art  
Williamstown, MA  
[wcma.williams.edu](http://wcma.williams.edu)

