

# CULTURE MONSTER

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

## [Review: Franz West at LACMA](#)

10:00 AM, March 31, 2009



“Don’t Touch” is an unspoken warning in any art museum. Sometimes an institution might post a sign explaining to visitors why touching the art on view is bad — not just for the obvious catastrophic reasons, but because even oils from hands that appear to be clean can cause incremental damage. Mostly, though, visitors already know what they are (or, rather, aren’t) supposed to do in art’s presence.

Touch is a privilege typically reserved for the artist who made the art, as well as its professional caretakers. In fact, “the artist’s touch” has been a central value in Western art for hundreds of years.

By the start of the 1960s, with the Abstract Expressionist generation of American painters riding high, it had even become something of a fetish. The loaded brush, the whiplash line, poured paint, the palette knife and sponge — signs of distinctive gestures mattered, almost like handwriting. De-mythologizing the artist’s touch was left to Andy Warhol, who announced that he instead wanted to be a machine, and to Sol LeWitt and his idea-oriented cohort of Conceptual artists. They pulled the plug for good.

Enter Franz West, the impish Viennese artist whose compelling retrospective is at the [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#). Born in 1947, West is a generation younger than Warhol and LeWitt. The fetish for the artist’s touch having been retired just before he arrived on the scene, he took the next step. In the mid-1970s, West handed things over to the audience.

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Literally.

Wrapping pieces of wood and cardboard and lengths of wire with gauze, coating it in plaster or papier mâché and painting the whole thing white, West made sculptures that the audience was meant to pick up, manipulate, examine at close range, hang on an arm or around the neck, or even stick one's face into. The shapes are abstract. But often, part of the sculpture suggests a handle — a direct visual invitation to audience participation. Silently it says, *Touch me, hold me.*



Other shapes appear designed to fit around the neck, under the arm or on other embraceable parts of the body. Or, they echo bodily orifices. (Can a sculpture have a belly button?) A glass bottle at the end of a long stick, both embedded in lumpy papier mâché, looks like a ritual implement meant to be passed around in some primitive religious ceremony.

These materials also evoke the damaged condition art holds in contemporary life. Like a cast made for a broken limb, white plaster and gauze result in sculptures bound in a medical dressing.

West calls these sculptures “Passstücke” -- originally translated as “fitting pieces” (*passende Stücke*) but now referred to as “adaptives.” In biology, adaptation is a structure or form modified to fit a changing environment. West's touch-me sculptures attempted the same for art's new circumstance.

The Austrian sculptor didn't begin to study art seriously until he was 26, which might explain two distinctive features of his work. First, West's expressive take on things is jaundiced and mature, snarky but sophisticated — Benny Hill with brains. And second, like an adolescent prankster with an old soul, its tone deepens and becomes more resonant over the next three decades, even though the die was cast right from the start.

West was born in the aftermath of World War II. In the survey, organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art, the trappings of the artist's upbringing amid the grim but tattered Austro-Hungarian remnants of recently fascist Vienna is immediately encountered. An untitled collage made in 1973 or 1974, around the time West enrolled in the local art academy, features a cut-out figure of a portly, mustachioed Prussian soldier adrift in a sea of excremental brown paint. Executed on a torn piece of corrugated cardboard, this disheveled leftover is a talisman of his nation's conflicted past — part Emperor Franz Joseph, part Sigmund Freud, part postwar ruin.

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## GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Thirty years later, the boulder-like sculpture “Sisyphos IX” has absorbed establishment references into its nearly 6-foot-diameter bulk. A paint-splashed blob of clotted papier-mâché and foam, held in place by a steel pipe wedged beneath the sculpture and the floor, the work remembers Sisyphos, the charmed ancient king condemned by the gods to repeatedly push a boulder uphill, only to watch it roll back down again. West makes the tale's eternal futility into a metaphor for the artist's job.

The splashed pink paint on the boulder does double-duty: The gruesome blood of a squashed striver, it's also gorgeous, Expressionist-style paint-handling. Expressionism's gestural application of paint is art's primary sign of subjectivity — the artist's touch as a revelation of his inner life. West pushes it up the mountain yet once more, only to see it inevitably roll back down again.

As a Viennese, West is heir — or prisoner — to the Expressionist legacies of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele and the Actionist artists of the 1960s, several of whose Freudian, blood-soaked ritual performances celebrating violence and destruction West saw as a teenager. He refers to all of them in his work, sometimes in peculiar ways.

His 1985 “Joy” — the German word is *“Freude,”* a feminine recollection of Freud — is an earthy, 3-foot-wide sheet of cardboard covered in gold foil and marked by a raised, papier-mâché “Greek key” or “squared spiral” pattern that coils into the center. The funky pattern comes from Klimt's famous 1907 “golden portrait” of his mistress, Adele; contradictorily, it also forms a three-dimensional rat's maze at the heart of the work.

“Joy” is not a sculptural relief to be touched, only looked at. The following year West caused some consternation with a show he called “legitimate sculptures,” which is to say free-standing, hands-off objects that — superficially at least — appeared to rebuke the touch-me position that established his career.

In fact, West was just keeping faith with the universe he had labored to create. Think of Alexander Calder, whose ground-breaking invention of the mobile was followed by works he slyly named “stabiles” -- otherwise known as plain old static sculptures.

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The post-1986 sculptures were “legitimate” only in relation to the “illegitimate” adaptives, which had broken sculptural taboos. West’s work turns on the primacy of relationships — the connections and couplings (sometimes sexual) among objects, people, environments and their histories.

Relationships explain why West is also big on collaboration. Pieces in the show were made with photographer Friedl Kubelka, Conceptual artist Douglas Gordon, musician Fred Jelinek and ceramist Tamuna Sirbiladze (West’s wife). And relationships explain why he built sculptural couches out of uncomfortable steel rebar, which make you think of reclining in pain to tell your traumatic stories to Dr. Freud.

“Spoonerism,” a three-part masterpiece from 1996, includes a painted papier-mâché blob standing atop an inverted cardboard box balanced on an upended black suitcase with wheels. The painted blob’s bulbous phallic shape clearly derives from Constantin Brancusi’s “[Mlle. Pogany](#).” The Romanian genius’ breakthrough was to explore the formal relationships among sculpture, pedestal and floor, rather than consider art as an autonomous object. West, with his mobile phallic blob atop a cardboard box and wheeled suitcase, takes a down-market version of Brancusi’s show on the road.

Putting a “please touch” show in a “don’t touch” museum is tricky. But the problem has been solved through labels that tell a visitor which West works can be picked up — they’re marked with a green hand — and which cannot. Sofas can be sat on (ouch).

The installation is somewhat unsatisfactory, though, since the show is split between the crowded photography galleries on the Ahmanson Building’s ground level and a room off the plaza-level lobby upstairs. (Two outdoors sculptures are nearby.) But the timing couldn’t be better. The Viennese sculptor’s work resonates with “Art of Two Germanys/Cold War Cultures,” the powerful exhibition next door at BCAM. The relationships between them are plentiful and provocative -- and sometimes even touching.

-- Christopher Knight

**“Franz West, To Build a House You Start with the Roof: Work, 1972–2008,”** [Los Angeles County Museum of Art](#), 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles; through June 7; noon-8, Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday; noon-9 Friday; 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Price: \$12; (323) 857-6000.

*Top photo: “Franz West, To Build a House You Start with the Roof: Work, 1972–2008” installation. Credit: LACMA.*

*Middle photo: Frank West, “Adaptive (Passstüch),” 1975. Credit: Courtesy of David Zwirner. © Franz West.*

*Bottom photo: Franz West, “Sisyphos IX,” 2002. Credit: The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas. © Franz West.*

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