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Friday, April 11th, 2008

## Franz West: Paßstück

by Becky Brown

Gagosian Gallery

980 Madison Avenue

New York City, 212 744 2313

March 18 – April 26, 2008



Franz West, Poster Design (Gagosian Gallery) 2007-08 collage and paint on digital print, mounted on canvas, 67-1/2 x 74-3/4 inches Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, © Franz West

When asked about his interest in bodily functions, the scatological in particular, Franz West replies: "This seems to be a misunderstanding, I am not interested in the body. I am not sure that I have a body. (I am interested in philosophy!)" West revives the age-old divide between body and philosophy, or mind and body, as a tongue-in-cheek rejection of this single (and dangerously singular) reading of his work. Less interested in *functions of the body* than in *the functioning of bodies* in social space, he creates objects and furniture for direct contact with, and use by, human beings. His latest two-level exhibition at Gagosian Gallery's Madison Avenue location includes objects; videos and paintings of objects in use; and a series of collages.

The title *Paßstück*, which has translations ranging from "adaptive" (as a noun) to "fitting pieces" to "parts that fit into each other," is used to describe a series of work that West has been exploring since the early 1970s. Assembled from found materials and coated in plaster and paint, they assume the double identity of props or

playthings (when the gallery permits us to handle them) and sculpture (when it doesn't). As West—and Gagosian—have it both ways, the show becomes a kind of Choose Your Own Adventure: those that prefer the more traditional (passive) experience of circling objects on pedestals will find their home on the sixth floor; while those that prefer an interactive experience will be satisfied on the fifth. We are told in various ways by the gallery literature (and by West's illustrations) that this artwork "needs to be held, adapted and moved against the human body." So why is this permitted for some *Paßstück* and not others?



Franz West, Untitled 2007 papier-maché, styrofoam, epoxy resin, lacquer, metal, 114-1/4 x 39-3/8 inches Courtesy Gagosian Gallery, © Franz West

From Joseph Beuys to Matthew Barney, we have seen objects in galleries and museums that derive meaning not simply from their presence in the space, but from their role in events already taken place. West's *Paßstück* are not just idle things, but instruments of action, just as sculpture and installation on view in a Barney exhibition are actually props and film sets. Yet there seems to be a disconnect between *Paßstück* as sculpture and *Paßstück* as object for play. A Beuys vitrine or felt suit tells a similar story in the gallery as it would in a performance, while the objects at Gagosian demand an entirely different (and potentially conflicting) set of eyes, mind and body from one floor to the next. On the sixth, we are looking at abstract assemblages that fall somewhere between Rauschenberg, Eva Hesse and Sterling Ruby. On the 5th, we are confronted with the highly distinct tradition of works based in performance and participation. Perhaps this is why fooling around with *Paßstück* feels something like role-play. We take our cues from instructional video footage—smiling men and women balancing objects on their arms and around their necks, contorting bodies to accommodate the very fixtures we see before us. I hear a gallery representative announce, in case we didn't know, "This is a unique uptown experience—being allowed to touch the art!"

Between West's lively poster-paintings depicting people engaging with *Paßstück*, and the chunky catalogue (more like an artists' book) with full-bleed photographs, the intended experience is so over-articulated that the live experience is bound to fall short. Fumbling briefly with the objects in front of me, I feel I am going through the motions without channeling the energy of the original event. But what is the source of this energy? Is it some pure union between man and thing, a conversation between the animate and inanimate? No—West is far too playful for such heavy-handedness. We are told that *Paßstück* is a response to the Vienna Actionist spectacles of the 1960s, which West observed as a teenager. But dangling plaster rings from one's arms (while struggling to keep a straight face) is a far cry from sacrifice and mutilation. *Paßstück* are like toys, and the people handling them like overgrown children. West replaces violence on bodies with bodies at play, but playing is unnatural and uncomfortable for modern adults: this is an art gallery,

not a sandbox, and *Paßstück* can be awkward, even hostile, to the human form. West responds to the extremity of Vienna Actionism with a more subtle, psychological investigation; his aim, as he states, is to make "neurosis become visible." And to a certain extent, he succeeds. But *Paßstück* is weakened by its two-faced nature—until its double life is reconciled, both sides suffer.

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