

# FRANZ WEST

## and the Absurd Creation

After emerging in the early 1970s, Franz West developed a unique and playful aesthetic aligned with non-traditional ways of viewing art. The colorful aluminum sculptures on view are meant to amuse as the viewer as he or she sits or lies on their lacquered surfaces. Known as the Alu Sculptures, they exemplify West's work not only as a social experience, but also as an art practice that relies on both high and low culture, and that utilizes recognizable and abstract forms. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus compares the absurd life with the artist's life, writing that "the essential fluctuation from assent to refusal is what defines the artist and his difficult calling."<sup>1</sup> A closer look at Franz West's artistic trajectory hints precisely at this fluctuation. Setting up a keen interdependence between participation and observation, and between function and abstraction, his work continuously shifts between two divergent notions in sculpture: the autonomy of the functional piece and the abstract artwork as furniture.<sup>2</sup>

1. See Federico Luisetti, "Reflections on Duchamp: Bergson Readymade," trans. David Sharpe, *Diacritics* 38, no. 4 (2010): 81.

2. Melitta Kliege, "Abstract Art as Furniture: Autonomous Sculptures by Franz West," in *Franz West: Sisyphos: Litter & Waste* (New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2003), 9.

Initially, West's work was centered on the notion of refusal. As a young artist in Vienna in the 1960s, he was exposed to the crisis of abstract art that was giving way to multiple "realist" trends in both Europe and North America. The Actionists' public acts and rejection of commodifiable art were a huge influence on West, leading him to focus on the interaction rather than the thing in the transitory exchange between viewer and object as he moved from drawings and painted Pop-inspired collages to three-dimensional objects in his first significant sculptures, the *Pass-stücke* (*Adaptives*). Originally translated from the German as "fitting pieces," the *Adaptives* required the viewer to pick them up, wear them, or carry them around. Using humble materials with rough surfaces, such as papier-mâché or plaster, and shapes ranging from abstract to utilitarian, like bags and brooms, West also described them as "prostheses," suggesting their dependence on the body to be completed as artworks.

Over time, as West became more and more involved in museum and gallery exhibitions the *Adaptives* became increasingly difficult to display. To present them on pristine pedestals meant revoking their participatory invitation. West's eventual turn to non-portable, self-sufficient—or "autonomous sculptures"<sup>3</sup>—was rooted in placing the *Adaptives* in a permanent waiting position on plinths and pedestals. These forms of display were later incorporated into the works, the plinths and pedestals becoming sculptures in their own right, culminating in complex installations and room-like environments composed of sitting objects along with small abstract pieces. Viewers were no longer able to pick up the works, but were instead invited to sit or lounge on these quirky-looking chairs and sofas in cast metal, plaster,

3. Eva Badura-Triska, "Everything Could Be Other Than It Is: Combination and Recombination as a Form of Language-Game in the Work of Franz West," in *Franz West: Where Is My Eight?* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König 2013), 16.

foam, and textiles, expanding visual expectations of firmness and solidity, while fulfilling their functional role beyond the purely decorative or aesthetic.

West furthered his exploration of abstraction through his bulky shapes in paint-splashed papier-mâché, a loose reference to *Art Informel*, the influential mid-century European art movement roughly paralleling Abstract Expressionism in the US. He also embraced increased scale in works like *The Left Horn of Moses* (2004). Another work, a meter-wide agglomeration of papier-mâché and foam fastened to the ground by steel piping, titled *Sisyphos* (2002) after the ancient king condemned by the gods to repeatedly push a rock uphill only to watch it roll down again, seems to reference the absurdity of the artist's incessant labor. Even so, there is a deliberate humor in the works, which is present in his large-scale outdoor sculptures like the epoxy, resin, and aluminum *Lemure* (2005), and in his even larger later works in lacquered aluminum and steel, such as the works on view.

Despite his sometimes mythological and philosophical artwork titles, West was resistant towards rigid theories and postulates. In this sense, his practice appears to be conscious of the absurd in its purposeful lack of a theoretical framework. Like Camus, who describes absurdity as the realization that the universe is fundamentally devoid of absolutes, West was mindful of the constitutive role played in the formation of art theories by many factors that are context-specific, and thus relative and subject to change.<sup>4</sup> Camus argues that the illusory nature of the world prevents us from clearly distinguishing between truth and artifice; it is an illusion that any proposition could have a certain meaning, because its elements cannot absolutely be said to be true

4. Eva Badura-Triska, "Everything Could Be Other Than It Is: Combination and Recombination as a Form of Language-Game in the Work of Franz West," in *Franz West: Where Is My Eight?* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König 2013), 42.

or false.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, West's avoids feeding the viewer definitive statements or answers, but rather, provides him or her with an experience.

Considering the philosophy of Camus in relation to West's artistic approach allows us to recognize the ephemeral essence underlying the latter's craft. According to Camus, the "absurd action" is not a form of production but an ephemeral creation "without tomorrows," that evades theory or anticipatory reasoning.<sup>6</sup> West's work, like an absurd creation, seemingly acknowledges that fact and meaning may contradict each other, or even that there may be no meaning at all. West has become an absurd artist by performing two tasks simultaneously: negating and magnifying.<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, by enabling the viewer to be a coauthor of the work, he rejects the authorship of absolute meaning. At the same time, and with an extraordinary sense of humor, he magnifies the innocence and beauty of the world and indeed, to acknowledge the absurd is to embrace all that the world has to offer, which according to Camus leads to revolt, freedom and passion.<sup>8</sup>

—Camila Jorquiera Stagno



5. Camus, Albert. *The myth of Sisyphus, and other essays*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012, 14.

6. Samantha Novello, *Albert Camus As Political Thinker: Nihilisms and the Politics of Contempt* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 91.

7. Camus, Albert. *The myth of Sisyphus, and other essays*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012, 114.

8. Camus, Albert. *The myth of Sisyphus, and other essays*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012, 64.