



WAKING UP TO ZOMBIES

AN INTERVIEW WITH FRANZ WEST

Tom Eccles
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TOM ECCLES: What was your experience growing up in Vienna?

FRANZ WEST: When I grew up in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, it could only be described as a time of darkness. Many of the houses and buildings were bombed out, and as children we played in ruins rather than on the grass. There was either dirt or ruins to play in. It was more than dirty—filthy. But I would describe it as a time of really essential living. It was real contrast to the sixties, when I was in my twenties, and probably more so to the seventies, with children watching television in their rooms, glued to the TV. We wondered how they would grow up, perhaps what kind of artists they might become: certainly cleaner than my generation.

TE: I'm also interested in your experience of being a child in a city and a culture that had embraced Nazism.

FW: There was always that shadow; a dark shadow that you could not completely identify. You didn't have words for it. Just about everyone had been a Nazi. Otherwise, why didn't they run away?

TE: Was it a period of denial?

FW: In the sixties, when Viennese Actionists created these performances with bloodied cadavers, everyone shouted "It's horrible, it's horrible!" Suddenly faced with what they had done in the war, they all became nice and proper. I grew up in a very conflicted time.

TE: You lived in a famous public housing project called Karl-Marx-Hof.

FW: Yes. It's ironic that this social housing project named after Karl Marx, with new bathrooms and light, was full of old Nazis. We had two



KARL-MARX-HOF. VIEW FROM AN ELEVATED POSITION TOWARD HEILIGENSTÄDTERSTRASSE

apartments adjacent to each other. My mother used one of the apartments for dentistry. There was always a lot of screaming and blood. Without anesthetics at that time, it was a pretty painful experience to go to the dentist! With very few doctors after the war, my mother worked until 10 o'clock at night. Every forty minutes a new patient was screaming. My mother used to come out in this bloodied apron. It would have fit right in with the Actionists.

TE: You went to art school quite late in life, at twenty-six. What happened before that?

FW: From seventeen to twenty-five, I had a pretty catastrophic life. A very strange life. It really goes back to my childhood, which wasn't particularly accommodating. I didn't fit here, and I didn't fit there. And so I went crazy. I also experienced the first waves of the Beat generation with Allen Ginsberg and others. As a teenager, I took drugs and traveled to places like Baghdad and Tehran. Things like that. There was, of course, the café scene with existentialists dressing in black, wearing long hair, and being pessimistic.

TE: What about your first experiences with art?

FW: I hated classical art. All I saw were churches with all these Catholic motifs. I hated it.

TE: Was it significant that your mother was Jewish?

FW: My father wasn't Jewish, so we weren't considered "clean" Jews. We weren't accepted either way.

TE: Did you grow up with any particular iconography in the home? Was there religion in your home?

FW: No, not at all. My parents were communists before the war, or at least on the left. In the immediate postwar period they were quite optimistic, but then came the news of Stalin's gulags and people lost most of their illusions. And here we were in this housing project with snickering old Nazi women. As with the Beat generation, I was not really left or right. You were something else.

TE: When was your first encounter with the Viennese avant-garde?

FW: I got my first invitation to an Actionist event when I was fourteen. It was called the *Feast of Psycho-Physical Naturalism*. Otto Mühl was there and he wanted to throw everything out of a fourth-floor kitchen onto the street. The kitchen had all the accessories for bourgeois living. The police intervened before he could begin, so the whole event moved down the basement, into the cellar. It was actually quite funny—more like Laurel and Hardy. He dropped a matchbook and on the way to pick it up, he broke a table and so on. It was amusing and a little obscene and sexual. Then Hermann Nitsch came along with a cadaver of a lamb and smashed it on the wall and the table. It was incredibly shocking and really depressing. In the end, the police came and took them away.

Besides the Actionists there was also the Vienna Group, focused more on literature and philosophy. The French writer Roland Barthes, I remember, was considered important at the time. I tried Kant, and people said you should read Hegel. And if you read Hegel, you should then read Heidegger. And then of course it came out that Heidegger was a Nazi. So I was somewhat philosophically conflicted! In this environment the Actionists were tolerated because they were very anti-...

TE: Bourgeois?

FW: Yes, bourgeois. It seemed healthy for Otto Mühl to go naked. Like some kind of therapy out of Wilhelm Reich. But it ended badly. Mühl and Nitsch became very Catholic.

TE: You made the first Adaptive in 1978. Is that correct?

FW: Maybe a little earlier.

TE: They have often been talked about in terms of prosthetics and Freud's idea that man is a "prosthetic god." In other words, man extends his reach into the world through tools.

FW: The idea was more to create an environment, and that the Adaptive could be handled and used rather than be looked at. For the romantics like Schlegel and the German philosophers, what makes art and painting special is that neither should be touched. With the Adaptives, the opposite is true. They were also a way to make a Happening. I was very aware of the artist Allan Kaprow, for example, at that time. It was not about seeing but about entering; art that you could really get in touch with. The first



GALERIE NÄCHST ST. STEPHAN OPENING, VIENNA, C. 1980. PHOTOGRAPH BY HEIDI HARSIEBER

time I showed them was in a small gallery no bigger than the room we are in. Maybe twenty people at most came.

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TE: Did you conceive of the Adaptives as foils for self-performances?

FW: No, not self-performances.

TE: But the visitor, in a sense, performs, or acts out with them.

FW: Sure. I liked the idea that in picking up one of the Adaptives there is a moment of not knowing what to do next, a moment of not knowing what to do with the audience. You make unplanned actions and gestures with the audience looking at you, and you wonder what you are doing with this. So the gestures become a little like art. Beuys during this period was making big pronouncements that “every man is an artist” or at least that, in its modified form, “every man has the potential to be an artist.” So unlike, say, a white sculpture by Hans Arp that you look at, with the Adaptives, you could pick it up and walk around the museum.

TE: The Adaptives are always white. Did you ever consider using colors?

FW: No. Colors would be irritating. White is clear. Painting would give them movement.

TE: Your early drawings of the Actionists already suggest the Adaptives in various forms.

FW: Yes. Particularly the Otto Mühl pictures. He was more interested in shit and piss than, say, Hermann Nitsch, who used blood. The Adaptives are more about shit and piss. It’s like paradise. Put this on and stand and piss. It’s certainly there in the drawings (p. 157).

TE: They are also quite sexual. Do you think about that?

FW: No, I didn’t think about that. There is the idea in modern design that it’s good if it functions perfectly. And from that it is beautiful. It’s also a Platonic idea that if it functions well it is good. I translated this idea to art more or less with the Adaptives. If the form is useful, then it’s beautiful. Adolf Loos once said that you should never paint an object with a color that it has naturally, like a wooden door should never be painted brown.

TE: I tend to think the opposite is true with the Adaptives. They are both attractive and repulsive but also playful. And the question becomes, why they are so engaging? Heidegger believed that our understanding of being in the world can be found when objects that we use every day fail to function. Something like a teapot that doesn’t work. At that moment we get a glimpse of our being. The Adaptives seem to me a little like the broken teapot. Rather than a functional object, they become playthings. You become aware of your body in the world. After all, people do act out with the Adaptives.

FW: I’m surprised they do. At the beginning, nobody did. It was the biggest disappointment. At my first exhibition, only children picked them up—and smashed them into the walls. In a way to get around this untouchability and awe, I began to make the tables and chairs.

TE: And did the tables and chairs allow you to create environments that provided a different platform for the Adaptives to function?

FW: No, they displaced the Adaptives. Instead of using the Adaptives, you

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THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN, 1983, CAT. 64

just sit around, talk, and think. Like putting a dream on Earth. The Adaptives would be the dream and the chairs and tables would be the Earth.

TE: Did you ever organize or consider organizing a public performance with the Adaptives?

FW: No. Who should do the performance? It is not for me to organize but rather it's a public act on the part of the participant. I remember Kasper König's exhibition *Westkunst* in Cologne in 1981. The Adaptives were put on these rather low pedestals and people lined up to use them. Each time they used them either like a housewife vacuum-cleaning or like a gymnast. It was all done very seriously. The problem was, and is, that after a while they become dirty and broken and then the museums put up a "Do not touch" sign. A couple of years ago, I had an exhibition in Vancouver where the mayor came to the opening. I put an Adaptive around his neck and he stood very happily for the official photographs with it on. It was a very good moment.

TE: Many of your collages suggest the Adaptives, only here people are handling sausages. You have used fairly consistent imagery throughout your career.

FW: The imagery for the collages comes from everyday advertising flyers I get in the mail. There is always this ideal in the advertisements that you will be happy if you have this kind of washing powder or whatever. There is also this ideal woman. Now for me the women look anything but sexy. So my joke is to suggest the erotic in these horrible-looking people. You can either be depressed or make a joke out of it. The second is the better way to go.

TE: Are they a critique of consumerism?

FW: No. It's not a critique of consumerism, but a critique of life.

TE: But you also tease out the latent sexuality in the image and the creation of desire. You have an acute sense of the sexuality of the image.

FW: But it is not really sexual. They don't make me feel sexy. I don't get horny if I see these things, but they should make you horny. It is really abusive. And it's just selling cheap crap.

TE: What about the constant imagery of meat? Is that an Austro-German obsession?

INSTALLATION VIEW OF FRANZ WEST, KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA, 1989, PHOTOGRAPH BY CANDIDA HOFER



FW: Well, it probably comes from my childhood where there was never any meat and you could only eat like that on a Sunday. And then later with the welfare state you ate a pork cutlet every day. And then of course meat was a favorite of the Actionists, with the blood of the lamb, etc.

TE: So to some degree you think that the use of meat in the collages comes out of the bloodier performances of the Actionists?

FW: It's not so different. The way the Actionists used cadavers, and now we eat them.

TE: Is it then back, once again, to a critique of bourgeois values?

FW: In some ways. I'm taking an image of a certain lifestyle. It's the image of how you are told you should live, made tasty, and I am making it disgusting.

TE: Do you think the furniture is another aspect of bringing art and life together?

FW: Yes, absolutely. The first divan I made was really comfortable but the first chairs were too high. When I was fifteen I went to Rome, and because I was alone there I went to the Spanish Steps, where you could meet people. It's the same in many Italian towns and cities with the fountain in the middle of a central square and people sitting around having conversations. From that experience came this ideal of sitting in the art, like a goal of sitting in the clouds: sitting in the art consuming life. It's perhaps a bit hippy-ish: not to participate in society but to have this art as life.



ETUDE DE COULEUR, 1991, AT THE OPENLUCHTMUSEUM
VOOR BEELDOKUNST, MIDDELHEIM, ANTWERP, 1997

TE: The first divans were shown at documenta IX (1992). They were quite different from subsequent versions. There you covered the divans in carpets.

FW: The carpets were symbolic. The used carpet was a symbol for not doing anything. Lounge around on a good sofa with an old carpet and you don't need a new carpet. The first chairs came out of a workshop for a sculpture class here in Vienna. I was asked to create seating for an auditorium at a local institute. We sat around on old chairs for musicians that were extremely comfortable, which provided the model. Now my assistants make the chairs.

TE: It also seems to me that you like the idea of making something cheap and utilitarian.

FW: They are not so cheap these days!

TE: Your first outdoor sculptures were the Lemure Heads. They are quite unlike any other of your works. How did the project come about?

FW: I was invited by the architect Hermann Czech to do a commission for a bridge in Vienna in 1987. In this period I was drinking a lot and would wake up with a hangover. In Viennese you say that when you wake up with a hangover you see *Lemuren* or "zombies." I liked the idea of them coming out of the river. Anyway the project was rejected and we showed the sculptures at Documenta at the same time as the divans.

TE: Did the Lemures allow you to start thinking about outdoor sculpture?

FW: No, they have nothing to do with it. Before I was making what I call Labstücke, or Refreshers. As I said, I was drinking a lot and didn't want to throw the bottles away, so I made sculptures with them.



FRANZ WEST, STUDY IN ACTIONIST STYLE, 1974-77

TE: What about the Legitimate Sculptures? What makes them legitimate?

FW: I think it is legitimate if you want to make it legitimate, and not because someone else says so.

TE: I must admit to finding them incredibly ugly. They are almost wantonly ugly.

FW: At first they were kind of an illusion, as though they were a joke on the collages. The collages are two-dimensional. They are out of life, in the dimension I inhabit, and I wanted objects in my life. My collages used color easily but my sculptures were white. Using color is like a musical composition, like songs, like a melody. I have been working in papier-mâché for many years. I came to this material because it's cheap and easy to use. You can make it at home without too many complications. It doesn't bleed. It doesn't stink. And you can live with it without being afraid.

TE: The Legitimate Sculptures also sit on pedestals. So you don't have a problem with pedestals any more?

FW: Not directly but practically. They take up so much space and are often bigger than the sculptures themselves.

TE: Were you surprised by the success of the aluminum sculptures? I saw them first at an exhibition in the Royal Botanical Gardens in Edinburgh in the summer of 2001.

FW: I made these fat, heavy forms that I thought would look ugly outside, particularly in nature. It turned out to be quite the opposite. It could have been a catastrophe, but they were incredibly harmonious in that environment. In nature you have such fine forms. So you would think that the intervention with a clumpy pink object would seem incongruous.

TE: Your outdoor sculptures have a very distinct palette. How did you choose?

FW: I use colors that attract me in a positive, as well as negative, way.

TE: Do you begin with models when thinking about large-scale sculptures?

FW: Yes. With plaster and sometimes with papier-mâché.

TE: Do you consider them autonomous? They don't seem burdened by site-specificity.

FW: They are absolutely autonomous.

TE: They are always a little awkward. They don't fit easily.

FW: It's the autonomy.

TE: When we worked together on the exhibition at Lincoln Center in 2004, you suggested lining the sculptures up together at the front of the plaza. It was quite a radical move.

FW: I thought of it like a stage, or like a Greek temple. In Greek temples you would see the gods lined up in a row at the entrance but here you would see the sculptures.

TE: Many of your outdoor works look like large turds or even phalluses. You also made a public urinal as a public sculpture, shown, for example, in the *Skulptur. Projekte in Münster 1997*. Are your outdoor works a commentary on public sculpture?

FW: A commentary? No. But then again, perhaps it's unconscious on my part. Everybody likes shit anyway. As a child, shit is the first gift that you give to your parents.

TE: Most recently you have undertaken a number of collaborations with a younger generation of artists, such as The Hamsterwheel exhibition in Venice in 2007, and your work has been included in exhibitions such as *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas* at the Hirshhorn in Washington, DC, alongside artists such as Rachel Harrison, Mark Handforth, and Andrea Cohen.

FW: When I was their age I had no visibility. I was rather isolated. If we had come from the same generation, I'm sure we would have been friends. We would have lived and worked together. I enjoy the fact that they react to my work.



FRANZ WEST AND HIS SON LAZARE, FEBRUARY 2008

INSTALLATION AT LINCOLN CENTER, NEW YORK, 2004, PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM POWELL

