

# HOW THE WEST WAS WON

From clochard to superstar: while preparing for a show drawn from his private collection, *Peter Pakesch* remembers the making of a legend—and a friend named Franz



FRANZ WEST, *Untitled*  
(former office desk of Galerie Peter Pakesch),  
1983, mixed media

At the beginning of my career, I started a gallery for one reason. There was simply no other way to work with the early-1980s artists in Austria. The existing institutions were so conservative, and there were really only two contemporary art museums: what is now the Mumok in Vienna, and one in Graz. Hermann Nitsch urgently needed a presence in the capital, so opening my gallery with his show in 1981 was a strategic choice—around 1,000 people attended. After that, I showed young Austrian artists like Herbert Brandl and Otto Zitko, caused a stir by exhibiting both Markus and Albert Oehlen, and then joined forces with Ariadne Gallery for *New Painting from Italy, the US, and West Germany*.

For that, Bruno Bischofberger lent me pictures by the likes of Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Susan Rothenberg. Perhaps naively, I wasn't necessarily interested in sales—I wanted to connect Vienna to the international scene.

At that time, Berlin was no longer very interesting, and artists such as Albert Oehlen and Martin Kippenberger felt that Vienna was the only relevant German-speaking metropolis. Harald Szeemann said the city was so unique because, though it still reflected so much of the 19th century, you could already see the 21st—Vienna felt like a new place.

Of course, Austria wanted to block out the recent past: its annihilation of a very important cultural class, the Jewish bourgeoisie. Franz West's Jewish mother had survived Nazi persecution

and opened up a dental practice in Vienna's iconic socialist housing project Karl-Marx-Hof. When I first met Franz West, he was still living with her, reading turn-of-the-century luminaries like Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Adolf Loos on his way into the city, where he would go table to table at pubs like an upscale tramp to sell his collages for a handful of coins.

Although artists like Kippenberger and Oehlen pretty quickly took an interest in him, the established art crowd didn't take him seriously. By the mid-80s, I could afford to offer him a contract with a regular salary. Franz then stopped selling his work piecemeal, and it became tradable for me.

In 1986, MoMA showed *Vienna 1900: Art, Architecture, and Design*,

and the Centre Pompidou also had an immense exhibition that posited the city as the birthplace of modernism, starring Klimt, Schiele, and Kokoschka. International interest was enormous. Franz was very well-versed in this era. In just a few years, he went from being a dandy-esque tramp to a major artist. It all started around that time at the Kunsthaus in Zurich and Vienna Secession, and in 1987 he showed his first large outdoor sculpture at Sculpture Projects Münster. For Franz, this success was also an opportunity to escape the confinement of Vienna.

His 1989 exhibition, *Possibilities*, at P.S.1 was huge. All the important New York artists were there, from Jeff Koons to Christopher Wool. But as the show had been partly funded by the city of Vienna, the condition was that Franz have an exhibition there too. The people at Wiener Festwochen, who were meant to find us a space, kept suggesting uninspiring locations, so, as a joke, I asked the director, "Why don't you try the Kunsthistorisches Museum?" And, not being from Vienna, he actually made the call. The museum's director, it turned out, was being criticized by the culture minister for not being forward-thinking enough, and he spontaneously agreed—the first time a contemporary artist would be shown at the venerable institution. When I called Franz with the news, there was a five-minute silence on the line. He was completely taken by surprise. Of course, he couldn't show the same pieces as in New York, so he populated the Kunsthistorisches Museum with metal furniture. And, because the museum wasn't used to festive openings, we picked a Thursday night when it was already going to be open late. This was just after the fall of the Iron Curtain, in December 1989, and the culture minister had just announced that guests from the former Soviet Bloc were to get free entry



When I called Franz to inform him that he would be the first living artist to be shown at the Kunsthistorisches Museum, there was a five-minute silence on the line

Herbert Brandl, Peter Pakesch, Heimo Zobernig,  
and Franz West at Galerie Peter Pakesch, 1987

to Austrian museums—and that was the first evening. All the Czechs, Slovaks, and Hungarians who didn't have enough Western money to go shopping went to the Kunsthistorisches. An impossible number of people attended, none of whom we knew.

With my gallery, I soon made the leap to California, showing John Baldessari, Mike Kelley, and Stephen Prina. I closed in 1993, going on to head Kunsthalle Basel and later Kunsthaus Graz. There, in 2010, two years before he died, I got to work with Franz one last time on a large sculpture retrospective. Now, I don't know whether a gallerist can truly be friends with their artists, and, truthfully, in the final phase of the gallery, it hadn't always been easy to work with Franz—while he enjoyed huge international success, I had to be strict to keep everything on track. Yet, in Graz, my technical team was astonished when Franz and I staged the whole retrospective in two hours. With any other artist it would've been a huge production. We must've been friends, since with Franz it was always so wonderfully fluid.

Franz West, curated by Peter Pakesch, will show at Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich from June 13 to July 18, 2025.