

DEVIN KENNY & FRANZ WEST

Shake-Up Environment

The exhibition *Shake-Up Environment* brings together works by Devin Kenny (*1987, born in Chicago) and Franz West (1947–2012, born in Vienna). It is the first of a three-part exhibition series in which curator Pia-Marie Remmers has invited artists to select a person from the programme of Galerie Thoman, founded in Innsbruck in 1977, for a joint exhibition.

DEVIN KENNY works with various media, including sculpture, painting, artificial intelligence and web, music, performance, video, text, and clothing, to further complicate the dynamics of contemporary culture. One focus is on linking subversive cultural practices such as graffiti, skateboarding, or digital forms of youth culture with the exploitative as well as dehumanizing workings of global financial capitalism.

FRANZ WEST's main concern was the contextualization of his works in interaction with works by other artists – starting with collages of partly his own, partly other artists' works, to group exhibitions with artist friends, assistants or students. In his sculptures, furniture, and collages, West combined the "high" with the supposedly lower arts to create situations that were intended to unsettle viewers. He described his famous "passport pieces" as "neuroses turned into sculpture," and he intentionally turned his seating furniture with its back to other works in the room. Yet the works hold out possibilities for communication, with oneself and with others.

Pia-Marie Remmers: Why did you want to work with artworks by Franz West?

Devin Kenny: I became familiar with Franz West's works, primarily the "Passstücke," during my undergraduate studies. They were presented as part of a sculptural practice that was meant to invite people to interact directly with art, although the concrete applicability was not intuitive. For me, this represented a stark contrast to everything I had learned about sculpture up to that point. Today, I see a kind of kinship with my own work, which is also often about subverting expectations.

PMR: One of West's works in the exhibition is a lamp dedicated to Elisabeth Thoman, the gallery owner. Your work KRAM is also a dedication, or rather a memorial.

DK: KRAM is the alias of a friend and graffiti writer from Chicago, Nick von Rudofsky. We met when he was about seven years old. Through him, I was introduced to the graffiti scene. KRAM (then called NUKE) was a member of Style Brigade, a very respected crew in Chicago from childhood. He had a big influence on me, even though we had very different personalities and approaches to life. Two years ago, I tried in vain to get back in touch with him. In the summer of 2022, I learned that he had tragically passed away. With the painting installation in the gallery, I try to give back some energy and respect to this person who took graffiti very seriously as a life-style and cultural form with its own history and etiquette – often maligned and exploited at the same time, for example, to make places seem hip and attractive. My homage brings techniques like "bombing" into an artistic context, with big and fast gestures, but there is also an aspect to the work that is very slow, quiet and ritualistic. Using mandala tools, I applied various layers of color pigments to the bottom of the back of the letters. Similar to an Easter egg in a computer program, or more generally in graffiti or street skateboarding, in the exhibition you are rewarded for looking at your surroundings closely, or with a specific gaze.

PMR: As an edition, we chose a series you did for the Whitney Museum's online program in New York. How did that come about?

DK: I had a project in mind for which I wanted to get access to the institution's archive of exhibition photographs. After they let me access several thousand photographs, a rather small sample, I ran them through GANS (Generative Adversarial Network System), a machine learning system for images. I thought the result would show something like the lowest common denominator and, above all, the architecture of the exhibition spaces. But the result was much more complex and interesting. The program created hundreds of thousands of images. In addition, I requested access to an archive of artists' correspondence from the 1940s to the 2000s. These were mainly scanned postcards and letters. It was relatively difficult to get them, because the Whitney was worried that I would create something that would make the museum look bad or misrepresent the artists. I got them in the end. From the AI-generated images and the correspondences, I made the collages. I used Photoshop tools that are similar to artificial intelligence image processing such as the healing brush, clone stamping, and other techniques to scramble and make something new from the source material.

PMR: So they are works created jointly by you and the AI?

DK: That was the idea! I wanted to collaborate, as much as possible, with the AI. This was before the hype and mass proliferation of AI image generators that we've seen this year. But I would not say it's collaboration in the sense of working as equals. I feed the AI certain materials, it's not free to choose, and it's not free to stop collaborating.

PMR: And because you alienate the correspondence between the artists and the institution, stories in the works are only hinted at in almost poetic word constellations. This connects them to Franz West's lamp, which, as is often the case in your works, is also hand-written and tells a story. To read it, the lamp has to be circled several times, but even then it remains incomplete.

DK: Yes, the stories are opaque. It was a privilege for me to have access to these personal letters and I wanted to protect the relationships that unfolded before me. By the way, this is a similar process to sampling in HipHop, where existing audio is used in a different way. That's how I worked with these letters. The result is these cryptic techno-poems made of fragments, some of which seem very soulful, but remain coded.

*PMR: I was just thinking that *Creativity: Furniture Reversal*, the second sculpture by Franz West that we're exhibiting, picks up on that very nicely because it functions as a kind of "conversation piece". Anyone* can sit on the chairs and talk. At first, though, I was interested in the work mainly because it's made of cheap materials. It comes as a box with instructions based on those for Ikea furniture sets, and people are encouraged to assemble the piece themselves, then tape it up to their liking. So it seems very accessible and lowbrow, which reminded me of your practice.*

DK: Yes, it immediately jumped out at me when I saw the list of works. What I find most exciting is how he makes a lot out of a little! I am engaged with repurposing in general. The table can be set up and taken down again and again, the tape removed and then rearranged. Transforming something with simple tools reminds me of going to the dollar store as a teenager and buying shoe polish, motor oil, rubbing alcohol, and paint to make materials for graffiti. So there's this attitude with West that you can make something with materials at hand that significantly changes things. I share that attitude.