

Dan Mitchell, Richard Sides
The Woods

July 18 – September 12, 2026

Opening reception: Saturday, July 18, 6-9pm

On June 7, 1968, in Hörsaal 1 of the Neues Institutsgebäude at the University of Vienna, an evening billed as *Kunst und Revolution* ran its course: first, Oswald Wiener, of the Wiener Gruppe, gave an apparently incomprehensible lecture on input-output theory, a cybernetic language of signs and systems that, in this setting, flew over everyone's heads. This was followed by further "theoretical explanations" by the Actionists, all of which were either barely audible or deliberately fragmented: Mühl insulting Robert Kennedy and his family; Weibel attacking the Austrian finance minister; Günter Brus undressing, cutting himself, urinating, drinking his urine, vomiting, defecating, and smearing himself with excrement while singing the Austrian national anthem and masturbating; and Mühl whipping Malte Olschewski, who was reading pornographic texts.¹

When the evening's organizers, after all of that, asked for questions from the audience, the story goes that, after a long silence, a twenty-one-year-old stood up, thanked the performers, said he had enjoyed it all enormously, and proposed a round of applause. The audience obliged. The man who broke the silence was Franz West, two years before he made any art.²

By now, this story belongs more to cultural myth than to history, and that is fine. What matters is not what was said or what happened exactly but that the frame of the event was loose enough that a remark from the audience could become a part of it—and that the eventual applause was directed at West as much as towards the people onstage, none of whom were entirely sure what had just happened, what they had just done, just as the audience were not quite sure what they had just seen.

I keep returning to this event because of the particular arrangement of that night: a series of radical speech acts performed inside an increasingly reactionary society, the analytic lecture versus the Actionists' "mess," mess as religion, mess as participation. The evening saw two quite different registers of language approaching each other without quite meeting. The anecdote is not a key but, in its perpetual retelling, a rehearsal of a problem of meaning. This is what *The Woods* inherits from the sixties, I believe. A situation in which language, action, interpretation, and publicness no longer quite know how and where to meet.

The idea of showing two language works in such proximity sounds almost self-defeating. Unless the point is how little separates them in tone. The pairing of Richard Sides' monochromatic language pieces and Dan Mitchell's signposts begins there, or near there.

Sides' enamel monochromes take the side of grammar, offering a sober visual field. Each painting carries one word in a different font: father, stepmother, brother, cousin. On the wall they sit together, one role next to another, each word naming an institution. A connection is implied by the sequence, though nothing in the painting or the hang reveals the connection's character. Every family is generic that way. Sometimes the word is painted almost tone on tone, the same colour as its ground, so that the name withdraws into it—there, but also not quite there.

Mitchell's signs and arrows start from another type of ordering. A sign can sometimes signify, direct, clarify. It can say where to go or where things can be found spatially or metaphorically. On the left, straight ahead, that way, over there. Here, directions are impure. They're comic, cosmic, obscene, historical, even desperate: Revenge, Boredom, Death, Nothing, Gulag, Nowhere, Everywhere. Arrows point, but they point inward—and too far in—

¹ For the historical account of *Kunst und Revolution*, also nicknamed the "Uni-scandal," see Caroline Lillian Schopp, "On Failing to Perform: *Kunst und Revolution*, Vienna 1968," *October* 170 (Fall 2019): 95–119. Schopp reconstructs the event from police reports, witness accounts, and press coverage and stresses the murkiness of all accounts.

² For the Franz West applause anecdote, see Peter Schjeldahl, "Postscript: Franz West," *The New Yorker*, July 27, 2012. Schjeldahl notes that the story is often told but may be apocryphal, since West himself no longer remembers it.

rather than out. The signs promise something more than a route, something closer to an ordeal, as if by going all the way through one might come out, somewhere, absolved.

So, already two righteousnesses and two kinds of poesis. There is guilt and shame in both, along with orgasm, anger, pop music, the bourgeoisie, the mother, the brother, the police state and so on: the "materials" that went into these works, made in the hope, however stupid or serious, that things might turn out otherwise. Guilt is about the deed, the law, the thing done and possibly expiated. Shame is about the gaze, exposure, and being caught wanting it, and its defence is withdrawal, removing oneself from the scene.³ Franz West said he could not bear to watch most people use his objects, that he felt embarrassed for them: shame is contagious that way.⁴ Mitchell's signs bear everything, will go on until the bitter (dead) end: what is left to say once Hitler has been mentioned? Sides' naming withdraws into introspection. Both works are dressed up as something like truth-telling, as if representing a shared wish to be free of all these systems, to escape via confession. Both also know that, ultimately, mapping does not get you out of anything, but they'll do it anyway.

That is what puts us back near '68. Almost everything has changed, and still a crisis of meaning has come round again. It's not the same crisis. Not the same public. Certainly, there's not the same belief in meaningful rupture, or what it might require. But there's a similar embarrassment around the frame itself: about what counts as an act, what counts as a response, what counts as freedom today.

Diedrich Diederichsen once described the shadow that seems to trail every radical movement: Goth after Punk, hippie esoterica after the New Left, dreamers after the enlightened. What matters in the pairing, he argued, is not only opposition, but the fantasy both sides share, what he calls the "specific sound of salvation": a sensual idea of what the good life would actually feel like.⁵ The political mind hides paradise behind concepts; the dreamer shows it too fast. Diederichsen wrote this in 2007, before our algorithmic forms of socialisation, and could not yet see how much the problem would mutate. It was not only that radical alternatives would be broken into marketable chunks: authenticity, flexibility, lifestyle, and so on. Something slightly blunter happened. Participation became the frame itself. To respond, to perform, and to be seen reacting is to be a part.

This matters more here, where paradise is not hidden behind concepts at all. It is the climate, the coast, the light through the branches, the promise that the woods outside the city *is* the good life, a place you can drive to. So, why don't you? This paradise is a local, regional product. But the outside is also real estate, hell. To show family words and road signs in this landscape is to work inside the broken dream that is kept buried, for reasons of self-preservation or self-flagellation, by the political mind.

This leaves us with a slight discomfort. Everything in the show is knowing or is about knowing. These are works about things we think we know too well. The wager is that this over-familiarity, pushed far enough (like words repeated in front of a mirror), will tip into something psychedelic: surely this will trigger something, at some point, right? And if it doesn't, what is left is apathy. The works keep pressing and pushing anyway. The pushing is the whole point.

—Gianmaria Andreetta

³ See André Green, "Le narcissisme moral," *Revue française de psychanalyse* 33 (1969), later collected in *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1983), translated by Andrew Weller as *Life Narcissism, Death Narcissism* (London: Free Association Books, 2001). Green's key schema turns around two tragic figures: Oedipus/guilt and Ajax/shame. Oedipus invests in the object, producing guilt through transgression; Ajax marks narcissistic disappointment, "I'm above this," producing shame and withdrawal. I am using this formally, not clinically, as a way to distinguish two registers or modes of expression.

⁴ Christine Mehring, "Tools of Engagement: The Art of Franz West," *Artforum*, September 2008. Mehring writes that West "cannot bear to watch most people use the Passstücke, because he 'feels embarrassed for them,'" citing an interview with the artist. These works, often translated as "fitting pieces," were usually white plaster and papier-mâché forms with holes, handles, straps, made to be lifted and worn or otherwise awkwardly used.

⁵ Diedrich Diederichsen, "American Surrealism as Asylum: Critique and Glorification in Goth and Other Shadowy Movements," *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 65, "Romantik," March 2007. Diederichsen discusses the shared utopian imagery of countercultures, distinguishing between *Erfahrung*, a sensual-political experience, and *Erlebnis*, the thrill of inward experience.