

# James Franco's Erased Oscar Hosting Gig

by Ben Davis

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Before I begin, let me just say, dear reader, that yes, I know... I can't believe that I'm writing about James Franco either. Of all humans currently living on planet Earth, he is probably the one who least needs another article written about him.

Second of all, I am also aware that the subject of this article — James Franco at the Oscars — comes to you late. A week-and-a-half is several generations in Twitter time. What else can be said at this point? How about this: Contemporary art ruined the 83rd Academy Awards.

Of course, the Oscars don't really need any real help in falling flat. They are congenitally interminable. Still, the producers had recruited Franco and co-host Anne Hathaway to bring a little youth appeal to this annual exercise in Hollywood self-congratulation — a gambit that definitely did not pay off, with ratings falling.

For my own part, I had been looking forward to whatever wacky conceit Franco had in store. Given his famous multitasking, I expected many costume changes, more than the one fleeting gag that had him tumble onstage dressed as Marilyn Monroe.

As for the rest of the show, he barely seemed to move. Hathaway — who is customarily content to be seen simply as an actress, and not some latter-day Renaissance hero — at least made an effort with a (rather lame) musical number.

What was striking, however, was that the dearth of energy Franco displayed in front of the camera contrasted sharply with what was going on behind the scenes. Franco unleashed [a torrent of Twitter and online video](#) to accompany his performance, a sort of running commentary on the proceedings. This all-day routine began with Franco posting [a clip of himself waking up on the day of the awards show](#), included some "last words for his fans" as he prepared to go on stage (the prophetic "this could be bad"), and even [a clip of him getting a hand massage from Hathaway](#) late in the show. Concretizing the metaphor of "phoning it in," Franco actually walked onstage for the opening-show monologue with his cell phone held in front of him, filming the crowd for [posting on the Internet](#).

Perhaps Franco's Academy Awards flub can be chocked up to him being out of his element, or overstretched. Post-show, he [told the New York Times that he hadn't really had time to rehearse](#) because of all the classes he is attending on weekdays. This we know is at least a half-truth, since he's had time for plenty of other extracurricular stuff: He was on hand, for instance, [to open his show with Gus Van Sant at Gagosian's Beverly Hills gallery](#) just the previous Thursday. So my feeling is that the actor-turned-grad-student-turned-filmmaker-turned-artist didn't bomb on Oscar night because a lack of forethought. There's a method to his madness, or lack thereof.

In just a few years, Franco has gone from thoroughly appealing heartthrob to pop-culture sensation about whom people write [embarrassingly long New York magazine articles](#). A lot of this cresting cred has had to do with his flirtation with the art world. And what is the feedback he has gotten based on his adventure into contemporary art? His first big project was with the artist Carter, with whom he realized "Erased James Franco," which had the actor recite lines from his movie roles out of context, turning them into a kind of spare, Beckettian text. As the title indicates, "Erased James Franco" is a half-serious, half-joking exercise, meant to deflate celebrity in the same way that [Robert Rauschenberg](#) poked fun at modernist self-seriousness with his "Erased De Kooning Drawing."

Next up was Franco's turn on "General Hospital" playing the murderous performance artist "Franco" (a stunt that has contributed to his mythos enough to be good for not one but two jokes during the Oscar-cast). Apparently egged on by Jeffrey Deitch, and originally planned as a show at Deitch Projects, the strange art-turned-soap-turned-art-again stunt climaxed with a performance staged at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art. Franco [took to the pages of the Wall Street Journal](#) to explain the whole thing as one genre-defying act of performance art. To illustrate how seriously he had come to view his acting work as part of the expanded field of performance, he accompanied that particular article with a video interview he did with performance-art queen bee Marina Abramovic. This high-profile fervor led to shows like the Gagosian L.A. outing, and his recent debut at Peres Projects in Berlin.

The point is, it's possible that James Franco has gotten so much good feedback for all his self-referential art about being a celebrity that, when it came to helming this most mainstream of spectacles, the pretension that his Oscar stint was actually some kind of performance *about* hosting the Oscars got in the way of the actual duties. In fact, all the behind-the-scenes stuff he spent his time posting — like a [clip](#) of him and Hathaway bantering with the audience during a commercial break — is very much in the spirit of his Gagosian gallery show, which features "Endless Idaho," an extended twelve-hour cut of Van Sant's "My Own Private Idaho" incorporating "outtakes, deleted scenes, alternate takes, and behind-the-scenes footage." In the audience at the Kodak Theater, Marina Abramovic was on hand to applaud, at the host's personal invitation. ([She wore Ricardo Tischi.](#)) All in all, it was like Franco was trying to be cooler than the actual show he was hosting, playing to his art friends. Arch meta-awards-show-hosting doesn't make for good TV.

It seems to me that Franco's tryst with art, at least as evidenced at the Oscars, is a good example of getting things exactly wrong. When Alanna Heiss tried to justify her Clocktower Gallery show of art by Franco last year, she told New York magazine that he was a figure who would influence future generations because he represented the fluid inter-connectivity of media — and there's probably something to that. James Franco has the charisma and intelligence to be a great ambassador for challenging art. But what Franco himself seems to have absorbed from art is just the opposite of a popularizing approach: a commitment to art-about-art, and commentary-on-

commentary — the art world at its most solipsistic. And that is something that probably should be erased.

*Interventions* is a weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor [Ben Davis](#). He can be reached at [bdavis@artinfo.com](mailto:bdavis@artinfo.com).