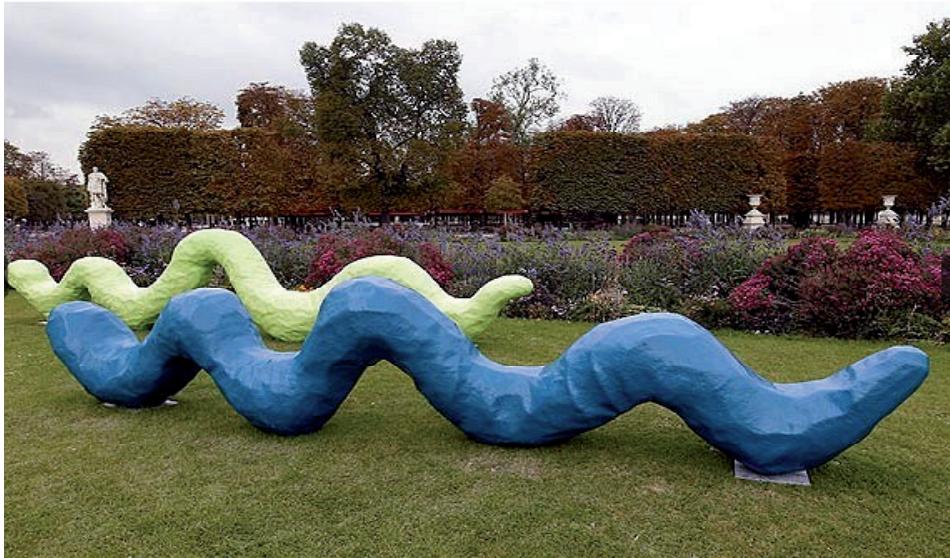


# Franz West

Franz West, who has died aged 65, was an Austrian artist whose playful sculptures were designed to be picked up, worn, sat on, climbed on or carried around.



West, who ranged from collages and “bricolage” to quirky pieces of furniture and colourful, bulbous public sculptures, was widely seen as a kind of antidote to the Viennese Actionists of the 1960s. Instead of trying to shock the Austrians out of their conservatism with outrageous public acts of sado-masochism, nudity and violence, he preferred humour and slapstick.

His hot-pink phallic sculptures (sometimes said to be satirical critiques of the soft porn industry), strange looking trusses and papier mâché hats, or human-size, vaguely fetishistic forms, were designed to persuade art lovers to forget their usual viewing habits and indulge in a bit of innocent fun. “It doesn’t matter what the art looks like,” West maintained, “but how it is used.”

West often incorporated jokey references to other artists in his work – the elongated figures of Giacometti, the plaster-coated paintings of Jean Fautrier, Dieter Roth’s chocolate sculptures, and so on. Yet a West exhibition resembled nothing so much as a set from Monty Python. Those who did not mind manhandling or climbing aboard some suggestively ambiguous-looking piece of sculpture could become part of West’s DIY theatre; those whose strong point was not audience participation were often left squirming for the exit.

West was probably best known for his Passstücke (“Adaptives”), a series of amorphous, rough plaster sculptures, often incorporating chair legs and other objets trouvés, that he claimed were only complete as artworks when the viewer experienced their “ergonomic” nature by picking them up, carrying them, or doing silly things with them.

The Gagosian gallery in New York described these artefacts (which West began making from the mid-1970s and which became somewhat grubby over the years), as “prosthetics for an intimate version of the extreme Actionist spectacles of the mid-Seventies”. At exhibitions, mirrors and video cameras threw participants’ own images back at them as they responded to West’s invitation to join the show – a heaven for narcissists.

The Adaptives were hugely influential in encouraging contemporary artists to explore the potential of interaction between object and viewer, and in the development of the postmodern craze for “bricolage” – the technique where works are constructed from any old bits of junk available to hand.

Franz West was born in Vienna on February 16 1947. His father was a coal dealer, his mother a dentist. Franz recalled that he became an artist “mostly to calm my mother, who was fed up that I did nothing”.

From early drawings, he moved on to (somewhat derivative) painted collages incorporating images from magazines and newspapers. He only really hit his stride in the 1970s after deciding that the provocative performances of the Actionists merited a satirical response. He once joked that he had his first experience of the movement listening to the screams of his mother's dental patients from her surgery next door to the family flat.

After the success of *Adaptives*, West studied for three years at the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts, where he executed a series of "wall arrangements" – installations in which he combined his work with that of his fellow students, and which he invited the viewer to carry, play with or wear.

In the early-1980s he started expanding on the possibilities of the furniture fragments incorporated into some of his earlier pieces, making spindly parodies of elegant antique chairs, benches and other items. In Vienna, to the bemusement of museum crowds, West would sometimes sprawl on one of his pieces – a graceful tapestry-covered bench – dressed like Beckett's *Estragon*.

He also made "environments" of furniture, sculpture and art which blurred the lines between the fine and applied arts. These became places for the viewer to sit or lie down in, so becoming part of the performance. At last year's Venice Biennale, he was one of four artists invited to create "para-pavilions" – structured spaces designed to host works by other artists. During the same Biennale, he was awarded a Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement.

Late in his career, West moved on to larger-scale works, mostly in lacquered aluminium, whose variously playful, scatological, bulging shapes (inspired, he claimed, by Viennese sausages) and Day-Glo colours seemed designed to cock a snook at the deadly seriousness of much abstract public art.

West exhibited around the world for more than 30 years, and had a show in London at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2003. In June this year his *Gekröse* ("Chitterlings"), a giant sculpture of pink intertwined aluminium tubes resembling part of the digestive system, was one of the largest and most peculiar pieces at Art Basel.

West's first marriage was dissolved. He is survived by his second wife, the Georgian artist Tamuna Sirbiladze, with whom he collaborated on a number of projects, and by their son and daughter.

Franz West, born February 16 1947, died July 26 2012

