

# Franz West Is Dead at 65; Creator of an Art Universe

By ROBERTA SMITH

Franz West, an influential Austrian sculptor with a penchant for art objects that were willfully un-serious, nonideological and accessible and were displayed in Central Park and on the plaza at Lincoln Center, as well as in international exhibitions and blue-chip galleries around the world, died on Wednesday in Vienna. He was 65.

His death was announced by the Franz West Foundation. He had been ill for some time.

Mr. West's work ranged from collages to furniture to large, colorful public sculptures. It consistently embodied a kind of friendly iconoclasm in which form and function were pitted against each other, and the notion of artwork as an autonomous object was frequently undermined. His homely, rough-surfaced materials, like plaster or papier-mâché, sometimes doused with color, challenged accepted taste.

His efforts contributed equally to two of contemporary art's most persistent trends: the interactive, collaboration-prone art of relational aesthetics and the cobbled-together assemblage-like objects called bricolage. He was also known for large, irreverent sculptures, like those shown in Manhattan in 2004 whose cartoonish, sausagelike shapes and patchwork surfaces, made of lacquered aluminum, parodied the usual decorum of abstract public art.

Mr. West, who represented Austria at the 1990 Venice Biennale, was less a strikingly origi-

nal artist who changed the course of art than an astute synthesizer and incisive adjuster. He operated on a parallel course to contemporary art, commenting and satirizing, creating a vast multimedia universe that fomented an active mingling of painting, sculpture, collage, furniture and even works (most of which he owned) by the artists he admired.

But his work was also steeped in various figurative and avant-garde traditions of postwar European art. Its DNA included the elongated, encrusted figures of Giacometti, the plaster-coated paintings of Jean Fautrier, the reliclike sculptures of Joseph Beuys, Dieter Roth's objects made of chocolate and other decaying foodstuffs, and the polymorphous formal wit of the painter Sigmar Polke.

Mr. West was born on Feb. 16, 1947, in Vienna. His father was a coal dealer, his mother a dentist who took her son with her on art-viewing trips to Italy. Mr. West was unclear about his aims in life and sometimes said he started making art "mostly to calm my mother, who was fed up that I did nothing."

He started making crude drawings around 1970 before moving on to painted collages incorporating magazine images that showed the influence of Pop Art. He was also attracted to newspaper as a material both to paint on and to moisten and form into tentative objects.

By then he was familiar with the work of the Vienna Actionists, whose provocative performances involving masturbation, self-mutilation and dead animals dominated the Viennese art scene of the 1960s. He once said that he had his first taste of the movement when he heard the screams of his mother's dental patients from her office next door to the family's apartment.

He deliberately sidestepped Actionism's physical ordeals and existential intensity. Instead he emphasized a benign, relaxed lightness.

Among his first known efforts were pieces that he called *Pastücke*, or *Adaptives*: eccentric white objects formed of plaster or papier-mâché and sometimes rebar that he began making in 1974, three years before he enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, where he studied until 1982. There he executed the first of his "wall arrangements," installations in which he combined his work with that of his fellow students.

The *Adaptives*, Mr. West's primary work into the early 1980s, executed a neat, low-key truce between performance and art object. Sometimes incorporating parts of chairs and other found objects, they reflected his early admiration for the all-white paintings and reliefs of Robert Ryman and Piero Manzoni. The difference was that Mr. West's works were intended to be held, carried or worn by the viewer, and they were often part of larger events.

Writing about the *Adaptives* in 1989 in *The New York Times* on the occasion of Mr. West's first exhibition in the United States, at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center in Long Island City, Michael Brenson noted that they were "meant to be placed over the face, worn around the waist or held in the crook of the neck," adding that "they leave the wearer looking both protected and trapped."

Much of Mr. West's later work developed from ideas implicit in the *Adaptives*. He sometimes invited other artists to apply paint

*A sculptor who worked on a parallel course to his contemporaries.*

---

or collage to their white surfaces. Soon he was adding color himself to pieces that were too large to handle, and which he therefore called "legitimate sculptures."

These evolved into considerably larger painted papier-mâché and cardboard works whose fragmentary shapes and distressed surfaces had an ancient mien, as if they had survived the vicissitudes of time. They were succeeded by larger, hilariously bulbous, vibrantly colored papier-mâché pieces.

In the early 1980s he started expanding on the possibilities of the found furniture incorporated into some of the Adaptives, making spindly chairs and divans out of rebar that parodied elegant furniture while being quite elegant and surprisingly comfortable themselves. This development led in turn to increasingly ambitious installations that combined furniture, sculpture, paintings and, frequently, works by other artists.

A large presentation consisting of row upon row of divans, covered with Oriental rugs, suggestive of a theater without a stage and titled "Auditorium," was one of the biggest hits of the 1992 Documenta in Kassel, Germany. A variation called "Test and Rest" was later installed on the roof of the Dia Art Foundation in Chelsea.

In the late 1990s, Mr. West turned to the immense lacquered aluminum pieces, the first (and several after) inspired by the forms of Viennese sausages, as well as the shapes of the Adaptives. With their hot monochrome colors and irregular patchwork surfaces, these works were immensely appealing and also meant for sitting and lying. They both confirmed and belied Mr. West's contention that "it doesn't matter what the art looks like but how it's used."

Mr. West's first marriage ended in divorce. He is survived by his wife, Tamuna Sirbiladze, a painter; their children, Emily Anouk West and Lazaré Otto West; and his sister, Anne Gutjahr.

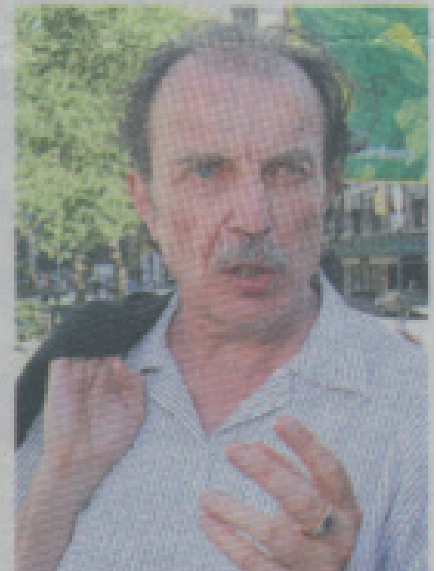


MARILYN K. YEE/THE NEW YORK TIMES

"The Ego and the Id," installed at the Doris C. Freedman Plaza in Central Park in 2004.



OLIVER HARTUNG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



CHESTER HIGGINS JR./THE NEW YORK TIMES

An installation at the Museum Brandhorst in Munich, and the artist, Franz West.