

INSIDE OUTSIDER

With his insouciance and his voracious appetite for funky forms, colors, and materials, the late Franz West was a precursor of today's anti-monumental artists.

by **Richard Kalina**

A FORTY-YEAR, roughly two-hundred-piece Franz West survey, launched last fall at the Centre Pompidou in Paris and now at Tate Modern in London, brings home to viewers the extraordinary formal range of this quirky, provocative, and influential Austrian artist. Bound by no one medium, he was equally at home (or, more likely, ill at ease) with sculpture, painting, drawing, graphic work, installation, furniture design, video, and performance—or any combination thereof. West, who died in 2012 at the age of sixty-five (after many years of hard living), dropped out of school at sixteen and almost immediately entered Vienna's growing avant-garde world. Ambition, coupled with an impulsive, anarchic streak and a don't-give-a-damn attitude characterized his art from the beginning.

West was born in Vienna in 1947, the son of a Communist coal merchant of Serbian origin, Ferdinand Zokan, with whom he did not get along at all, and Emilie West, a cultivated, warm, artistic Jewish dentist, whom he greatly loved (and whose name he took). Those postwar years in Austria were grim, but the general air of disorder and breakdown had positive aspects. It ultimately opened things up and provided space for a radical, anti-establishment art in a city that was set in its artistic ways. West, largely self-taught, was strongly attracted to the new art scene, but in his early days he was clearly a peripheral character.¹ An odd duck who at first sold his work in the street, he took drugs and drank heavily, got beaten up and thrown out of bars, and seemed to many just a satellite of his flamboyant older half-brother, performance artist Otto Kobalek. West, however,

was charming, inspired, and possessed of a real—if unorthodox and complicated—talent for friendship (attested to in the catalogue by the recollections of numerous friends and collaborators). He hung in there, and by the 1980s found his work increasingly exhibited, both in Austria and abroad.

Key to West's development was his reaction to Vienna's best-known avant-garde group, the Actionists—Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and others. There is nothing to catch people's eye like pissing in public and drinking your urine, shitting while singing the national anthem (again publicly), and covering your body with shit while masturbating—all of which Günter Brus did. Unsurprisingly, such artists received a great deal of attention, something that West very much wanted for himself. They, however, were not terribly interested in him, perhaps because they sensed his lack of adulation. While West liked the aggressive, performative aspect of the Actionists, their emphasis on the body, and their desire to offend the bourgeoisie, he rejected what was, to his way of thinking, their self-indulgent seriousness, their Christ-like posturing, and their obsession with blood, pain, mutilation, and suffering. He wanted something equally powerful but lighter and considerably more casual. The Pompidou's Christine Macel, co-curator of the exhibition, refers to West's desire to become "a dandy with an elegant and rebellious body of work and an unpredictable intelligence, at once frivolous and intellectual."² A certain studied idleness, in the mode of Duchamp, was part of his

View of Franz West's installation *Epiphanie an Stühlen*, 2011, steel, extruded polystyrene, gauze, paint, and wood, at Tate Modern, London. Photo Luke Walker.

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CURRENTLY ON VIEW
"Franz West," at Tate Modern, London, through June 2.

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Psyche, 1987, iron, steel, wood, mirror, acrylic, and carpet, chairs (made with Mathis Esterhazy): 33 by 17¼ by 17 inches each, table: 54¾ by 86¾ by 27½ inches. Grässlin Collection, St. Georgen, Germany.



artistic affect. Macel remarks, “Sitting down and lying down were also West’s greatest sources of inspiration. This was a matter of necessity as much as of inclination, for his health sometimes forced him to adopt such states of *otium*.”³ For all of that, West was remarkably productive.

But his art, even the large-scale welded aluminum or epoxy resin sculptures, eschewed the look of the planned, well-made object. He was drawn to whatever was at hand—crummy, disintegrating foam rubber and nonchalantly painted papier-mâché; lumpy, awkward aggregations of plaster; seemingly tossed-off, often vaguely pornographic exhibition posters; singularly uncomfortable pieces of “furniture”; and formally disjunctive collaborative efforts with other artists.

Bad color was West’s calling card: nasty bubble-gum and intestinal pinks, shrill chartreuse and depressing institutional greens, lavenders to set your teeth on edge, sullied sky blues and a whole range of aggressively insipid pastel tones. Like the Actionists, he was committed to merging art and life, and to directly involving spectators. That interaction—with viewers encouraged to perch or slump on the furniture, or to hold the white, weirdly balanced, portable *Passtücke* (Adaptive) pieces—was often physically awkward, but also visceral and rewarding.

To make something visually engaging yet awkward and dopey-looking is harder than one might think. It often comes down to an innate grasp of scale—not just scale in terms of overall size, but scale as the measure of the relation of part

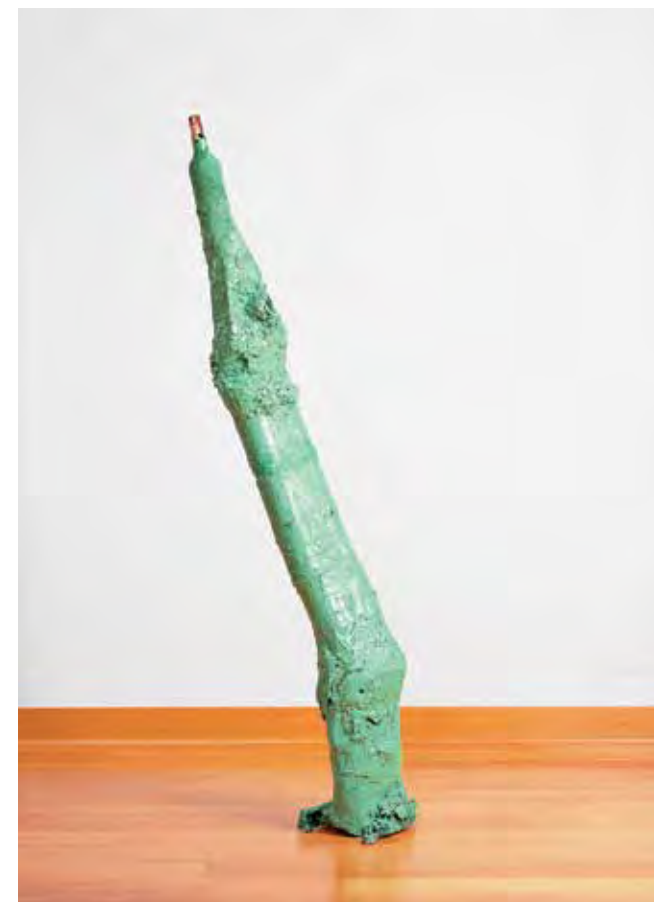
to part, color to color, surface to surface, action to action. The *Labstücke* (Refresher) sculptures of the 1980s, for example, *Trunkenes Gebot* (1988) or *Labstücke* (1986), are “drinking sculptures,” in which an empty alcohol bottle, its contents consumed during the making of the work, is embedded in the sculpture itself. In *Trunkenes Gebot*, a bottle of J&B scotch pokes out of the top of a tall canted and articulated column made of steel, wood, and polyester, slathered with sea-foam green acrylic paint. *Labstücke* gives us a green bottle of Metaxa, precisely centered, but buried up to its neck in a lumpy sleeve of harsh yellow papier-mâché, which in turn sticks up from a very wonky yellow plank-like form, also in papier-mâché. The placement of the bottles in both pieces is so obvious, their relatively small size so out of proportion to the rest of the sculpture, the semiotic heft of the implied drunkenness so insistent, and the overall gawkiness so blatant, that despite everything it *just works*.

It is instructive to compare pieces like these to Robert Rauschenberg’s combine sculptures, for example, *Monogram* (1955–59), with its taxidermied angora goat cinched at its belly by a tire. The Rauschenberg, although joining seemingly incompatible objects, is in fact perfectly and elegantly balanced, both formally and sensually. The goat and the tire, although we hadn’t previously considered it, are made for each other—and the resulting image is right and unforgettable. The West, on the other hand, never sits comfortably. Its

awkwardness virtually hums: it is the sculptural equivalent of a three-day hangover.

Incongruous conjunction runs through West’s work, although not in the typical Surrealist mode—think of Magritte’s gigantic apple squeezing out the space of an otherwise empty bourgeois sitting room or his cheery daytime sky seamlessly blending into a lonely small-town night—but rather in the way that expected formal relations may be skewed to unsettle the viewer. We can understand jarring colors, paint haphazardly applied to a crumbling surface, odd placements like the pair of red shower sandals stuck on an untitled 1974 painting, waiting to be stepped into: these are all in the expected zone of casual art-making and the Duchampian readymade.

Yet certain things are more subtly disturbing. We normally establish, for example, a comfortable physical distance between ourselves and others, especially when conversing. This distance can vary from culture to culture, but the rightness (or wrongness) of it is something that we intuitively feel. It gets expressed in many different formal ways, notably in furniture design and placement. West consciously subverts this. With *Eo Ipso* (1987), his first outdoor sculpture, the artist disassembled his mother’s old washing machine, patched it up with metal sheets, painted it a queasy light hospital green, and stretched the whole thing out so that it became two seats placed very far apart from each other yet still attached, with another green metal pedestal “chair” placed separately



off to the side. The work seems to be a setup for some kind of social interaction, but everything is too far apart and too oddly turned for easy face-to-face conversation, and the seats themselves are anything but comfortable. A similar unease is to be found in *Psyche* (1987), where two chairs are positioned at angles, facing three obliquely placed mirrors.⁴ Tate Modern’s Mark Godfrey, the show’s other co-curator, put it this way: “Think about sitting down on the chairs of *Psyche* with a partner and looking at your three reflections in its mirrors while being aware of him or her looking at you at the same time. Here, narcissism meets paranoia.”⁵

THE SCULPTURAL BASE is another site that West exploited to evoke dislocation. To our modern eyes the classic pedestal is neutral—a boxlike or cylindrical form intended either to raise the sculpture to viewing level or to elevate it above the plane of ordinary life, physically protecting the work while underscoring its special qualities. Challenging the role of the base has long been a part of the modern approach to sculpture. It came under assault from Rodin in *The Burghers of Calais* (1884–95), a figure group commemorating the humility, fellow feeling, and sacrifice of six of Calais’s leading citizens during the siege of the city during the Hundred Years’ War. To underscore this, Rodin intended to place the work on the ground among passersby, *not* to separate it from its viewers. Later, Brancusi made his

West’s Vienna studio, 1992, showing four *Lemur Heads*, plaster, gauze, cardboard, iron, acrylic, foam, and rubber. Pinault Collection. Photo Harald Schönfellinger.

Trunkenes Gebot, 1988, steel, wood, polyester, glass bottle, and acrylic, 72 by 25½ by 15¼ inches. Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin. Photo MOV Ministry of Vision.

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View of West's exhibition at Tate Modern, 2019, showing *Eo Ipsa*, 1987, iron and paint. Photo Luke Walker.

complex sculptural bases part of the work itself; and in the postwar years, the base virtually disappeared from abstract sculpture.

West, on the other hand, saw the base as a rich source of semi-otic dissonance. He could, for example, perch painted papier-mâché sculptures on top of a set of four partially filled bookshelves as in *2 to 2 (do too 2 [too do 2 {to do two}])*, 1994, or cover a white plinth with poetically explanatory text as he did in *Kollega* (1988), or simply use whatever was around: television sets, cabinets, a refrigerator, old suitcases, cans, junky or elegant tables, a bed, straightened metal clothes hangers, or even another artist's work. These bases were integral to the overall sculpture, as were Brancusi's, but unlike his they very clearly did not speak the same language as the sculpture itself. They felt detachable but vital—a kind of homemade prosthesis.

Using a fellow artist's work as a base or, conversely, placing other artists' sculptures on his own (as he did with pieces by Herbert Brandl, Otto Zitko, and Heimo Zobernig in an untitled 1988 work) speaks to one of West's principal concerns—collaboration. His shared artistic efforts were fruitful but often fraught. He continually sought others out for company, inspiration, intellectual justification, and help, but he was uneasy with commitment. Sometimes the artistic partnerships ended abruptly and seemingly inexplicably, with all the expected hurt feelings; but more often than not, fellow artists were loose about it—Franz was just being Franz. As sculptor Rudolf Polanszky commented, "One thing I'd say is this: we were both successful, but in different ways. He wanted to be famous and he got famous. I didn't want to be famous, and I didn't get famous. So we both achieved what we wanted!"⁶

Earlier on in his career, West was uncertain about his painting skills, and he would frequently ask other artists to paint his sculptures. That practice, which continued after West became more confident, produced some very fine pieces, especially the papier-mâché and bent-wire works, such as *Die Ernte des Tantalos* (1988), a piece he made with Brandl. Occasionally (and not always with his collaborators' knowledge), West would use works that he had acquired from other artists. The four-person Viennese artist collective gelitin said, "When Franz saw a new word, an aesthetic, a move in your work that he was interested in, he incorporated it into his own art. He was very generous. One takes and one gives, as with any respectful exchange—just sometimes without asking!"⁷

At other times, West would populate installations with his friends' art. *Viennoiserie* (1998), for example, is a domestic-looking grouping of some of his furniture pieces and sculptures placed in front of a wall hung with framed drawings by Seamus Farrell, Richard Jackson, Roland Kollnitz, Joseph Kosuth, Paul McCarthy, Muehl, and Raymond Pettibon.⁸ An especially compelling work of this sort is *Extroversion*, made for the 2011 Venice Biennale. The installation replicated the kitchen in his Vienna home, but turned it inside out and decked the walls, cabinets, and shelves with forty-three works by West, his assistants, and various friends. West won the Golden Lion award for lifetime achievement that year.

As the artist became more successful and his international reach expanded, his natural tendency toward indolence was tested. Being on the museum, biennale, and ultra blue-chip gallery circuit required an uptick in production. New studios were acquired, more assistants hired, and various ongoing projects—the papier-mâché Legitimate Sculptures (as he called them), the furniture, the

Franz West, Heimo Zobernig, Herbert Brandl, and Otto Zitko: Untitled, 1988, wood, papier-mâché, and paint, dimensions variable. Hauser & Wirth Collection, Switzerland. Photo Stefan Altenburger.



Outdoor Sculptures—had to be regularly produced in order to keep the whole enterprise afloat. West’s loose, improvisational, catch-as-catch-can, “anybody here have any ideas?” approach had its limits.

WEST’S LATER PRODUCTION was anchored by the large-scale Outdoor Sculptures. Made of lacquered, casually patched-together aluminum or epoxy resin, they are lumpy-looking twisted linear forms (in general structure not unlike bent paper clips); giant wonky balls; oversize, vaguely donut-shaped hassocks or footstools meant for sitting. Also designed for sitting or leaning against are somewhat rectangular or potato-shaped boulder forms. Throw in sculptures that look like vertical cigars, abstracted Venus of Willendorf figures, or (not to put too fine a point on it) large, brightly colored turds, and you have a body of work eminently suitable for long-term public display. The sculptures are permanent, goofily attractive, and immediately recognizable as West’s. Looking at, say, *Rose/Drama* (2001) (its title surely alluding to Duchamp’s female alter ego, Rose Sélavy), with its complex, intestinal, horizontal, hard-to-grasp Möbius-like form, its overly sweet pink color, and its patched-up, do-it-yourself surface, one can scarcely deny either its originality or its homey familiarity.

West was not a stickler for site specificity. The dealer David Zwirner once asked the artist why he had placed

his large boulder-like sculpture *Warum ist etwas und nicht nichts?* (Why Is There Something and Not Nothing?), 1997, “literally in the middle of nowhere.” (The work sits at rural crossroads near Stronsdorf, a town of about 1,700 people in far northeast Austria.) “Franz, with all due respect,” Zwirner added, “since when are you interested in the great outdoors?” West rolled his eyes, picked his nose, and flicked snot on the floor—a gesture that Zwirner took as the artist’s way of clarifying his creative process.⁹ This casual attitude might be refreshing and unpretentious, but people who buy or commission works tend to take a keen interest in their placement. West, concerned as he was about his reputation and fame, could scarcely repudiate his public and private patrons’ well-meaning interest.

A particularly enjoyable aspect of the show’s installation in Paris was the siting of seven sculptures in the adjoining Marais district (plus one in the museum lobby itself). They were placed in parks, gardens, and courtyards—all quite elegant and typically Parisian—where they looked colorful, lively, and funny: incongruent but appropriate. The Outdoor Sculptures are often tempered, even domesticated, by their surroundings. Any neutral white-cube exhibition space brings out the inherent unease in a wide range of West’s work, but place one of his big sculptures out in the world and it accommodates itself rather nicely. Possibly this is a subtle form of collaboration, in deep accord with the artist’s overall project.



View of *Warum ist etwas und nicht nichts?* (Why Is There Something and Not Nothing?), 1997, laminated aluminum, 78¾ by 153½ by 71 inches, near Stronsdorf, Lower Austria. Courtesy Architekturzentrum Wien. Photo Margherita Spiluttini.

West’s disruptive sensibility, slapdash formal approach, and humor put him in sync with the Post-Minimalist sculptors, painters, and performance artists who emerged in the 1970s and ’80s in Europe and the United States. Artists like Richard Tuttle, Mary Heilmann, Eva Hesse, Mike Kelley, Keith Sonnier, and Bruce Nauman in the US, along with Europeans like Sarah Lucas, Urs Fischer, Bruno Gironcoli, Ugo Rondinone, and Albert Oehlen, were able to leave stylistic purity and consistency behind, to take what they wanted from whatever medium caught their fancy, and to adapt their references and techniques to the changing culture around them. They have been the flâneurs of this era’s ironic, pop-inflected, crud-infused, historically unmoored world. Rather than patiently shaping and refining a vision, they go at the culture with abandon and verve, skimming its variegated surface, assured by a real interest in matters philosophical and linguistic of their works’ ultimate theoretical justification. West’s influence can be felt on many younger artists, especially from Europe—Anselm Reyle, gelitin, Tatiana Trouvé, Camille Henrot, Laure Prouvost, Tobias Pils, Helen Marten, and others.

West was particularly refreshing in his utter lack of sentimentality, self-righteousness, and pomposity. He embodied a key artistic ethos of our time, one which allows surprisingly original abstract forms to interact with both the performative

and the referential. He saw art as, at heart, a social act, but not one that merely reinforced a set of norms and ideals agreed upon by right-thinking people. He was too much a troublemaker for that. Friendship was important, a necessary component of art-making. So was excess—pushing things just far enough, and then a bit further. The slickness of the factory-crafted art object, announcing the work’s price and the owner’s power and good taste, seemed anathema to him. His art was never comfortable or comforting. No matter how central he was to the artistic dialogue of this time, or how well-liked and respected by the art community, West was always an uneasy fit, an outsider in spite of himself. ○

1. From 1977 to ’82, West was frequently advised by Bruno Gironcoli (1936–2010), an influential sculptor, draftsman, and professor at the Akademie der bildenden Künste. West’s study with Gironcoli was informal, and he never received a degree.
 2. Christine Macel, *Franz West*, exhib. cat., Paris, Centre Pompidou, and London, Tate Publishing, 2018, p. 35.
 3. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
 4. “Psyche,” in addition to its philosophical, psychological, and mythological associations, also refers to a kind of mirrored dressing table.
 5. Mark Godfrey, *ibid.*, p. 127.
 6. Rudolf Polanszky, *ibid.*, p. 94.
 7. gelitin, *ibid.*, p. 174.
 8. “Viennoiserie” is another example of West’s love of wordplay. It refers to the things of Vienna, but it is also the French term for breakfast or snack pastries—croissants, brioche, and the like, often presented as an assortment, as are the works in this installation. See Marika Bayer-Wermuth, *ibid.*, p.13.
 9. Exchange recounted by David Zwirner, *Franz West*, p. 142.