

Franz West

Touch Me ▶ Francesca Gavin

Franz West's super-sized, baby doll-coloured plops, turds and phalluses are instantly recognisable. The Austrian artist's swirls, loops and squiggles — or 'Wurste, Qulze or Qwertze' as the artist refers to them — transform the crude and trivial into meaning and form; make sense out of the senseless; fuse an innate incoherence with a sense of function.

The fibreglass and aluminium objects are twisted and welded into shapes, covered with surface flotsam, developed with collaged fragments, and painted in the colours of a child's playroom. There is a tactility to the results. West invites us to break the unspoken barriers around an art object, touch the work, sit on it, lie down on it. The result is work that is not just about the object but about the viewer's inner life.

West's sculptures had a theatrical source. 'At the beginning I made papier-mâché sculptures. I knew an actress from a basement theatre who explained to me how such backdrops are made from papier-mâché. Is art scenery? At that time people began calling graphics paper works. So my first sculptures were three-dimensional paper works,' West noted. These were objects inspired by the fake boulders in Ben-Hur made from papier-mâché toilet rolls and washing powder boxes. These developed into his early

Passstücke pieces or 'adaptives' created around 1974, where viewers were invited to adapt the pieces to their bodies — to hang them around their necks or shove them on their heads.

This sense of experimental interaction grew out of the legacy of 1960s Fluxus performances and Allan Kaprow's environments or happenings. Susan Sontag defined the happening in Against Interpretation. 'First, its supra-personal or impersonal treatment of person; second, its emphasis on spectacle and sound, and disregard for the word; and third, its professed aim to assault the audience.' West's approach to the audience is different. His work is about collaboration rather than conflict. It is about triggering emotional and psychological reactions. 'The objects are to be used. They represent the potential to give form to neurotic symptoms,' West pointed out.

These objects intentionally hit psychological cues within the viewer — memories of play, even playing with faeces. 'Everybody likes shit anyways. As a child, shit is the first gift that you give your parents,' as West observes. There is an implicit reference to psychology and Freud. This was brought to the fore in Auditorium, an installation created for Documenta in Kassel in 1992. West filled an outdoor space with divans covered with Turkish rugs to resemble Freud's couch. Here West makes rest a conscious action, something dramatic; turns contemplation of an artwork into the art itself.

West's work could be seen to lie within Joe Scanlan's definition of design art in Please Eat the Daisies (2001). 'What seems crucial



Above: Franz West, Eidolon (2009) installed in The Shape We're In (London)
 Overleaf: Franz West, Ecke (2009), details

to design art in all its forms is that some sort of slippage occurs between where art is, how it looks, and what it does.' West's chairs and sculptures are not just design objects; their possibility of purpose deviates from expectations. The artist experimented with furniture from the early 1980s, notably collaborating with furniture designer Mathis Esterhazy between 1986 and 1991. The work is intended to be experienced with a viewer's whole physicality, not just their eyes.

Daring the viewer to have a physical relationship to the work is something West played on in his 1989 PS1 show in New York. Here he invited the audience to get naked with his work. A sign in the show read: 'You may take your place behind the divider and undress. Naked, you may interact with the sculptures as illustrated in the video-examples. An experience of such a paradisiacal freedom must be paid for with nakedness. Touching the sculpture while dressed is forbidden. You may ask the guard for a shot of whiskey.'

Much of West's best-known work is located in public spaces (and thus with less opportunity for nude interventions). He has installed site-specific outdoor works in locations such as New York's Lincoln Center, or in the Place Vendôme in Paris. Using the sculpture as a seat or climbing frame or place to chat is encouraged. Even within the gallery environment there is a desire to touch on the functional. The works in The Shape We're In will serve as tactile and engaging props in an organic setting during weekly life drawing sessions, creating provocative and exciting relationships with the naked human body.

These interactions, this sense of use, do not lessen the object as art. The meaning of 'function' and 'art' do not have to be antithetical. The Oxford English Dictionary describes function as 'an activity that is natural to or the purpose of a person or thing', emerging from the Latin functio and fungi for 'perform'. Don't judge — these artworks are just doing their natural thing.



The Shape We're In (London)



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