

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Franz West, a Sculptor Who Defied Categories

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*“Chou-Chou,” a 1998/2001 work by Franz West, at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt.
Axel Schneider/Franz West Foundation*

FRANKFURT — Whenever designers describe their work as “artistic,” I tend to cringe, not least because they are usually referring to flashy, barely stable, inexplicably uncomfortable furniture. And when artists talk about designing objects, I cringe again, because the outcome is likely to be just as showy and impractical.

Yet there are exceptions. One is the furniture of the late Austrian sculptor Franz West, which can currently be seen in two exhibitions, “Franz West: Where Is My Eight?” — a retrospective of his career running through Oct. 13 at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, and “Mostly West,” a survey of his collaborations with other artists at Inverleith House in Edinburgh until Sept. 22.

West’s furniture is as nutty, subversive and intriguing as the rest of his work. Few, if any of his chairs, tables, lights or other objects could be considered to be models of “good design,” but he did not intend them to be. When West, who died last year, made furniture, he treated it not as a design project, but as something else. Looking at the results in Frankfurt and Edinburgh made me wonder what that “something” was, and why he had succeeded in a field where so many of his fellow artists have failed.

The answers are rooted in the feisty debate on the constantly changing, often contentious relationship of art and design. To most people, art is a medium of self-expression, often in work made by the artists themselves. While designers fulfill a practical role, typically defined by their clients, and delegate the making of their work to other people. Artists are admired for being purist

and uncompromising, while designers are darkly suspected of kowtowing to commercial demands.

Neither stereotype is accurate. Many artists delegate production too, and the feebler ones forego freedom of expression to pander to the art market. As for designers, they have been given greater control over production by digital technology, which has also helped them to pursue their own agendas: Maybe by realizing their political objectives, or by treating design as a medium of expression and intellectual enquiry.

Even so, there are still elemental differences between the two disciplines. One is that every design exercise must have a function. Art can too, but only if the artist wishes it to. Most design projects are also rooted in design culture: Maybe by adhering to the design process, or making references to design history. Again, art can do the same: Artists have produced remarkably perceptive critiques of design over the years. In “The Encyclopedic Palace,” the principal exhibition at this year’s Venice Art Biennale running through Oct. 24, several young artists including Ed Atkins, Camille Henrot, Helen Marten and James Richards explore the impact of digital technology, which is a core concern of the new genre of conceptual designers. Yet, unlike designers, artists are free to choose whether to engage with such issues.

West’s furniture demonstrates the differences beautifully. Born in Vienna in 1947, he started to make art in 1970, focusing on drawing and then sculpture. After devoting much of the 1970s to producing *Passtücke*, or *Adaptives*, a series of abstract forms with no obvious purpose other than to provoke a physical response, West pursued similar objectives in two strands of work — abstract sculpture and furniture. The evolution of both strands is explored in the Frankfurt retrospective, which was first shown this year at Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Vienna.

Having begun by producing furniture that resembled his *Adaptives*, by the late 1980s West was replicating the familiar forms of chairs, tables and other domestic objects that designers and artisans had developed over the years. Often, his furniture was fabricated by specialist makers, as the work of a designer or decorative artist might be, though so was much of West’s sculpture. His best known object, the *Uncle Chair*, made with brightly colored straps of industrial fabric bound to a metal frame, was named for the Polish upholsterer who made nearly a thousand of them with his nephew, first in West’s studio in Vienna, and then at their workshop in Poland.

You can sit on those chairs, just as you can use some of West’s other objects, although they are seldom robust or especially comfortable. Even his *Diwans*, the sofas draped with Turkish carpets that he devised as the seating for a cinema in the Documenta IX exhibition in Kassel, Germany, in 1992, are better suited to be sprawled than sat upon, as you can discover for yourself by trying them out at Inverleith House.

But not all of West’s furniture is functional. Some of the pieces are too fragile, and none of them were intended for practical use, at least not in the way we would expect of a designed product. Take *Psyche*, a dressing table made in 1997. You could, in theory, check your make-up in its angled mirrors, but their fractured reflections and the ominous stains on its unkempt wooden top suggest that *Psyche* was conceived to convey something dark and unsettling, rather than to serve a practical purpose.

The same can be said of West's other objects, which far from being steeped in design culture, stem from his inner world, like his sculpture. As well as sharing similar materials and stylistic cues, they explore the same obsessions: from the piercing shade of denture gum pink he remembered from his mother's work as a dentist, to the writing of favorite philosophers, like Ludwig Wittgenstein.

West's furniture may have been made in a similar way to design and decorative art, and share some of the same functionality, but there the parallels end. Artists often fail as designers because their work is purely decorative; West's is anything but. His objects are as provocative, compelling and disturbing as his sculpture, and that is their strength: So much so that it is impossible to imagine him dithering over whether they were examples of art, design, decorative art, or anything else.