

Fun and art games



Franz West's Platonc Moon, 2003

By [Nick Hackworth](#) [Evening Standard](#) | 10 September 2003



The tone is set by a large, neon-pink, turd-shaped metal sculpture in the Whitechapel's foyer, on which a number of lazy art-lovers lounge. Titled *Pink Sitzwuste*, the object functions as an unusual garden bench and comes, if you want to buy it, with tubs of pink paint for touching-up as required. It also illustrates the defining strategies of Franz West's entertaining art: playfulness and a desire to encourage social activity.

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They inform all of his eclectic output, represented here in his first major British retrospective of abstract sculpture, performance props, furniture and collages.

West, 56, spent his formative years in the Seventies rejecting the then dominant ethos of minimalism, as well as that of Aktionismus, the extreme performance art group that was influential in his native Vienna.

He did not want people to be passive consumers or spectators, but actively to create their own experiences. So he developed as a series of works called "adaptives", odd, usually hand-held plaster objects that look like science-fiction prostheses, designed to be used by gallery visitors as props or as inspiration for performances.

Suspended from the ceiling here are oblong adaptives that you can put your head through, and other glovelike ones that you can stick your hand in and wave around; there is even a curtained-off section where the shy can try out their adaptives in privacy. Most of West's later work has been conceptually similar to the adaptives.

His pieces of furniture - chairs, sofas and a bed are on show here - are just that, and, faintly absurdly, visitors are invited to use them in order to undermine the pseudo-religious air of galleries. Even his more traditionally formed work, which can be perused from the comfort of a circular chair, retains the demotic touch.

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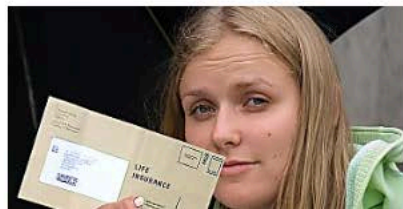
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His rough, quick collages and naive paintings poke fun at Freudian psychology and consumer imagery.

West's best works, though, are his weird, lumpy, abstract sculptures, often made from papier-mache. Some are painted quite beautifully with bright colours, making them relaxed, 3-D abstract expressionist paintings.

The artist's humour is ever-present in this show; my biggest laugh, however, came when a woman turned to me at the recent press view and said in a heavy German accent, "You know he haz made s***loadz of money."

Despite being subversive in his art practice, West has been commercially successful. While that does not necessarily undermine his work, it highlights the commonplace truth that fate often twists artistic intentions into empty poses.

True playfulness happens in private, not public, cultural spaces and it is hard for objects to be stimulants of social interaction when they are privately owned possessions.

So West's strategies have become decorative accessories. Happily though, that does not detract from the enjoyment of his art in the gallery.

• *Until 9 November. Information: 020 7522 7888.*



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