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Jan Verwoert on Franz West



What I find fascinating about Franz West's Adaptation series is that they are incomplete anamorphic figurines and I used this in relation to the Lagosians who are under the poverty line and can not afford housing. However, people from abroad and the very wealthy such as: Otedola will **always** have a space to live. In addition, there are no homeless shelters.

To show how they are disconnected from their origins I used Franz West's Adaptive to explore this. This is due to the fact that, poorer Lagosians suffer from being Nigerian due to overpopulation which is set to reach **50 billion** in **2050**. However, there is a culture of people extending their homes to others who are in need. For example, paying rent for church members.

According to the Greek pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, life begins with **disconnected body parts**. Arms **without shoulders**, heads without necks and other solitary organs bob about on the surface of Earth until love makes them come together and form whole beings (with no guarantee of functionality).

Indeed, Nigeria's population increased by nearly 50 million between 2005, when the policy was launched, and 2015, when the report was authored. Nigeria's total fertility rate (average number of births per woman) dipped only slightly from 5.7 to 5.5 children per woman, notably higher than the target of 4.38 children per woman for 2015. Just as crucially, the modern contraceptive prevalence rate among married women increased to 9.8%—far less than the 30.2% policy target.

The world of Franz West is not dissimilar. His sculptural work is full of anamorphic bodies animated by a spirit of gentle cynicism and philosophical mockery.

Take the *Paßstücke* sculptures (usually translated as 'Fitting Pieces', 'Adaptables' or 'Adaptives'), which West has been producing since 1974. Most of them begin with a found object, some discarded item, which he covers with a coat of plaster.

I'm interested in materiality and my sculpture itself has not one meaning but loads of interpretations. Like the lady at the review of the Hepworth Wakefield Interview video said, his

Can be seen as a ghostly figurine, a cloth a sheet- something of another realm. A spiritual realm, not of earth, making it alien like. However, at the same time the height, peak and depth gives the sculpture the appearance of a mountain, which is easily grasped and familiar to Earth

This is then morphed into weird final work retains some of the but is at the same time strange on makeshift plinths, often with pick them up and adopt any pose they feel might be appropriate to the form of the sculpture.

Also, the designing stages of my work was essentially morphed into its final shape because my idea was shown to my tutors and peers and their interpretation was so different. Leo for example thought it was a 3D landscape with hills that covered all four lengths of the leaf box.

What is sculpture?

"Robert Morris, in 1967, described his first 'basic plywood sculptures' as a process of losing interest with things 'that dealt with information'.

Sculpture of Elimination Quote: Lecture from Unit 5 on Moodle written by: Karen + Adrian

The curvature of my sculpture has a curvature which could be seen as a spine and could represent arching the back. Creating movement, the use of the colour white representative of the bones, fragile and soft like the plaster. When my ideas were shifting, from contested space I started to link the relationship with- space, colour and movement. Basically, discovering they are somewhat interlinked and can not function without each other in terms of my work.

Although the biomorphic shapes of the pieces look as if they were made to fit snugly into the folds and curves of a human body, they never do. You can try and stick them under your arm or between your legs, you can press them against your neck or stomach but the *Paßstücke* simply will <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ceZ0grsxvQY> accommodate it - like one of Empedocles' Ur-creatures trying to integrate a reluctant extra limb into your autonomy. The encounter with the sculpture ends up as pure slapstick.

In his 2001 retrospective 'Appartement' (at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg) West showed one of the *Paßstücke* pieces (2001) shaped like a tube with a handle on the inside, but so far down that, when you reached in to grab it, your armpit rubbed against the rim of the tube. Once you had got hold of it, you were invited to stand in the V-shaped corner of two mustard-coloured walls and swing the *Paßstücke* around. In doing so, you became part of a practical joke about Modernist notions of form and function - but since everyone in the exhibition could see your performance with the *Paßstücke*, the joke was on you too. The best thing to do was put on a brave face and continue swinging the useless object until a feeling of blissful vacancy began to overtake you.

Feeling of awkwardness and uncertainty

The *Paßstücke* can be seen as exposing and subverting the tyranny of Functionalist design. Today we are surrounded by gadgets and prostheses that are supposed to make life easier for us, but what these props actually do is force us to adapt our lives to them. So the experience of fiddling about fruitlessly with any of the non-adaptable 'Adaptables' is quite liberating. As the object has no function, there is no need for your behaviour to be determined in any way by it.

Functionality/ Meaning vs Aesthetics. Franz West believed that sculpture could just be an object and the meaning being open to interpretation. In the 1970's, conceptual art being held in high regard his views seemed to be taboo. This made me question if my sculpture needed to be explained or just to be influenced by culture, politics and religion of Nigeria. By doing this I am solely relying on my meaning by my audience (the dog walkers in the park, peers, family etc)

The **biomorphism** of the **Paßstücke** is particularly interesting in this context: in **1990s' design Functionalist ideology** manifested itself in the conflation of the **organic and the ergonomic**. From Air Jordans to the iBook commodities were morphed into shapes that suggested these things would not only make life **easier and more efficient**, but would actually fit your **body** and your **brain**, as though they were organic extensions of yourself. To purchase them would be entirely **natural** and necessarily 'good for you'. **West's sculptures** suggest a different approach. Although **physical interaction** with the Paßstücke is possible, it is not an intimate encounter. **The object and the user don't 'click'**. Their relationship is a **non-relationship**.

But while they may undermine the principles of **'form equals function'**, West's works are by **no means shapeless or amorphous**. On the contrary, if you look at the **papier mâché sculptures** he has been producing over the years, it is clear that they are the result of an effort to conceive forms with **highly specific properties**. *Sisyphos (I-X)* (all 2002), for example, is a series of ten papier mâché sculptures - a set of bulging limbs that vaguely **resemble truncated torsos**. Their uneven surfaces are loosely covered with splashes of paint in clashing colours. Similar to the **Paßstücke**, these sculptures are built up around **found objects** or **pieces of rubbish**, but in this case the **original objects are** allowed to poke out from within the sculpture, and sometimes even provide its support. **Sisyphos VIII** is propped up on an **empty paint can**, for example, while **Sisyphos II** stands on two old metal poles that jut out from its body. What is so striking about these pieces is that in each case every single detail is completely unique. A total lack of **symmetry** means the diverse curves and folds into which each papier **mâché object** is moulded are entirely individual. In music the equivalent of this aesthetic of **asymmetry** would probably be an improvised solo played in the **'wrong' time signature**, something only the beginner or the virtuoso can do.

That **West's aesthetic is no simple negation of form but a genuine search** for it was demonstrated particularly clearly in the exhibition 'West/Arp' (curated by Stefan Schmidt-Wulffen at the Hamburger Kunstverein in 1996). Ranking very high on my list of all-time favourites, the show combined West's works with those of Hans Arp, not only highlighting the **congenial, generous humour of both artists**, but also bringing out the playfulness and concentration involved in the attempt to twist an organic form into a shape so complex that it defies any form of circumscription. There was a **certain provocativeness** in displaying such inscrutable forms on plinths, as if they could actually be assessed by the quizzical gaze of the connoisseur. Also emphasized was the fact that West's works take on a **new, conversational aspect and often reveal their**

This may make perception unbalanced due to perception

qualities best when seen alongside works by other artists. West himself seems to thrive on such dialogue. Recent retrospectives such as 'Appartement' or 'Merciless' (at the MAK in Vienna 2001-2) included works by colleagues such as Meuser, Richard Hoeck or Janc Szeniczai. Elsewhere West has frequently collaborated with Heimo Zobernig or Herbert Brandl; in fact, West's first coloured papier mâché sculptures, such as *German Measles* (1987), were painted by Brandl. Initially, the story goes, West didn't feel comfortable with painting and asked a friend to do it. This could be taken as evidence of a relaxed pragmatism: if you can't trust yourself, you can always put your faith in others.

This affinity for dialogue can also be found in the numerous furniture pieces West has designed for discourse, contemplation or sleep. There are the well-known sofas first exhibited as *Auditorium* (1992) at Documenta 9. Oriental carpets were laid out on frames welded together from scrap metal, and these makeshift settees were offered to exhausted visitors as places for rest and conversation. At Documenta X, West supplied the lecture hall with the *Dokustuhl* (1997), chairs with rough metal frames covered in richly coloured African fabric.

Interesting situations arise when the furniture pieces are situated alongside West's other sculptural objects. In *Bryn/Atlas* (2001), for example, a divan with shiny silver covers was placed either side of a huge golden brown ball, and the whole ensemble presented on **two thin, white wood panels. Should you lie down to contemplate the ball, or just ignore it? Photographs of a visitor sleeping on the divan evoke images of Sisyphus temporarily putting down his rock to have a break, or a philosopher - Hegel, say - leaving a big thought to one side for a moment in order to take a quick nap.** In general, West's sofa pieces can be understood as exposing the **regressive nature of philosophy.** After all, philosophical reflection could be described as what happens when the mind, overpowered by its own weight, settles on its own workings. Deep thought is a particular form of fatigue; not for nothing did Socrates and his friends recline on their chaises longues before

Regressive
- like
Nigeria
because
we are
overpopul
ated due
to lack of
of use of
natural
resources
such as:

<https://nigerianfinder.com/natural-resources-in-nigeria-the-full->

beginning their symposia.

		Gypsum, Kaolin, Limestone & Oil/Gas
30	Osun	Columbite, Gold, Granite, Talc, Tantalite & Tourmaline
31	Oyo	Aqua Marine, Cassiterite, Clay, Dolomite, Gemstone, Gold, Kaolin, Marble, Silimonite, Talc & Tantalite
32	Pleteau	Barite, Bauxite, Betonite, Bismuth, Cassiterite, Clay, Coal, Emeral, Fluoride, Gemstone, Granite, Iron-ore, Kaolin, Lead/Zinc, Marble, Molybdenite, Phrochlore, Salt, Tantalite/Columbite, Tin & Wolfram
33	Rivers	Clay, Glass-Sand, Lignite, Marble & Oil/Gas

What I actually meant when I wanted my sculpture to juxtapose another or its environment

Recently West has been taking his sculptures outside. The *Sitzwuste* (2000), for instance, are round aluminium sculptures, up to eight metres long, painted in ghastly neon colours and shaped like a cross between a worm, a dildo and a turd. A whole series of them was installed on a picturesque lawn in the palace grounds in Innsbruck. Despite the obvious tension between the sculptures and their elegant setting, their primal shape and laconic placement made their presence seem almost natural. They fitted into the park by not fitting into it, in a very definite way. Contemporary thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Zizek have elucidated the paradox of shit: excrement is 'ideal' in that it is first created by humans and later becomes autonomous - you need to shit, but the shit doesn't need you. In the same way, we live in dependence on auratic objects whose value is believed to exist independently. So when in 2001 West erected Centripedale - a mucky brown pillar over six metres high, mounted in the middle of a white circular worm lying on the ground - opposite a traditional monument, he was not only mocking but also deconstructing its claim to monumentality. What difference is there between the shit and the statue, you could reasonably have asked,

when both acquire their special status through the same procedure of removal and isolation from regular life?

It would be wrong, though, to say that West's outdoor sculptures are hostile to their surroundings. On the contrary, in spite of their eccentric shapes, they seem almost to want to be overlooked. Take Corona (2002), for example. Made from **aluminium**, **the sculpture** is shaped like a ring of sausages, or rather intestines, which undulates smoothly, so that the **whole construction** resembles a **huge halo**. The piece is painted in a blue grey that blends in perfectly with the colour of the **paving stones**. You could take its **presence** for **granted and treat it** as you might a fountain in an **Italian piazza**. You might just want to sit inside it, read some Empedocles and casually wait for an extra limb to hop around the corner, looking for love.

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