

The Herald

HAVING THE LAST WORD

The distinctive style of the late Franz West shines through in his collaborations, writes Sarah Urwin Jones

It doesn't matter what the art looks like, but only how it's used," said the late artist Franz West. But form and function are inextricably if sometimes inscrutably linked in the gently humorous work of the idiosyncratic Austrian, who spent a lifetime creating curiously appealing art.

Born in 1947 to Communist parents in Allied-occupied Vienna and beset, culturally, by the avant-garde shock tactics of the Vienna Actionists, West did not formally study art until his mid-twenties, when he enrolled at the city's Academy of Applied Arts. He found inspiration in performance art but it was in sculpture and collage that he found his media, fashioning fantastical yet oddly comfortable furniture or wrapping everyday objects in papier mache. Collaborator Sarah Lucas once fondly called him "the master of the lump." He died in 2012; a year after receiving the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale.

West dealt in what one might call "nonsense". His first major series of casts – the Adaptives (1970s) – were designed to be worn, and appeared to have some undefined function, yet it was not a function anyone might recognise. There was irreverence too, although others might call it toilet

humour. One reviewer called his preoccupation with doodling male appendages on magazine images teenage; his fascination with bodily fluids and scatological themes "play-school". West was a serious artist, but never serious.

Above all, West's was a sociable art, instantly accessible to its viewing public, and open to suggestion from artist collaborators. That, indeed, is the crux of this Inverleith exhibition, which had its genesis in a pavilion in Berlin in 2011 after Ealan Wingate, (advisor to the Franz West Foundation) saw the results of a collaboration between West and young artist Anselm Reyle. "It was spectacular," says Wingate. "The energy between them was clearly evident." Alongside Ines Turian, he evolved the idea of an exhibition of West's collaborative pieces, "works that museums and galleries find confusing because they can't ascribe one author." West himself loved the idea, says Wingate. As did Inverleith curator Paul Nesbit, who had previously shown some of West's



Bateau Imaginaire by Franz West and Heimo Zobernig is among the works on show in Edinburgh

bright outdoor sculptures in a 2001 exhibition called *Leading Places*.

The list of collaborators includes some of the art world's leading names, with a text by Scotland's Douglas Gordon in one work. West picked his collaborators on a whim. "It could be just a person that he had met recently, someone whom he found interesting and started a conversation with," says Turian.

The works gathered now in Inverleith's airy galleries were a relatively small but significant part of West's output. While the roster of artists is impressive, the dominant force is beyond doubt. "You would think West, who so actively sought out collaboration, would give in to what the other artists would do, but he was very passive aggressive," says Wingate. "He would always get the last say. In every aspect a piece might be a very wonderful collaboration, in the end it all looks like Franz West!"

Mostly West: Franz West and Artist Collaborations, Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Gardens, Arboretum Drive, Edinburgh. 0131 248 2971 (0131 248 2849 at weekends) www.rbge.org.uk. Until September 22, Tues-Sun 10am-5.30pm, outdoor works Mon-Sun, 10am-6pm, free