

Remembering Franz West

From stony silence to a sense of elation

Jörg Heiser

In an obituary for an artist, it seems inappropriate to place great emphasis on one's own encounters with him. In the case of Franz West, who died on 26 July 2012 aged 65 after a long illness, things are different, because it was the very nature of his work to put an emphasis on personal encounters; thus the following account of my own experience with him is a fitting tribute to someone who always pushed his collaborations with others to the point of resembling a comedy of errors. For example the plinth of one of West's *Lemurenkopf* (Lemur's Head) sculptures actually housed a work by Rudolf Stingel (*Untitled*, 2006); West offered choreographer Ivo Dimchev the chance to use his *Passstücke* (Adaptives, since 1974) as props for his grotesque performances. West's humour produced a liberating disregard for the borders not only between artists and artist – between his work and others' – but also between the work and the viewer. His *Passstücke* hugged their users' bodies like absurd prostheses, and his furniture, like the 72 sofas he installed at documenta IX in 1992, invited people to take a break from art, on the art. West grew up in Vienna and studied with the sculptor Bruno Gironcoli; what was new about West's approach was not the direct use of art works but the situation comedy he derived from such usage – thus dispelling not only the stiffness of the work but also that of the diligently contemplative viewer.

I experienced this first-hand when I interviewed West in 2005. The interview was planned for the revival,

initiated by West himself, of the magazine *Der Brenner*, which had been initially published by Innsbruck writer and Georg Trakl patron Ludwig von Ficker and which was to appear under the new title *Der Ficker* (The Fucker). We had an entirely serious conversation, among other things about the Vienna Actionists' infamous lecture hall action of 1968, when Günter Brus whistled the Austrian national anthem while masturbating – and at the end West stood up and walked to the front while the rest of the audience were still rooted to their seats in mute shock. Before the issue went to print, West reversed the roles of interviewer and interviewee, replacing 'I' with 'you' and vice versa. The final version read as if I had been at the lecture myself: 'Then you went to the front and thanked the performers and asked the audience if they would please applaud. Because nothing else came to mind, you simply moved your mouth a little and these movements filled with words to dispel the stiffness. Suddenly there was a switch from stony silence to a sense of elation.'

We will miss Franz West and this special gift – his special gift – for telling stories about deflating authority, which was deflated even more by the way he told them.

Translated by Nicholas Grindell

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