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Franz West Sculpture at the Heart of Life

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The opening of Franz West: The Revolution of Sculpture at ALBERTINA MODERN on 5 November 2026 marks a welcome celebration of an artist who transformed the relationship between sculpture and its public. Conceived in anticipation of West's eightieth birthday in February 2027, this retrospective honours a figure whose irreverence, intellectual curiosity, and humour continue to challenge the solemn conventions of art.

Its premise is compelling: sculpture belongs not beyond everyday experience, but within its unpredictable, bodily, and social fabric. From an art-historical perspective, West's achievement lies in his rethinking of the viewer's position. His celebrated Adaptives, developed during the 1970s under the influence of Viennese Actionism, were conceived to be held, worn, or applied to the body. These peculiar, prosthesis-like objects displaced the traditional expectation that sculpture should be contemplated from a respectful distance. Instead, the spectator became a participant, and the artwork became an occasion for encounter.

Looking alone was no longer sufficient; meaning emerged through the imagined or actual negotiation between object and person. The exhibition's subtitle, The Revolution of Sculpture, therefore feels entirely appropriate. West's revolution was not simply a matter of inventing unfamiliar forms. It concerned the cultural authority of sculpture itself. Where the monument traditionally asserts permanence, dignity, and distance, West proposes contingency, awkwardness, and proximity. His art allows uncertainty to become productive. Its humour is not an ornamental addition to serious thought, but one of the means through which serious thought becomes possible.

Works illustrated in the exhibition's presentation, including Two Lemures (2002), Larrey Rue (1986), and Uncle Chair (2003–2007), suggest the breadth of this enquiry. Even their titles draw us away from the supposedly self-contained object towards associations with bodies, language, domesticity, and the imagination. Read together, they offer an alternative understanding of sculptural presence: something encountered within life rather than isolated above it. Equally significant is the collaborative dimension represented by works involving Heimo Zobernig, Herbert Brandl, Otto Zitko, and Eugenia Rochas. Their presence invites us to understand West not as an isolated genius, but as an artist whose practice could accommodate other voices.

Collaboration becomes another way of loosening authorship's boundaries, just as the Adaptives loosen the distinction between an object and its audience. There is something especially fitting about celebrating this

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achievement in Vienna, alongside the opening of Franz West and Vienna at the Wien Museum. Together, the exhibitions acknowledge both an international career—recognised by the Venice Biennale's Golden Lion in 2011—and an enduring connection to the city's artistic culture.

Ultimately, this retrospective's most persuasive invitation is to reconsider what we ask of art. Must it elevate us through distance, or might it engage us through familiarity, discomfort, and play? West's answer remains generous: art need not resolve the strangeness of being human. It can give that strangeness a form, a companion, even a place to sit. ALBERTINA MODERN's celebration offers a timely opportunity to rediscover sculpture as encounter—open-ended, questioning, and inseparable from the everyday lives we bring into the museum.

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