It's Nice That

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Erwin Wurm – French Police Cap, 2010

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Erwin Wurm on art being considered suspicious, addressing social issues with cynicism, and not being able to get rid of those damn pullovers...

I'm An Interested

Dilettante

In the 1980s, sculptor Erwin Wurm (b.1954) made the decision to take no work to a gallery show in Bremen, and instead used the objects and people in the immediate vicinity to create transient performative sculptures he then photographed and exhibited. Combining immediate humour and underlying cynicism, which allow for myriad interpretations, the artist has since gone on to question both the traditional definitions of sculpture and much larger social issues.

Wurm's work is highly-lauded worldwide. When we spoke to him he'd just returned from showing in Paris, and was working on upcoming shows in Vienna, Odense and Copenhagen...

IT'S NICE THAT:
A good place to start would be at the beginning...

ERWIN WURM:
Exactly, but what's the beginning? That's the question...

INT: Well, your work over the last three decades has been defined by or associated with sculpture, but we know you've said you originally wanted to study painting, and became a sculptor by coincidence. Why did you want to become an artist in the first place, and what was the coincidence that led you to becoming a sculptor?

EW: Well that's exactly the question my father asked me at that time: "Why do you want to become an artist?" I have no idea, it was just there, a huge desire. I got caught, I would say, by the arts and by the fascination for art and literature and so on. I grew up in a little bourgeois family, and art and literature and music weren't really welcome. Those things were considered suspicious even. But for me it opened a door to a totally new world – all of a sudden – a place to escape to and discover new things. The wish to become an artist grew slowly. When I was able, after I discussed the question with my father a million times and finally he agreed, I took the exam at art school. At that time the system meant that if you were accepted they would decide in which section you were allowed to study, and they put me in the sculpture class not in the painting class, although I desperately wanted to become a painter.

Then there was big drama and frustration, you know, but after a while I started to think about what sculpture means and decided to take it as a challenge. From that point on I started to research and question sculptural issues. I guess I still do it today.

INT: Your earlier work seems familiar as a result of the materials you used - everyday things like pens or fruit or buckets, things that we use ourselves and know very well - and so the pieces become affecting on a personal level. Why did you start using these objects?

EW: At the very beginning there was a very clear reason – I had absolutely no money. It's much easier to paint, because you can get cheaper materials, but it's more expensive to make sculpture. So I started to make objects with things other people threw away. In the beginning, I had a studio under a company that made woodwork, so I got a lot of old wood, which became the first pieces. And then I moved into a studio that was close to a factory that produced cans and buckets, so I used those. I realised that I was only using materials from within my surroundings, so why not go the next step and use materials that we all have in our surroundings, in our apartments. I started to work with my clothes, and with dust, and then finally with everyday objects. It was a movement that took a couple of years. It's quick and easy to tell the story but it went slowly.

INT: Do you think that the use of those everyday objects is what makes some of your work so immediately accessible?

EW: I think so. Firstly because I use objects everybody knows and understands and then I combine them with normal people from the street, like we all are. I tried then to combine these things with everyday life questions to do with healthcare, beauty, obesity, cars, houses, things we want to have which we are not able to have – issues that matter to us. Everybody can relate to these things. For example with the *Fat Car*, everybody understands it is a car that's fat, so the reaction to the work is very immediate. But of course that's only the surface. Then there is a second layer, and a third layer, with more content. For this you have to work at it. I connect the pieces with philosophers and with psychology and with social theory so there are different aspects behind the surface.

INT: Do you ever worry that surface almost looks too good aesthetically, and that people aren't interested in uncovering the layers?

EW: Some pieces are very seductive and some pieces are not. I remember making these dust casts that nobody wanted, but which I liked very much. Sometimes pieces are attractive to people and sometimes they're not. Frankly, I still don't know if a piece is going to be sold easily or if a piece is going to be successful or not. It's still part of the miracle for me.

INT: So what do you think makes a piece of your work successful?

EW: For me, if it functions in a way that addresses social issues with a certain criticism, and I use humour and cynicism as a method of criticism, then it works for me.

INT: And then there is the dialogue with the viewer...

EW: Yes. There should absolutely be a dialogue with the viewer. There always is a dialogue between art and the viewer. For example, if the Mona Lisa sits in a basement and nobody is there and able to see and read the painting, it would mean nothing. It would just be a piece of canvas. Art always needs the spectator, the viewer, the public, in order for it to be worth something.

INT: We find that you seem to want to rebel against certain things, and yet as part of some of your works, you include

Philosophy – Digestion, Freudsche Rektifizierung, 2004

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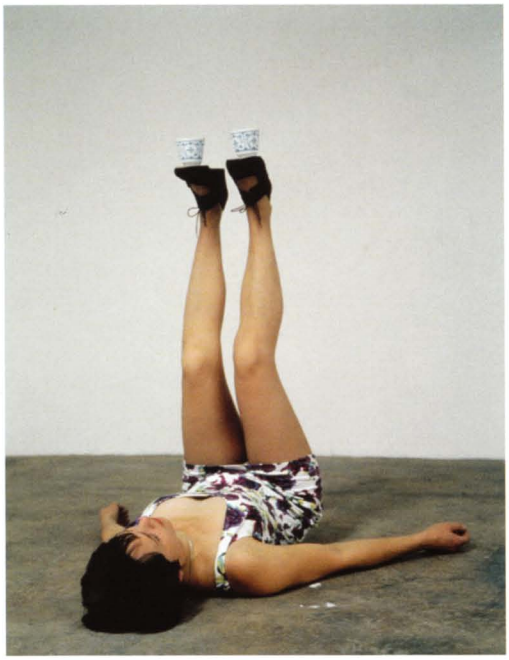
Renault 25/1991, 2008 (Courtesy: Beat Curti, Zurich, Switzerland & Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna/Zurich)



One Minute Sculptures, 1997

Untitled, 1990

Instructions on how to be politically incorrect,
Fuck the Third World, 2003

Fat Convertible, 2005 (Courtesy: Gallery Xavier Hufkens)

Philosophers, Big Gulp, 2009 (Courtesy: Gallery Xavier Hufkens)

own drawings. Many sculptors in China are using new technologies, and I tried to use the same technology for *Gulp*, but the method made it too easy to realise an idea, weakening the idea very much. Personally, I prefer to make hand-made things, because I believe the work needs to be far more tactile than when using 3D photography.

INT: One of the things that seems very present in your work, with technological advances or not, is the pullover. What's your fascination with this item of clothing?

EW: I actually have no idea. It's ridiculous, I know. For a certain time I couldn't get rid of this damn pullover. I don't know why. I'm embarrassed about it. Maybe it's because from the very beginning I have been thinking about making form unclear, about destroying form. To put one pullover over a perfect body is fine, but what happens if you put three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten pullovers over a perfect body? The form starts to be destroyed – you don't see it anymore. It becomes more or less massive, an undefined mass. I was interested in destroying the form, which I think is why I used the fatal sweater. It's the same as what I did with obesity with *Fat Car* and *Fat House*. Through fatness, the form expands, gets less defined. The next step was to melt things, which was another way of destroying form. So from the pullover to obesity to melting, these were all stages in getting rid of the permanence of specific form.

INT: So can you tell us a bit about what sculpture is to you, as it exists in so many different forms within your work?

EW: I don't think about it. For me it was initially important to bring the performative part of each sculpture out. I didn't invent it because people were doing it in the 1960s and 1970s, but what I found interesting was to question the point at which an action becomes a sculpture. When I do something, and I continue to do it, repeating myself, slower and slower, what is the specific point between something being an action and it being a sculpture? I dealt with this question for many years, but now I think OK, I cannot define this point, but who cares anyway?

INT: Do you think you would have had as successful a career if you'd studied painting in the very beginning?

EW: [*Laughs*] Maybe not. I must confess that I think I was a bad painter and that the teachers were right to put me in the sculpture class. I'm thankful to them.

INT: What are you working on at the moment and what can we expect to see next?

EW: At the moment I'm trying to realise a video again. I had a show in New York recently, and I showed this little seven-minute-long video, *Tell*, that I made two years ago. There was a critic for the New York Times who wrote that *Tell* is better than that new film, *Inception*. I found this hilarious, so I'm going to make a new video now.

INT: So what exactly do you want your legacy to be?

EW: I'm a sculptor, I define myself as a sculptor. That's it, it's very easy and very simple. And whether I do videos or photos or books or 3D sculptures or performance, it's always about sculpture, or issues to do with sculpture.

INT: And what do you want to have achieved?

EW: I would like it if people said: "He was a cynicist who questioned certain issues that seemed to be normal in our society." Because these things are not normal, and they do really have to be questioned.

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Instructions on how to be politically incorrect, Inspection, 2002

One Minute Sculptures, 1997