LIFE IN THE FAT LANE

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THE FAT CAR IS NOT THE WORK OF A DERANGED DESIGNER OR A WEIGHT-SENSITIVE KIT-CAR MANUFACTURER BUT OF AN ARTIST BY THE NAME OF ERWIN WURM

In Germany or Austria a ‘fettes auto’ is the most expensive, flashiest and biggest car that money can buy. In the US a ‘phat car’ has the loudest woofers and shiniest rims. But in a gallery in Paris sits the dumpy immobile anti-car, the antithesis of wealth, prestige and speed – the Fat Car.

Austrian Erwin Wurm has succeeded in combining the technical system of a car with the biological system of a body to organically grow the humble car chassis. Constructed from layers of styrofoam and polyurethane around an old Alfa Romeo, finished with a polyester ‘skin’ and painted in creamy vanilla car paint, the Fat Car is shiny and solid to the touch, but “looks cuddly and good enough to lick” advises Wurm.

Like the crown of a chubby face, the car’s roof is not puffy; instead the rolls of fat cascade down the bonnets and doors as it would the chin and the cheeks. Like a real body’s bones and internal organs, the interior of the car is unchanged by the fat, with the seats, steering wheel and dash intact. All the car’s lights and indicators work, although they’re now partially obscured under folds of fat, “like when you can see a person has knees, but there are layers of fat hanging over the top”. The car unashamedly lets it all hang out, there are no muscular shapes or sweeping curves – it just droops. 0-60… um, never.

Fat Car is not ugly, but realistic, according to Wurm. The prevalence of obesity in the US (almost 70% of the population in some studies) is a national joke and no matter how much money is spent on diets, supplements or self-help books these people are still getting bigger. “I wanted to make a video of a fat person trying to squeeze into the car, sitting inside and then becoming one with the car”. A perfect symbiosis of overweight man and his overweight machine – a true vision of modern unhealthiness. “For some reason I always had in mind the big fat mama who looked like a whale from that early Johnny Depp movie [What’s Eating Gilbert Grape] who was so big, it took an enormous struggle to get her out of the house and onto any kind of transport.”

Unfortunately, this proposed tragi-comic video of pink flesh cocooned within its protective belly bubble will never be, because only Fat Car’s electric windows allow any access to the interior. As it is, $40,000 and two years’ development went on customising the old Alfa, before the final version was built in just over two months. Wurm initially approached Opel/General Motors who put their technicians onto the project, but found that even with the latest 3D-modelling software he could not achieve the desired effect, so the body was hand-finished by antique car restorers. “All new cars are designed by computers and it is impossible to make biological shapes or human forms. We gave up after a week.”

Besides the expense, Fat Car is literally too fat to be driven on European roads. The maximum berth is 250cm but Wurm’s wide load measures 280cm at its extremes, making it illegal and too obese for the roads. Its burden does not end there. The car’s windows have to be taken out when the enormous work is shipped for exhibition all over the world. The original numberplate had to be remade because the police decided Wurm was liable for insuring the vehicle. For one of only two other Fat Cars, a big Austrian collector requested a personalised numberplate W-EF22 645 (W for Vienna, followed by his initials and his birthdate). A US version in hot pink (modelled around a Ford) also exists, and Wurm has had a request from a French collector to bulk out his already unwieldy midnight blue Rolls-Royce (only 60,000km on the clock), which has become a source of intense embarrassment for him on the tight streets of Paris. Fat cars, it seems, are catching on.

Ironically, Wurm drives a flashy C-Class Mercedes, a “fettes auto” indeed. Despite having owned a classic Karmann Ghia in the past, he prefers the practicalities of his present car; it’s technologically more advanced, faster and “part of my living room”, he says.

Fat first reared its ugly head in the ’80s work of the artist. A series of instructional drawings showed 59 ways to modify a simple sweater to make the wearer bulbous,
bloated, hunchbacked or grossly tumescent. "I was not satisfied with just making the good-looking works. I also wanted to make bad or ugly versions that lend themselves to a whole range of psychological states: embarrassment, ridicule or stupidity." Wurm advertised in his local newspaper, seeking volunteers to model in a series of ad-hoc human sculptures. He was called by more than 50 people from all walks of life. The series featured housewives, hawkers, university lecturers and even a bank manager who Wurm photographed in front of his bank with asparagus spears stuck up each nose.

'I don’t want to make the whole world fat'

In 1993 his piece From Size L to Size XXL Wurm gave simple written instructions on how to gain two extra dress sizes in just eight days, a step-by-step guide to the best ways of ingesting huge amounts of calories while conserving maximum energy and minimising weight loss. Another ongoing series Curator Imperator features big-name curators from the art world with multiple layers of clothing and bread stuffed in their cheeks à-la Marlon Brando in The Godfather to intensify their aura of self-importance. His next work is to be a Fat House, a scaled-down version of a famous Adolf Loos building in Vienna that looks like a face, in which the windows are the eyes, the balcony the nose and the entrance the mouth. There are no plans to produce a line of Fat Cars that would make Wurm rich enough to indulge his taste for fast cars, especially so if he could convince Americans that they are what they drive. In fact after the Fat House he may stop force-feeding his art. "I don’t want to make the whole world fat". Wurm describes himself as a sculptor, so working with volume has always fascinated him. Similarly as a society we are ever more preoccupied with gaining or losing weight – the ultimate act of sculpting or working with volume. "Traditionally, bigger, fatter humans were more important. Venus was fat because it was both healthy and necessary for bearing children." Nowadays our image-conscious world demands that our bodies are lean and healthy and our cars are fast and seductive. Fat Car stands in opposition to the glamorous world of sleek, aerodynamic engineering and bodily perfection depicted in advertising. The counter campaign might read "Fat Car. Guzzles like you, looks like you and feels like you."

Left: Self-portrait of Erwin Wurm as a one minute sculpture shot for Intersection, July 2003.