Stand-Up Artist

Erwin Wurm’s diverse body of work is physical, funny and ephemeral. Often inviting viewer participation, the prolific Austrian artist both extends and undermines artistic traditions of the 1970s. Widely exhibited in Europe, he is finally becoming familiar to U.S. audiences.

BY STEPHANIE CASH

Erwin Wurm: Outdoor Sculpture (Apparatus). 1993, C-print on aluminum, 77 3/8 x 83 1/4 inches. Photo by this article courtesy Studio Erwin Wurm, Vienna.

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Lil Duchamp with his snow shovel. Austrian artist Erwin Wurm can make art with little more than a rubber band, a pickle or some dust. Wurm calls himself a sculptor, though many people might be more inclined to call what he does performative, and what viewers usually see are photos or videos of these performative “sculptures,” or their related instructional drawings. With feet firmly planted in conceptual traditions of the 1960s and ’70s, Wurm riff s on those traditions with his own brand of comic conceptualism. The artist is perhaps best known for his ongoing “Do It Yourself” and “One Minute Sculpture” series (begun in 1996 and 1998, respectively). These consist of written instructions and diagrams and props needed to carry them out, such as “sharpen a pencil” or “tie the bank—no part of the body should touch the ground,” and “put the felt markers on top of your shoes, hold this for one minute and think of Hieronymus Bosch.” Such is the popular appeal of his work that members of the music group The Red Hot Chili Peppers are seen carrying out the artist’s instructions for various pieces—including bassist Flea sporting markers up his nose and ballpoint pens in his ears—in the video for their recent song “Can’t Stop.”

Wurm’s One Minute Sculptures don’t always involve people. Chairs balancing on one leg or with two legs propped up on carrots, a banana suspended between sliding cabinet doors, and upended and stacked configurations of hotel furniture are all examples of Wurm’s fleeting sculptures.

Though his work has taken many forms since the early 1990s, the common thread is the question of what constitutes a sculpture. Is a person sticking out his tongue a sculpture? If that particular act only exists in a photograph, is it still a sculpture? Wurm’s work shares strong affinities with that by German artist Franz Erhard Walther, who in his instructional pieces similarly describes an artwork as an interconnected event between a human body, an act and an object. Certain examples by Arno Mendieta, Yoko Ono, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth, Charles Ray and Dennis Oppenheim also show an undeniable kinship. Wurm continues to explore issues similar to those of 1970s Conceptual or Body art pieces that only live on in documentation. Whereas some artists are content to allow their works to linger in the realm of pure concept, Wurm encourages the imple-

By Stephanie Cash, "One Minute Sculpture," 1997, C-print, 17 3/4 x 11 1/2 inches. Wurm’s work was seen in a traveling survey curated by Peter Holm and co-organized by the New Gallery, Graz (June 20—Sept. 21, 2002), the Centre National de la Photographie, Paris (May 26—Aug. 26, 2002), the Galerie d’Art Moderne, Brussels (Sept. 26—Dec. 1, 2002), and the 20th Century of Art and Ideas, Katowice (Jan. 19—Mar. 16, 2003). Solo shows were recently mounted at Veduta Gallery, Chicago (Sept. 15—Oct. 19, 2002) and Art Which Gallery, San Francisco (Oct. 17—Dec. 1, 2002). Upcoming exhibitions (all in the United States): “Work Ethic” at the Baltimore Museum of Art (Oct. 12, 2002—Jan. 6, 2003); a survey of his work will appear at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio (Feb. 12—April 20, 2003); and at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, and other U.S. venues.
Wurm's explorations in the ephemeral began in the early 1980s with a group of works using dust. Ghostly silhouettes, usually circular or rectangular, are variously seen in glass vitrines, on pedestals or boards laid flat on the floor, and sometimes applied directly to city streets. He has also produced less ephemeral sculptures using clothing or furniture. Some examples involve articles of clothing—sweaters, blazers, shirts—folded or otherwise shaped into simple configurations, attached to the wall or displayed on the floor. Others employ rectangular forms "dressed" in contemporary attire, such as a button-down shirt wrapped around a shelflike, wall-mounted form, the fabric neatly tucked along the edges, or a trench-coat-clad box that stands stiffly in the middle of the room. In other variations, Wurm stretched colorful T-shirts across the tops of hollow wooden boxes, the arm and neck holes creating receding voids—a sort of Fruit of the Loom take on Ashish Kapoor.

Closer to the artist's recent work are photographs and videos showing people donning articles of clothing in comical ways, as if either trapped or trying to hide inside a turtleneck sweater. One example shows what could be a man bent over, with arms and legs stuffed into the arms of a pullover, his head gesturing somewhere near the newly formed "crotch." A number of diptychs evoke a "before and after" effect: a straightforward photograph of a thin individual is juxtaposed with another of that person made fat by multiple layers of bulky clothing, cheeks bloated and chin tucked to simulate a flabby neck. Patience, as an additive sculptural process, seems to be a favorite theme of the artist. He wrote an instructional book on how to gain two clothing sizes in eight days (1983), and plumped up a car using Styrofoam and fiberglass, its chubby body towering beyond the sporty frame (2001).

It follows that Wurm would find laziest another topic worth exploring: "Instructions for Idleness" (2001) is a series of photographs with text showing the artist