Erwin Wurm by Laura Richard Janku
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Erwin Wurm’s first major survey in the U.S., “I Love My Time, I Don’t Like My Time,” reveals how, over the course of a decade, his work has gathered momentum, form, and focus, layering specificity atop continued pranky existentialism. Where earlier works tended to be more metaphysically self-conscious, their practices parodying artworld practices and predecessors, Wurm’s more recent sculptures offer visceral reactions to current events.

A Wurm primer of sorts for the largely uninitiated American public, the exhibition includes the seminal 59 Positions (1992), a video sequence of individual human bodies contorted within a piece of clothing. The more extreme of these biomorphic figures push the limits of flexibility, tensile strength, and the viewer’s capacity to recognize them as human or the fabric as clothing; they compel us both to puzzle apart the anatomy while vicariously feeling the physical discomfort of the poser, not to mention the quiet metaphysical distress of a person transformed into a generic abstract mass. If 59 Positions is Wurm’s most formal exploration of the body as sculpture including the conditions necessary for it to be seen as such, his One-Minute Sculptures (1997-) are its more outspoken and outrageous younger siblings. In them, minimalist-inflected abstraction is traded in for more bizarre, farcical performance.

Beginning with an instruction drawing, willing participants—the artist, his friends, gallery goers, strangers on the street—act out a single static gesture that is documented by video, still photography, or informal Polaroid snapshot. Wurm’s illustrated instructions and the images of their execution serve as a habeas corpus that documents and validates the body as sculpture and renders the artist a reverse Pygmalion. While these notions build on conceptual and performance art practices of the 1960s and ‘70s, Wurm’s is a unique union of high and low culture in which guttural gestures and pedestrian props are the slapstick vehicles into physical philosophical haiku. Not only do the One-Minute Sculptures take aim at the historical and commercial conventions of art, but their humor and accessibility engage those beyond white-cube culture, deconstructing the formal and social parameters by which sculpture is traditionally made and understood. It is as if Wurm proposes a formula for quantum metaphysics (sculpture = mass—energy/time) in which levity gives weight to the everyday and process is prized over product. This imbedded gravitas allows his works to transcend beyond scenes from the theater of the absurd into the extended dialogue about possibility, both in art and life, drawing parallels and metaphors of mortality along the way.

Within the One Minute Sculptures are several sub-series, each defined by a particular theme or location. These aggregations permit Wurm to flesh out an idea—usually anti-establishment in spirit—more fully. The uproarious Instructions on How to Be Politically Incorrect (2003) (which includes the sub-series, Looking for a Bomb, Fuck the Third World, Be a Terrorist)—with its arms and heads in trousers, body fluids, and dick jokes—relies on repetition, deadpan delivery, and recent political debacles to establish its critique as more than facile, bawdy one-liners.

While Wurm invites the public to participate in most of his sculptures, establishing his art as populist and also slyly suggesting that his jobs are universally felt, two series—Brothers and Sisters (2001-02) and Curator/Imperator (2002)—rely on members of a specific group to deliver their punch. In one image, a priest stands in a church, hands in pockets, an apple in his mouth, sucking-pig style. Two other images depict a wimped sister standing in a rectory-like hallway; in one she bows, head touching the wall, in the other she stands, back to the wall, with her index and middle fingers inserted into a crusty bread roll. The obvious religious symbolism in apples and bread and the submissive/repressive gestures seem a bit heavy-handed, but they are offset by the ambiguity implicit in their creation: is this a real priest or nun? If so, are they unwitting critics of their own faith or just game enough to poke a bit of fun at the institution?

We can be assured that the artworld professionals in Curator/Imperator were fully cognizant of the power metaphor implicit in their faux bloatedness (in these full-length portraits their clothing is padded, their expressions haughty). In a similar investigation of human materiality—adding mass to a living sculpture—several photographs present “normal” and “fat” versions of a person. The inverse of the clichéd “before and after” diet testimonials, these diptychs call out the tension between stagnant self-perception and the truly dynamic corporeal state in which we live. That it is hard to tell whether the person in the images has really put on weight or if it only appears so thanks to prosthetic bulk and posture, gives further dimension to Wurm’s various interplays—appearance/reality, time/end, art/life, person/object, humor/nihilism, process/result.

In the last three years, with Fat Cars and Fat Houses, Wurm has moved the idea of expanded mass in a different direction. Rather than redefining everyday stuff through unusual acts and contexts, in these works Wurm takes the symbolic stuff of the bourgeoisie and makes it hyper-bourgeois: doughy, shiny, supersized. Yet, while the cartoonish Fat Car is the perfect mascot for middle-American conspicuous consumerism, its puffy and ultra-customized style also smacks of street subculture. Initially, the Fats seem to have little in common with their predecessors: they are sculptures in the traditional sense, frozen by gravity and product. And I Love My Time, I Don’t Like My Time (2003)—a video projected within the Fat House of the Fat Car performing a Beckettian drug-lingo-inspired monologue that projects the dystopia of a post-9/11 world—realizes the inverse of the One-Minute Sculptures. Where the latter propel ordinary tableaux vivants of gestures and props into ephemeral sculpture, the former animates inert objects via Pixar-ish digital trickery to deliver its desperate rant. However, the two series remain strongly linked by a transformative suspension of context and social commentary, and a comic, resonant absurdity. “I Love My Time, I Don’t Like My Time” reveals that to speak most effectively about today’s world, Wurm has updated his visual language from the conceptual and performance art dialect to the idioms of hip-hop and street culture—his new tags may be phat, but they are not happy.