special issue on conceptual art

THE work of Austrian artist Erwin Wurm suggests that, despite the apparent coming of age of the postmodern oeuvre, there appears to be a deeply rooted, if often quietly unapparent discomfort in contemporary art practice relating to modernism’s formalist legacy, or rather the medium-specific rigidity it implies. Perhaps the lingering uneasiness is best described as a state of artistic schizophrenia in which postmodern notions of innovation clash with a seeming unwillingness to reevaluate the status of Clement Greenberg’s artistic dystopia. But is it all possible for art to unburden itself from such wide-reaching schools of thought, or is the question at hand the very validity of art that voices ideas beyond form and texture?

In answering that question, the work of Erwin Wurm appears as a refreshingly subtle, often comical statement on modern man’s fear of the formalist myth: quietly critiquing current social and political, as well as ahistorical issues with an air of ironic sophistication and playfulness. The piece Fat House (2003), a lifesized model of a comically bloated building, for instance, is symptomatic of the kind of engagement with irony and symbolism that is at the heart of Wurm’s practice. Fat House reaches beyond a concern with its own materiality, and functions as a kind of social commentary which, at once, mocks modern dietary habits and a farcical modernist obsession with self-reference. The piece seems to oppose Theodor Adorno’s call for art as a self-contained, formally oriented entity, through its voluptuous tangibility. And, as if further undermining Adorno’s views, an animated video inside the house gives the piece a voice, with the Fat House posing questions such as, ‘Am I a house? Am I a work of art? Who decides?’, thereby bringing into the foreground a questioning of art historical paradigms that is very much at the core of Wurm’s practice. The true triumph of the piece, however, lies in the way in which it remains entirely unashamed of the playfulness inherent in its use of symbolism: Wurm accepts the limitations faced by art of making claims at transcendental truth, and lets the work act as a simple but bold statement on the opulence of modern life.

In more recent works, Wurm further expands on his critique of modernist ideology. The artist who swallowed the world and The artist who swallowed the world when it was still a disc (2006), both currently on show at the Baltic Mill in Gateshead, reemploy the familiar symbol of the overindulgent person/object to comment on the way contemporary art practice sometimes loses sight of its possibilities, through an exaggerated sense of self-importance and by letting itself be overshadowed by ideology and

Two ways of carrying a bomb, 2003. Courtesy: Galerie Kinzig, Vienna
myth-making. The opposing views of the world as round or flat could thus be seen to embody this dilemma, mocking the kind of self-indulgence that, more often than not, stifles any artistic aspirations to take a self-critical look at one’s own practice. As a solution to this problem, Wurm seems to propose humour as a means of obtaining (or retaining) a self-critical position.

If, however, the aforementioned works are seen as an overt critique of overideologised art, then Wurm’s films and photographs, involving comically dysfunctional items of clothing, imply that perhaps art’s role is related to its capacity to challenge perception, not through illusion or spectacle, but by calling into question the practicalities of the banal. In the piece 39 Positions (1992), for example, people can be seen struggling with different garments, generating laughable scenarios which address the everyday act of wearing clothes as well as ridiculing the formal boundaries of sculpture.

Such characteristics of Wurm’s practice culminate, perhaps most prominently, in a recent piece entitled Adamo was wrong with his ideas about art (2005). The work provides 12 sets of instructions, reminiscent of those accompanying Wurm’s One Minute Sculptures (ongoing), directing viewers to do things such as hold their breath and
think of Spinoza. It gains a dimension of critical validity by openly challenging the rigid and inflexible guidelines for art laid out by Adorno, and engaging viewers in a dialectical relationship between overt art-theoretical critique, and a kind of formal lightheartedness that grants the work an air of legitimacy. Whilst Wurm doesn’t appear to be taking his statement all too seriously, the irony and wit underlying the sculptures give his ideas weight. Furthermore, the work’s immediacy avoids a tedious discussion on any potentially mediating documentation, reinforcing the view that what is encountered can, in fact, be taken at face value, rather than seen through the distorting prism of a history that has little bearing on it.

Erwin Wurm’s work thrives, to a great extent, on its humorous and ironic tone. Its true strength, however, lies in its ability to appropriate and, in turn, challenge the languages and visual codes of a world assumed familiar. Wurm calls into question the validity of an art historical legacy that still casts its shadow over art today, and engages audiences in a satirical, yet fundamentally critical discussion on art’s forms and social criticism alike.

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