PRINTS
An Insider’s Guide
What’s So Funny About Erwin Wurm?
Art Materials: The Unseen Dangers
Maps as Art
Cheerful conceptual prankster
Erwin Wurm creates a surreal universe
where Bosch meets Looney Tunes

UPPING THE ANTIC

BY DAVID GALLOWAY

The headquarters for Erwin Wurm’s sprawling
conglomerate of workshops, ateliers, and storage facilities in
Vienna is situated in the historic district of Leopoldstadt. At the
heart of the city’s former Jewish quarter, once known locally as
Matzoh Island, it was the site where residents were gathered be-
fore being sent off to concentration camps. A generation ago, stu-
dents and artists, drawn by the area’s low rents and proximity to
the city center, just across the Danube, moved into its rundown
buildings and were soon joined by trendy urbanites as well as a steady stream of
immigrants. Today Orthodox Jews, most of them from the former Soviet Union, have
also found a home here.

It is this constantly shifting society that appeals to Wurm, whose studio complex is
located in the Taborstrasse, adjacent to a large discount shop owned by a Pakistani.
On the same block is the school Sigmund Freud attended, and, across the street, a
17th-century Carmelite church, alongside Vienna’s oldest outdoor market. The Japan-
ese restaurant that Wurm frequents is only a short walk away, as is the floor-through
loft he is renovating. “The multicultural mix often reminds me of New York,” the
artist says. He describes the office part of his studio as his think tank, where he
comes up with new projects and manages his hectic exhibition schedule, which in the
past three years or so has included major retrospectives in Vienna, Hamburg, Munich,
Bonn, and Beijing. From 2002 until his recent resignation, Wurm taught at the Acad-
emy of Fine Arts Vienna. Today he and his wife, French graphic artist Elise Mougín,
divide their time between Vienna and their residence at Schloss Limberg in the wine
country.

Wurm has some of his sculptures fabricated in a building neighboring his Vienna stu-
dio, but most of the production facilities are outside the city. It is clearly difficult to
maintain a single atelier or production facility, since his works are often executed in vari-
ous materials at once, such as wood, polyester, and bronze. Wurm’s cars, for example—
both inflated and melting—are lacquered at the Opel facility in Russelsheim.

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The teeming streets of Leopoldstadt offer obvious parallels to the eclectic universe Wurm has created, one where talking houses get fat, cars climb walls, and human bodies sprout cucumbers and bananas. The metamorphosing entities are like a collaboration between Hieronymus Bosch and Looney Tunes, cheerfully crisscrossing traditional boundaries between styles, mediums, and genres. From watercolor to film, performance to installation, photography, video, and sculpture, there is scarcely a medium to which the 56-year-old artist has not added his surrealist signature. He has even experimented with hypnosis for video projects. He exhibits widely and is represented by Lehmann Maupin in New York, where his show opens on November 4. Prices for his sculptures range from $35,000 to $175,000.

WHEN HE APPLIED to study art at the Vienna Academy, Wurm’s ambition was to become a painter, but the entrance exam required him to submit both paintings and sculptures, and it was the latter that got him admitted. “That’s when I started to think about what sculpture could be today,” he says. “It led me on a search for emptiness, possibility, and volumes—the fundamental qualities of sculpture.” Exploring the phenomenon that a form can expand and then contract, hence changing its volume, resulted in his “breathing” (and speaking) cars and houses. “It’s all about adding and subtracting.”

Wurm reflects, as in his pieces composed of dozens of sweaters pulled one over the other to make “fat” sculptures. Works like Speech Bubble and Sex Bubble (both 2007)—swollen, sorbet-colored spheres resembling knitted balloons—barely hint at their sweatered ancestry. “I’m interested in the shell,” Wurm says, “and in the packaging of forms or bodies.”

Four of Wurm’s “One Minute Sculptures,” all 1997, except for the 2005 image of Franz Beckenbauer (lower right).

It’s a theme that has comic resonance in works such as the video 59 Positions (1992), which, in 20-second snippets of action, demonstrates the steady deformation of a human body as it is encased in layers and layers of clothing. Since that piece, the comic element, verging here on slapstick, has played a central role in Wurm’s art. It distinguishes his

In Confessional, 2000, viewers can insert their heads—and confess—winding up in the doghouse.

Wurm’s iconic Fat Convertible, 2006, cloaks emptiness.
work from the tortured, guilt-ridden approach of the Viennese Actionists, although like those ritualists, Wurm sets the human body at the center of his oeuvre. The comic spirit also informs his own collection, with works by such artists as Richard Prince, Martin Kippenberger, Sarah Lucas, and Sylvie Fleury.

Besides employing absurd humor, which Wurm sees as an instrument of social criticism, he frequently alludes to games like hide-and-seek, charades, and blindman's buff—drawing on his childhood for themes and strategies. He was determined, he says, from the age of 13, to make art his profession, although his father, a policeman, considered such a career only a few steps from that of a criminal. Nevertheless, Wurm recalls, his father was a popular figure, well liked even by the men he helped put behind bars. Prisoners used to send him objects they had made from matchsticks or straws—ships and church towers and bridges. “He had a whole collection of miniature sculptures,” the son recalls. “Maybe that’s why I became an artist.”

WURM REMEMBERS
producing his first sculpture at age 14, and says he was encouraged by an art teacher who recognized his talent. When he was 18 he fell in with a circle of friends who were interested in literature, reading such writers as Thomas Bernhard, Samuel Beckett, John Steinbeck, and Michel de Montaigne. Suddenly, he says, “culture seemed a possible way out of the narrow world in which I’d grown up.” Yet when he announced to his parents his intention to study art, “there was a lot of shouting and slamming of doors. In the end, though, my parents supported the decision.”

Wurm also reflects on his youthful interest in furniture and common household objects. “I didn’t know why, but there were material things that simply fascinated me. They included

a crèche with carved and painted figures that I could play with for hours on end,” he says. “My parents weren’t particularly religious, but they were convinced I wanted to become a priest. For me, though, it was all about the carving and the painting of forms themselves, and had nothing to do with their religious significance.” That Wurm’s artistic vision is rooted in childhood may well explain why he chose to make a recreation of his parents’ house the central work in his recent Beijing retrospective, “Narrow House,” at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art. Like the actual house, it is 26 feet tall; only in its shallow depth, 3¾ feet, does it
depart from—or perhaps interpret—reality. For his first Fer
House (2003), he composed a text that the house “speaks”
when visitors enter. It includes the following sardonic reflection:

who says this is an art work as a house
and that it is just a house?
the architects—people who build houses
or artists—people who make art
or contemporary art people . . . who make contemporary art
or contemporary architects . . . who build contemporary houses
but wait
there are just people who think and talk about art
and there are people who just think and talk about houses
they have actually just talking about art and or houses
they also write about art and or houses.
Here the artist refines intellectual speculation. Wurms takes a
pragmatic approach to popular culture, as well as to the house
and to art in general, viewing it as a cloak that defines a form
while embracing its meaning and values.

It is no surprise that Wurms favorite building type is the
stuccoed, tile-roofed bungalow. Such a typically middle-class
family home was a prominent motif in Wurms 2006 show at
Viennas Ludwig Forum. There, a scale model of the building,
seemingly fallen from the sky, was wedged upside down
against the outside wall of the museum. The artist titled the
work House Attack. Among the numerous other constructions
were miniature houses into which the artist often sticks his
head. His Conference (2003) is a doghouse with two entrances
into which any two viewers, lying flat on the ground, can in-
sert their heads.
At first, Wurms worked exclusively with found materials—
scrap of wood or metal and articles of clothing—all of which
he saw in a sculptural context. His choice of materials had as
much to do with the fact that he could not afford conventional
supplies as it did with his sense of the poetry (and absurdity)
of the commonplace.

WURM RECOGNIZES PARALLELS IN HIS WORK,
which he thinks of as a form of social sculpture, to that of
Joseph Beuys, yet he is critical of the degree to which Beuys
bound his art to his own person. By contrast, Wurms first be-
came known for tableaux vivants that virtually anyone can
perform. In these “One Minute Sculptures,” which sometimes
recall the early performances of Gilbert & George, the artist or
his models strike absurd poses that can be held for only 60
seconds. A man sits with a bucket on his head. A woman lies
on her back, legs raised, balancing two porcelain cups on the
soles of her shoes. A man sits in a chair, but does so while
standing on his head. Franz Beckenbauer (2005), a photo docu-
menting a performance in which Germany’s nattily dressed soccer legend
leans against a wall with oranges pressed between his head and his shoulder, shows two
oranges on a shelf alongside the image and a
label reading “Being like Beckenbauer.”
The photo is intended to be exhibited along with a real shelf
bearing two oranges. This part of the two-part
piece carries the title Being Like Beckenbauer.
In this way, as the artist puts it, “art makes the
impossible possible.”

In the series “Instructions for Idiocy” (2001),
do-it-yourself sculptures, operating on the princi-
ple of point-by-number, offer the following sug-
gestions: “Stay in your pajamas all day,” “Don’t
care about anything,” and “Express yourself
through yawning.” For the true activist, the series
“How to Be Politically Incorrect” (2002–3) offers
simple formulas like “Sit in someone’s soup” and
“Peel on someone’s rug,” along with graphically
documented how-to photographs. Wurms’s expan-
sion of the sculptural idiom includes his “dust
pieces,” which consist of nothing more than
the shapes left behind when an object is moved—in a display case,
for example—and for which the artist is prepared to issue cer-
tificates of authenticity. Far less ephemeral are the “tortured
constructions based on dysfunctional machines. Misconceivable
(2007) is a replica of a cabin cruiser that seems to have
gone soft at the center and be “melting” from a pier and into the
water. Such conceptions rival Rube Goldberg in wit, com-
plexity, and absurdity. Wurms’s Teknikütten Rent VW Van (2006)
can move only in circles, while his Renault 25/199 (2008)
binds the entire car into a slanting position to resemble
something viewed in a fun-house mirror. At the heart of this
surrealistic universe is a determination to erase the conven-
tional boundaries of artistic practice. Even if it involves urinating
on a friend’s carpet.