

whitewall

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THE ART ISSUE

FIVE YEARS! JULIAN SCHNABEL, EVAN PENNY, ERWIN WURM, LAURENCE GRAFF



Erwin Wurm grew up in a household that considered artists to be criminals. His father was a detective who envisioned his only son growing up to be a lawyer, doctor, or government official. Wurm, however, had other plans. In the late nineties he earned mass acclaim for his "One Minute Sculptures," which appeared in the Red Hot Chili Peppers video "Can't Stop" and many fashion magazines. By using everyday objects like clothing and creating houses, cars, and human figures (however bloated), he holds a mirror to society through formalist sculpture with a dash of humor. After Wurm's recent show at Lehmann Maupin in New York, "Gulp," *Whitewall* spoke with him about comfort within our first, second, and third skin and the story behind the huge police cap.

ERWIN WURM

BY KATY DONOGHUE, PORTRAIT BY STEVE BENISTY

WHITEWALL: *What attracted you to the life of an artist?*

ERWIN WURM: You have this idea of the life of the artist when you're young. I thought an artist is someone who is free — they can do what they want. And it's like falling in love with someone: You fantasize, you imagine, you project certain things on the other.

WW: *Your father was a police officer, and you've said that he thought that artists were criminals. How did he react when you told him you wanted to be an artist?*

EW: Well, he was very shocked, of course. It's like the world broke down for him. And it was also a concern because as an artist at that time in Austria, it was kind of a weird role. There were artists who from society's point of view were insane. So for my father they were criminals. For my parents, it was a world that they didn't know. And for that reason they were very concerned, and they were afraid that their only son would become strange and dangerous.

WW: *Did the large police cap at the show at Lehmann Maupin*

relate to your father's career?

EW: No. It's another story. I live in Vienna and some years ago I was invited by the police headquarters, along with several artists, to create an outdoor art piece. I proposed the big police hat, three meters in diameter mounted at approximately head level of the public so that the public could go under it, walk under it, and feel protected. I thought it was a great idea, but they didn't accept it. They didn't like it at all. I thought after a while to bring the police cap [into my own work]. It's not connected to my father. He was a policeman, but he was a detective, so he was not wearing a uniform.

WW: *When you applied to art school, you originally wanted to be a painter.*

EW: Exactly. I wanted to be a painter and at that time we had to take exams and be accepted. I took the test, and they put me in the sculpture class, which was a big shock for me because I was making paintings. It was a big challenge, and after awhile of being frustrated, I started to think about questions and notions of, What is a sculpture? What can it be for me? Can I use it as a tool for

Opposite page:
Erwin Wurm standing under *New York Police Cap* (2010).



Above:
Erwin Wurm
Fat Convertible
2005
Mixed media
51 x 185 x 94 inches
Courtesy of the artist
and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York



Right:
Erwin Wurm
New York Police Cap
2010
Styropor, epoxy resin, and fabric
24 x 43 x 40 inches
Courtesy of the artist
and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

Right:
Erwin Wurm
Jakob / Big Psycho VII
2010
Aluminum and paint
47 x 15 x 42 inches
Edition of 6
Courtesy of the artist
and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York



[addressing] themes of our time? And after some time I started to make basic research on the issue of sculpture.

WW: *What did you find from that research?*

EW: For the first years I made work that was related to both sculpture and painting. When you look at paint, it's almost a kind of skin. I've realized that skin is very potent for sculpture. Classical sculpture, cast aluminum, or bronze is skin, a very thin layer of metal. The skin defines the surface, defines the volume. And I realized it's also the same with paint and cloth. I came very quickly to the material cloth, with shirts, and so on.

WW: *How did the idea for "One Minute Sculptures" come about? Was that part of your exploration of what is sculpture?*

EW: Well, when I started with thin layers of cloth, sweaters, or so, it was about the surface; the transfer from two-dimensional to three-dimensional things. Through a simple way of hanging a sweater, you could transform the sweater into, say, a urinal, based off my instructions on the wall. And those pieces only existed for a short period of time, like the time of an exhibition. And this short period of time became shorter and shorter. I realized, now I have pieces that exist for only ten seconds or two minutes, and so I gave them the name "One Minute Sculpture."

The first time I did it was when I had a show in Germany. I said, "I'm not going to ship anything over there and I'll go there 10 days in advance." There was a guest apartment where I could stay, and it tried to realize what I would do with the daily life objects I found there: chairs, oranges, beer bottles, whatever. I asked the people at the gallery if they would work with me. So the director put all these pens in his nose and his ears. I used the materials there, and I created all these combinations with the people who work there. First I tried everything myself by video and I showed them in the show and some prints of the pictures I made. So the first time happened quite pragmatically.

WW: *So what do you think the appeal of these sculptures was to people like Karl Lagerfeld and the Red Hot Chili Peppers?*

EW: The unusual combination of daily life objects, the people — it was very much about the psychology of our society; I was trying to create a strange connection between the people and the space where they live, what they have. I don't know what really attracted them; I didn't analyze it. But I was just fascinated by it.

WW: *You've said that you want your work to be accessible and that you want it to reach a wider audience. Was that a notion you had early on in your career?*

EW: No, this came slowly. I wanted to be accepted by the father and mother figures of the art world. I wanted to be accepted by people I admired. And then after a certain time I realized the art world is pretty small and it would be interesting to step over it. But this came by itself. It came through the Red Hot Chili Peppers or the fashion magazines, photographers, fashion icons like Lagerfeld. All of a sudden I got access to people because they wanted to work with me through my "One Minute Sculptures." I thought it was interesting to open yourself to others and to let them have access to your work. I realized that magazines, TV, the Internet, newspapers are a public space where art can happen.

WW: *Perhaps part of the mass appeal is that your work is really humorous. You've said that you prefer to deal with serious issues through humor. Why?*

EW: Most of the art out of the 20th century, German and American art, is on a very serious level — very heavy and with pathos — and I think there is another way and I'm interested in this other way. Humor is a strange thing. I made a series called "Instructions on How to Be Politically Incorrect." One piece was called *Looking for a Bomb I*. In Europe, people found it funny and interesting, but in America people found it scary and some were even insulted. I never expected that, because it wasn't meant to insult anybody. It was a work that I wanted to create that related to questions of our time. This is a big issue of our time. But some people read it in a very different way, and I realized this afterward. I never make things just to make funny things. I make things on a certain level to create insecurity and question marks in the relation to their daily life, to our psychology, to our social issues.

WW: *You've also received a lot of attention for the "Fat Cars" and "Fat Houses" series. Are those a commentary on consumption?*

EW: Of course. We create our identity through consumption. You remember this famous book *To Have or To Be?* Now we are definitely on the "to have" side. To have is more important than to be. Most of my work is about reflecting these issues of consumption, our fascination with youth, and our fascination with health. Educated and rich people are slim now, and the poor people or people who don't have access to knowledge are big and eat junk food. The big ones were the important ones, and the small ones were the underdogs. And now that's turned around. And growing became all of a sudden a social component — growing and getting slim. All this diversity is interesting to transform it into sculpture. Those are interesting questions for me.

WW: *The "Fat Cars" and the "Fat Houses" really resemble human fat. I think if it was more cloudlike or perfectly bulbous, we wouldn't have the same reaction as we do looking at a form that resembles our own fat. Was that intentional?*

EW: That happened, but it was a total coincidence. When I made the first car fat I saw that it had a face because of the lights and the license plate. So I made a video where the Fat Car talked. And the same happened with the house. This was interesting, because it was related more to the person who owns it. It's like a dog. People say that when you have a dog for 15 years, you start to look like the dog. So it's the same with the house or car.

WW: *Do you have a car or house that represents you?*

EW: No. I have a car, but it doesn't represent me.

WW: *The exhibition "Gulp" at Lehman Maupin in New York included cast sculptures of human forms contorted inside real sweaters. What was the idea behind those works?*

EW: It's a variety. To me, they are very simple pieces, because I asked a person to take a sweater and put it over as I told him. These forms came out and then we cast it. It transformed very easily into something else. The *Lying Big Gulp* is very sexual, and this was not intentional; it just happened. I made a series about this aspect with clothes because it's about hiding — you see a human being but you don't see the face, so it's not related to any person or personality.

WW: *Clothing is also like a car or a house. We project ourselves through it.*

EW: Exactly — this was the beginning. The clothes are the second skin; the house is the third skin, in a way.



Erwin Wurm
One Minute Sculpture
1997
C-print
18 x 12 inches
Courtesy of the artist
and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York



Erwin Wurm

Fat House

2003

Iron, wood, polystyrene, aluminium,
and electricity installation

18 x 33 x 23 feet

Color video on DVD, video projection, speakers,

8 min 40 sec, loop

Installation view at Unlimited Basel, Basel, Switzerland, 2004

Courtesy of the artist

and Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York