

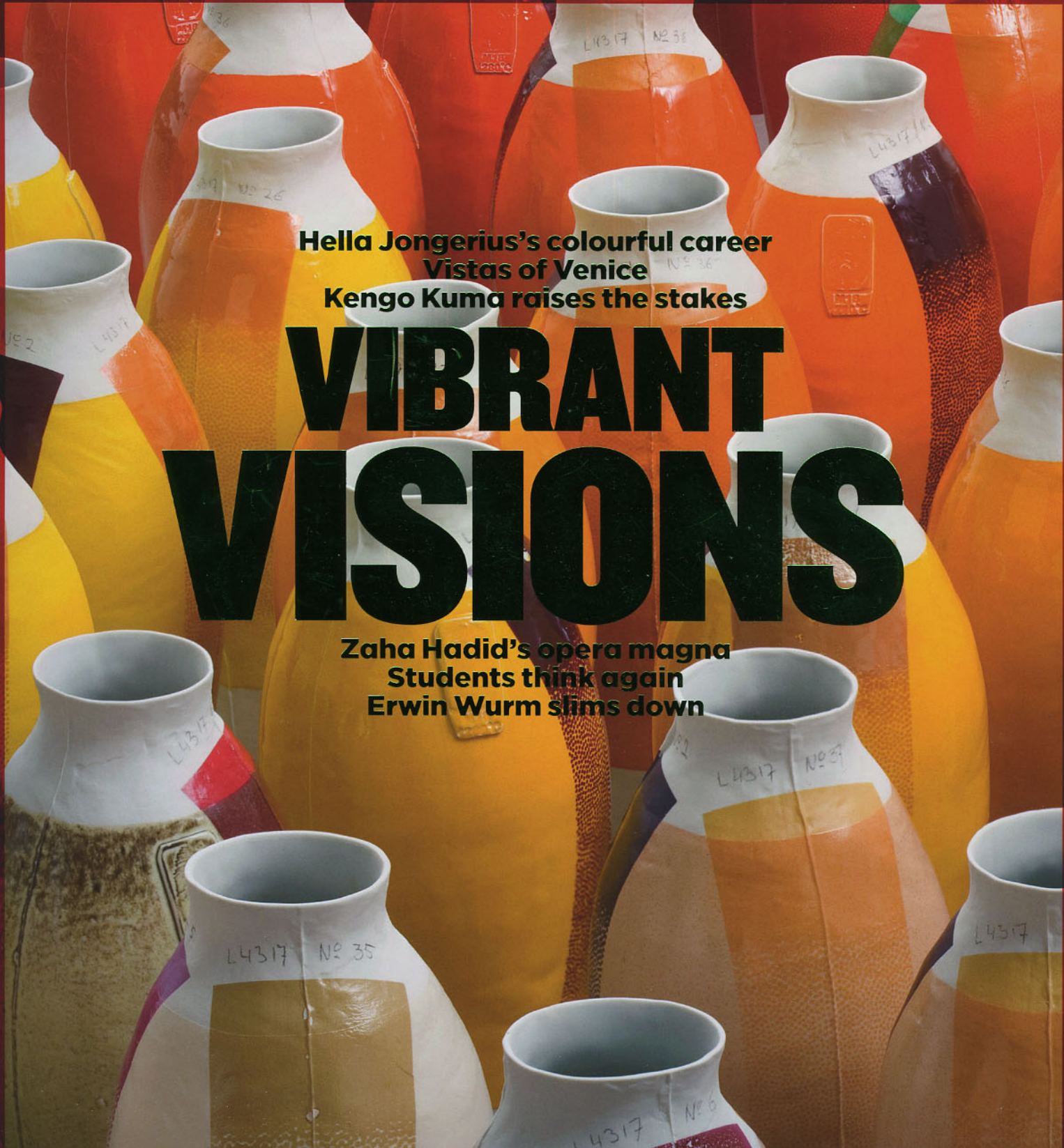
FRAME



Hella Jongerius's colourful career
Vistas of Venice
Kengo Kuma raises the stakes

VIBRANT VISIONS

Zaha Hadid's opera magna
Students think again
Erwin Wurm slims down





THINK



THIN



PHOTO TANG XUAN,
COURTESY OF UCCA

Like much of ERWIN WURM's work, *Narrow House* greeted visitors to Beijing's UCCA with a light touch, fully weighted by his views on individualism, politics, the press and perception.

WORDS FEMKE DE WILD
PHOTOS MISCHA MAWRATA, COURTESY OF ERWIN WURM



NARROW HOUSE, WHICH REFLECTS TODAY'S 'NARROW MINDED SOCIETY', IS A REPLICA OF THE HOUSE WURM ONCE LIVED IN WITH HIS PARENTS.
PHOTO COURTESY OF ESSL



ENTERING THE HOUSE AND FINDING EVERYTHING SQUEEZED TOGETHER, YOU ARE OVERCOME BY A SENSE OF CLAUSTROPHOBIA.



'We are reliant on our perception of the world'
Erwin Wurm

You've made a fat car, a contorted minibus, rectangular torsos on headless humans and now a narrow house. Would you agree that proportion and distortion characterize most of your work?

I've always been interested in scale and in how the media influences human perception. Photography was the first medium to affect the way we perceive things. Today it's the widescreen TV that distorts our image of reality. When you watch old films on a new screen, you see people who are deformed. They look wider, fatter – a good reflection of the obesity problem in the United States. Although my brother-in-law is retarded, he can travel alone and take pictures of what he sees. His photos are all slightly distorted. That's how he sees the world.

Why is our image of reality so important?

We are reliant on how we perceive the world around us. To survive in this world, a hedge-fund manager has to see things entirely differently than someone in the Andaman Islands. At the moment, we're living in a very narrow-minded society – a society that's represented by *Narrow House*, which may look completely normal from the outside, but when you enter, you find everything squeezed together and are overcome by a sense of claustrophobia.

The British philosopher Karl Popper advocated an open society, unlike our society, which is becoming more and more constrained. In America orthodox religions are growing in numbers, and the same thing is happening in other places as well.

And the media is playing a major role in this situation?

In the 1960s and '70s, the media criticized and monitored the world. That's not happening any more. Nowadays, the press most often conveys the ideas of people and groups. As a result, the media contributes to the dissemination of certain opinions, which are then shared by more and more people. In a democracy, analysis and monitoring are very important, but the media has lost sight of its watchdog function. Art magazines, too, often represent only the views of a certain group. In the past, it was the task of art magazines to introduce art to the world, but now art is everywhere and other issues play a role.

You often work with archetypes and icons.

Does *Narrow House* follow in the same direction?

The installation has a pitched roof, which is indeed an archetypal component of houses in general. For *Fat House* I considered using a modernist house by Adolf Loos, but that didn't work because it had a flat roof. I want instant recognition from viewers. *Narrow House* is a replica of the house I lived in with my parents for the last three years before I left home. A lot of prefabricated houses of that type were built in Austria in the 1970s. Prefabrication is a conspiracy of supermarkets, hardware stores and mass media, such as television. I just got back from Abu Dhabi, where I saw heavily guarded neighbourhoods that are carbon copies of communities in the United States. Picture 300 houses, all identical in appearance. They've duplicated not only houses, but streets and gardens as well. They're cloning bad architecture – what a nightmare. A bad painting can be hidden away, but we have to live with bad architecture.

How would you describe good architecture?

Good architecture takes care of the physical, >>>

the mental, the intellectual and the psychological needs of those who use it. It's up to architects to broaden their approach to architecture, to keep developing new ideas. If they did this, we'd be much farther down the road – much more sophisticated.

The house is a theme in your work. Why?

Look at it this way. The skin of a bronze sculpture is very thin. It determines the form of the piece, but there's nothing inside. At a certain point I realized that clothes do the same thing. They lend form to the body. A house is like a third skin. But is it protective? I'm interested in the house as a concept, in how this concept evolves and in the society it reflects. People used to be proud of their homes. Buying a house meant having a place to live for the rest of your life. It's not at all like that today. When people in the United States began buying and selling houses with the greatest of ease, they changed the idea of what a house is.

You've mentioned the States several times now.

Mass consumption and the fact that we define ourselves through consumption started in the USA. In Abu Dhabi, they're copying not only houses built in the United States but also the American lifestyle. That's happening all over the world, and it's frightening. I've been travelling for my work a long time now, and I used to see far more diversity. In Asia today, everything is new. Old neighbourhoods and houses are disappearing. It's all starting to look alike, to become boring and exchangeable. The first time I was in the States, the people there seemed so different from those in Europe – in the way they talked, in the way they acted. But the big differences have faded away. Everyone's imitating everyone else. Uniformity offers protection against the outside world. We in the West tout Individualism as the highest aim, but freedom and individualism are big lies. We're all dependent on one another. We're mass creatures.

But we shouldn't define ourselves by mass consumption?

We should define ourselves by what we are spiritually and mentally, not by material possessions. You don't see a single human being in the scads of design magazines available today. Magazines like to talk about showing identity, but what's between the covers besides photos of empty lofts, empty houses and empty buildings? I used to collect design. I thought the Eames lounge chair was fantastic, but before long it had become a status symbol. You saw it everywhere. Later all the hip people in the art scene had to have a piece of furniture by Jean Prouvé. I was no exception. Currently, though, I make my own furniture, and it's been years since I looked at design magazines.

What's the alternative?

There are too many rules. A house can't be higher than a specified number of metres. You can have a certain amount of floor space and absolutely no more. There are so many restrictions. People should be permitted to be more creative. Get rid of the rules and let people dream about how they want to live. Change will come when that happens. I know people who would love to update the interior of their apartment, but they don't know how to do it. People are sitting on bank accounts that are bursting with money. Banks are the greatest threat to our society. Society, politics, the economy – all >>>

IN THE INCONCEIVABLY CRUSHED AND CONFINING BEDROOM, EVEN THE CRUCIFIX ABOVE THE BED IS DISTORTED.



'Design magazines talk about showing identity but publish photos of empty lofts'
Erwin Wurm

THE NARROW KITCHEN BREATHES
AN AIR REDOLENT OF THE 1970S.





HANGING ON THE WALL OF THE UNCOMFORTABLY CRAMPED DINING ROOM IS A PHOTOGRAPH OF A BOY IN A CHINESE HAT.



KÄSTCHEN 2.

MÖBEL I.
PHOTO CARMEN BRUCIC,
COURTESY OF AK7

MÖBEL 2.



**'We should define ourselves
by what we are spiritually,
not by material possessions'**

Erwin Wurm

WURM'S NEW CAST

In the past, Erwin Wurm collected design classics by the usual suspects: Gerrit Rietveld, Verner Panton, Charles Eames, Poul Kjaerholm and the like. When design became a status symbol – and 'all the hip people in the art scene had to have a piece of furniture by Jean Prouvé' – Wurm lost interest in his hobby and started making his own furniture. In 2010 he set about creating a collection of sculptures made from old furniture. These 'performative objects' reach completion only when someone sits down at the table or takes a drink from the bar that's concealed behind the doors of Wurm's Kästchen 1 and 2.



MÖBEL 4 & 5.

completely dependent on banks. Lobbyists, in particular, represent the greatest danger. In the 1960s the tobacco lobby was still making sure that a lot of people thought smoking was healthy. And don't forget how the Bush administration planted seeds of doubt that made people question the threat posed by climate change. We are stupid little fish swimming in a big pond.

You're addressing highly charged political topics today, yet your work is known for its humorous character.

Artists take different approaches to their work. Theodor Adorno said that art should be serious; he saw art as something almost sacred. He also believed that the Holocaust should have put an end to poetry. Major themes are usually approached seriously, with pathos. Pathos is heavy; it pulls you down. Humour, on the other hand, is light. Making use of humour allows me to talk about things more easily. I went through a very difficult period in my life, and I was helped by being able to laugh at myself now and then. But my work isn't about the joke. Just the opposite – I'm asking people to take a closer look. Humour is just the surface. I can reach people more easily with humour, but then it draws them inside.

Did that difficult period you mentioned influence your work?

Although I'd never been someone who believed in that sort of thing, that bad patch did change me. While I was in the middle of it, I couldn't have cared less what people thought of my work. The opinions of others were no longer so significant. I've always set high standards for myself. I wanted to reach a high level of philosophical achievement and to produce excellent work, but I hadn't managed to satisfy those goals or to gain the recognition I found so important. Then I got to the point where it didn't matter any more, and it all happened more or less automatically. ■■■■