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Christy Gast \* Erwin Wurm \* Six  
Israeli Sculptors \* Hong Kong Int'l  
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# ***In Search Of Catharsis***



***The Austrian sculptor Erwin Wurm uses his rich sense of humor to make works, both conceptual and formal, that inspire the ridiculous and the pleasurable.***

***The theatrical nature of much of Wurm's work reveals deeply serious observations on life and society in which comedy and tragedy and joy and despair are the jousting protagonists of the human condition.***

By Jonathan Thomson

In *The Name of the Rose*, Umberto Eco's brilliant novel of medieval life, ritual, knowledge, and theology that is also a riveting mystery and an engrossing thriller, the object that was the root cause of the mystery and the murders committed to protect it was a copy of Aristotle's lost second book of the *Poetics*. Since the Renaissance, discussions of Aristotle's *Poetics* have lamented the loss of this second book, which is supposed to have contained a theory of comedy that would have complemented and completed the Aristotelian theory of tragedy.

The lost second book is believed to have contained a discussion of the ridiculous, *katharsis* (catharsis), and a discussion of comedy in which the laughable would have been analyzed as corresponding to the pitiful and the terrible in tragedy. Eco imagines that the lost book begins by saying "As we promised, we will now deal with comedy (as well as with satire and mime) and see how, in inspiring the pleasure of the ridiculous, it arrives at the purification of that passion. That such passion is most worthy of consideration we have al-



**Erwin Wurm, One Minute Sculptures** (Horst Giese, former director of Künstlerhaus Bremen, Germany), 1997, c-print, 45 x 30 cm. Courtesy: Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg (A), Paris (F) Photograph: Studio Wurm.

ready said in the book on the soul, inasmuch as—alone among the animals—man is capable of laughter.”<sup>1</sup> He then outlines how comedy excites laughter through action and speech, and lists the former in a manner suggested by the *Tractatus Coislinianus*: “Ridiculousness of actions is born from likening of the best to the worst and vice versa, from arousing surprise through deceit, from the impossible, from violation of laws of nature, from the irrelevant and the inconsequent, from the debasing of characters, from the use of comical and vulgar pantomime, from disharmony, from the choice of the least worthy things.”<sup>2</sup>

These are all strategies used by Austrian sculptor Erwin Wurm, whose works inspire the pleasure of the ridiculous in order to make serious observations on life and society. There is something theatrical about all of his works and, just as the twin masks of comedy and tragedy represent the dramatic arts and their themes of joy and despair, so, too, do his works bracket the human condition.

Erwin Wurm was born in Bruck an der Mur in Austria in 1954 and studied the History of Art,

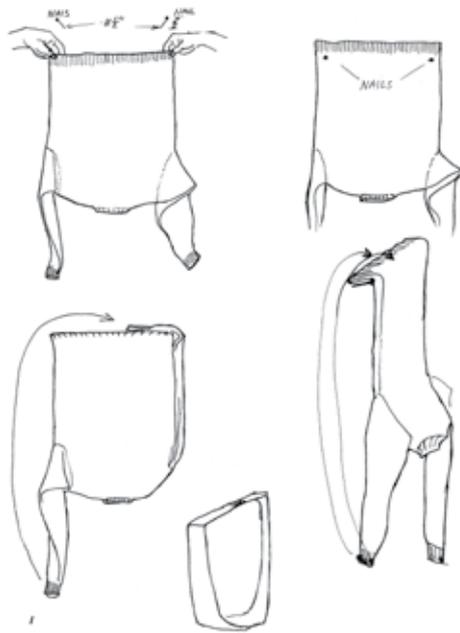


Der Idiot

**Above left: Erwin Wurm, The Idiot II**, 2003, chair by Roland Rainer, drawing, wooden pedestal, carpaint, 83 x 55 x 53 cm. **Above right: Erwin Wurm, The Idiot II**, 2003, pencil on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm. Both courtesies: Xavier Hufkens Gallery, Brussels, Belgium. Photo: **Previous page: Erwin Wurm, Geste mobil**, 2008, mixed media, 371 x 327 x 143 cm. Courtesy: Museum of Applied Arts, Vienna, Austria. Photographs: Studio Wurm.

German Language, and Literature at the University of Graz, before completing art studies at the Art Studies Mozarteum Salzburg in Salzburg and the Gestaltungslehre University of Applied Art and Academy of Fine Art in Vienna. He first came to international prominence in 1990 when he was included in the Aperto section of the *Venice Biennale*, although he is perhaps best known for his *One Minute Sculptures* that he began in 1988. His work is conceptual and formalist in that it consists of concepts and ideas and is concerned with sculptural space, surface, scale, volume, formal organization, and process.

Throughout his 40-year career he has transformed everyday objects into art. He does not present these things as ready-mades *per se*, but rather as a vehicle for the experience of art. His first use of everyday objects was based on economic necessity. He says, "When I started to study art, I had no money, so I started to



**Erwin Wurm, Instruction drawing, 1990**, felt-tip pen on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm. Courtesy: Xavier Hufkens Gallery, Brussels, Belgium. Photograph: Studio Wurm.

work with material that other people throw away. I had a chance to work with several artists together in a little studio and there was a wood factory nearby and so there were offcuts of wood that I could use. Later we moved to another studio near a can factory and so there were cans that I could use. Then I realized from the cans that, while they are vessels, they are empty, with no mass, just the sides like a skin, like clothes. And from there I realized that I could use all sorts of everyday objects and, when I combine those objects with people in a strange or embarrassing position, something else happens and this is the real outcome of the piece and not the fact that I used an object.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1990, Wurm placed old clothes on plinths for his work at Aperto in Venice in 1990. He also used clothes to create a work for his first exhibition in America that consisted of a drawing of instructions to the gallery, to drive pairs of nails into the gallery wall a certain distance apart, then to hang from these nails



**Erwin Wurm, 59 Positions, 1992**, c-print, 16 parts, each 50 x 70 cm. Courtesy: Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg (A), Paris (F). Photograph: Studio Wurm.

old sweaters (jumpers, pullovers) of different sizes and colors that they were to buy from local shops. A subsequent work called *59 Positions* is a 20-minute video depicting the strange abstract shapes that are created when a person pulls a sweater on over their entire body or wears it in unconventional ways.

**H**is first *One Minute Sculptures* were improvised works that were created wherever he happened to be, using whatever objects, participants, and backgrounds were available. The participants posed themselves with the objects for 60 seconds while Wurm documented the work through photographs and video.

One of his best known works features Horst Giese, then director of Künstlerhaus Bremen, with pens inserted into his nostrils and ears, film canisters clenched in his eye sockets, and a stapler in his mouth. The resulting image is both arresting and very funny. In later works the artist gave directions as to how an object could be used in performance and the artwork consists of either a drawing illustrating a person engaging with an object in an unconventional way and a simple instruction, or a photograph of a person performing that action. Examples include clenching a broomstick between your buttocks, inserting your arms into the arms of a chair and balancing its seat on your face, or standing with one leg in a rubbish bin.

These are very direct and very funny works but the artist is at pains to



Erwin Wurm, *Art Basel fucks Documenta*, 2006, resin, paint, 62 x 124 x 85 cm. Courtesy: Lehmann Maupin Gallery, NY, USA. Photograph: Studio Wurm.

point out that he is “not doing comedy.” “I am not trying to make jokes. I just try to interpret my surroundings, my time, my world, my society and that is what makes people laugh. I never [set out to] make a joke so for that reason I do not like that my work is cut short to ‘joke.’ Humor is something else. I work with humor because it attracts people and gets people closer to the piece and then, when they realize that there is something behind it, another layer or a second or third layer behind that, and that is interesting to me. My work does not just attract people from the art world but people who are not con-

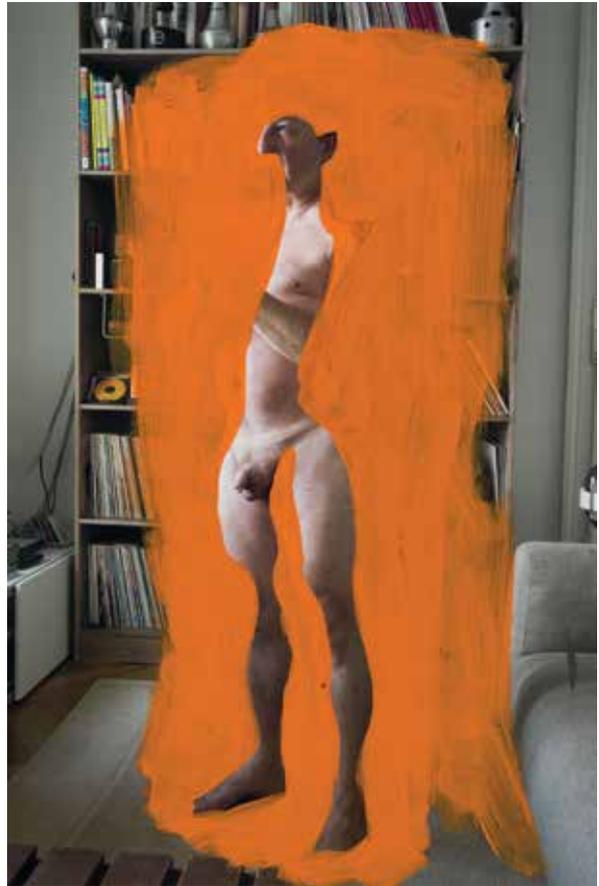
nected to that world because it is easy to get and is mostly connected to reality and to certain problems of life combined with humor. With the one minute sculptures there are different layers between the situation on one side, and the problem or possibilities that the public would realize as sculpture, as an actor being on the stage for a minute. This creates something very interesting.”

Some of the situations that Wurm depicts look quite violent, and may be connected to slapstick humor or *Schadenfreude*, which refers to taking pleasure in the misfortune of others, but Wurm insists that he is not interested in violence but in the ridiculousness of the participant. He offers instead the German word *Fremdschämen*. This word describes the vicarious embarrassment that we may feel when we see someone else doing something embarrassing, even though that other person may not be aware of the fact that they ought to be embarrassed. “This is an excellent word. When you look at these people, you have this feeling of *Fremdschämen* and this is what I like because it reflects on yourself—you see yourself in this position.”

*Fremdschämen* is not empathy. Empathy is the pain we experience with someone. They suffer and we suffer with them. But with vicarious embarrassment we feel the pain of the other person’s situation as if it were us, and we laugh as our laughter is our way of coping with the pain of that experience. Wurm says that over the years of working he has “learnt that it is better to accept the ‘weak’ parts of a personality such as ridiculousness or embarrassment—things that you normally try to avoid because no-one wants to show how weak he is or whatever—be-



Erwin Wurm, *Fat Convertible*, 2005, mixed media, 130 x 469 x 239 cm. Courtesy: Xavier Hufkens Gallery, Brussels, Belgium. Photograph: Studio Wurm.



**Clockwise from top left:** Erwin Wurm, **Untitled (Christian) 1**, 2012, acrylic on c-print, 149.3 x 99 cm. Erwin Wurm, **Untitled (Michael) 5**, 2012, acrylic on c-print, 149.3 x 99 cm. Erwin Wurm, **Untitled (Manfred) 2**, 2012, acrylic on paint, 89.5 x 59.8 cm. Erwin Wurm, **Untitled (Hermann) 3**, 2012, acrylic on paint, 89.5 x 59.8 cm. All images: Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg (A), Paris (F). Photographs: Studio Wurm.

cause this goes to the center of something and this is what is interesting to me.”

For him the humor is the medium rather than the message. A well-known work is his *Fat Convertible* (2005). To make this work the artist bought a sleek and covetable Porsche convertible and padded it out with foam before applying a brilliantly glossy, seductively smooth fiberglass skin. The resulting obese mounds and folds are both enticing and repulsive. People laugh at this work because cars shouldn't be fat, cars don't have obesity problems. But this is just the surface.

“When I made this work, it was very much about criticism, consumerism, our health system. The rich are aware of health issues and are able to take care of their appearance while poor are often only able to afford junk that causes obesity. This is a work that is about social issues. For me the main point is to make sculpture—to work with mass and volume—but also to change the content. I very much believe that philosophical ideas and points of view and different aspects of a society at a certain moment are fascinating. This is what makes it so interesting. If someone learns to laugh, it may help him to survive better even though it doesn't solve the problem or change the world.”

In 2008, the organizers of the European Football Championship, jointly hosted by Austria and Switzerland, were concerned about the violence that often accompanies these competitions—especially as disgruntled fans leave the stadium. Wurm was invited to make a sculpture that might defuse this tension. His work *Geste* was designed to be mounted on the tray of a small truck and driven around the streets wherever fans might group. The work is a more-than-three-meter-high hand and wrist, wrapped in an innocuous sock that is giving the finger in the universal symbol of contempt. With this work Wurm disrespects everybody—winners, losers, and bystanders—and that has to be funny even as it questions the basis of our own emotions.

Wurm is interested in philosophy and ideas but is quick to point out that he is not a specialist. “As far as philosophy is concerned I take different parts



**Erwin Wurm, House Attack, 2006, mixed media, 500 x 1000 x 700 cm. Installation view at MUMOK Vienna, Austria, 2005. Courtesy: STRABAG Company, Vienna, Austria. Photograph: Lisa Rastl.**

that I like. [Theodor] Adorno was very highly regarded in the 1950s and 1960s but, when I was reflecting on him when I was being educated in the 1970s, some of his thinking was very strange. For example, after the Second World War, after the Holocaust, he said ‘there can be no poetry after Auschwitz’ but I think the contrary. Especially after the Holocaust there has to be poetry because this is the only force that can balance the tragedy. I also like some of the ideas of [Michel Eyquem de] Montaigne who described the world by describing himself, which is more or less what artists do. You create something and then time goes by and you are overruled by new ideas and new pieces of work and so this is a challenge, but then you are able to think and reflect and reflect yourself and your world and this is something I like very much.”

Wurm is interested in icons, especially architectural icons as representative of some of the big themes of our time. He has taken Frank Lloyd Wright's New York Guggenheim and made it melt, and has made Adolf Loos' Moller House in

Vienna fat, and the activity in *Art Basel Fucks Documenta* is evident in its title. He has also made works that critique the ‘anti-architecture’ of much contemporary construction. He abhors the prefabricated project homes, kit homes, and DIY buildings that have blighted the outskirts of Vienna and other European cities since the 1950s. In *House Attack* he made a life-size version of one such building and positioned it in such a way on the facade of the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna (MOMOK) as if it has been thrown there, in much the same way as a demonstrator might egg a politician.

His most recent work at the Albertina in Vienna is called *De Profundis* after Oscar Wilde's uplifting prose letter of the same name that lays bare his soul from the depths of despair and degradation, written while he was in prison. It is a series about aging and in it the artist invited his artist contemporaries—all roughly the same age as the artist himself, all aging, some more successfully than others (whatever that means)—to pose nude for a photograph. The photographs were then painted

by the artist in order to shape the body differently. Wurm doesn't call these paintings as he uses the brush as a sculptural tool—in some instances adding to the body and in others cutting from it, and in his own case trans-gendering himself into a woman. The results are strange and grotesquely comic, not least because they mock the inevitability of aging, decay, and death. If we can laugh at this, then surely we can say, “Oh death where is thy sting, Oh grave, where is thy victory.”<sup>4</sup> This is true catharsis. Δ

#### Notes:

1. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, Picador, 1984, pg. 468.
2. Ibid.
3. Interview with the artist in Bangkok on February 26, 2013. All subsequent quotations are from this same interview.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:55.

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