

MODERN

MAGAZINE

DESIGN
DECORATIVE ARTS
ARCHITECTURE

WINTER 2014 modernmag.com

KATHIE VON ANKUM SPEAKS WITH **ERWIN WURM**, CONCEPTUAL ARTIST AND DISILLUSIONED DESIGN COLLECTOR

Found Furniture

ERWIN WURM IS LEAFING THROUGH A COPY OF MODERN, "I've got one of these, one of these, and one of these," he says, pointing listlessly at some of the design classics featured on the pages of the issue.

The almost-sixty-year-old Austrian conceptual artist, known for shrinking, blowing up, and otherwise deforming and defunctionalizing all kinds of dwellings and objects, began collecting twentieth-century design classics in 1992, when he discovered the Parisian gallery of Philippe Jousse, a prominent dealer of French modernism on the Left Bank of the Seine. At the time, pieces by Jean Prouvé, Serge Mouille, or Charlotte Perriand had not yet achieved the stratospheric prices they command today—plus Jousse was willing to barter with the artist, who was having his first Paris show at Galerie Arnaud Lefebvre. Attracted to the clean lines, lack of decoration, and what he calls the "quietness" of modern design from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, Wurm continued to acquire works by French modernists, eventually branching out to pieces by the American Georges—Nelson and Nakashima—and discovering the Austrian modernist Carl Auböck.



Kredenza, 2011, compilation of credenzas from different decades epitomizes Erwin Wurm's aesthetic of recycling.

But when a design magazine approached him wanting to feature his newly acquired twelfth-century estate in rural Limberg in the picturesque Austrian province of Styria, he began to question his collecting ambitions. Looking through the publication, he realized that his home looked pretty much like every other upscale interior out there. "In every magazine, it's the same thing," he complains. "I want

Wurm's interactive "Drinking Sculptures" series, as installed at the Martin Gropius Bau, Berlin, in 2012, is a celebration of artistic excess and an homage to Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and other creative people who suffered or died from alcoholism.



my work to be unique, I would like what I collect to be unique!" Disgusted, he vowed to create furniture that would look like no one else's, furniture that would be uniquely his.

Born into a lower middle-class environment that viewed artistic expression with suspicion, Wurm retaliated by building a career that used sculpture as a playful provocation of what society considered "normal." With *Fat Car*, a series of automotive sculptures created in the early 2000s, he called into question the average consumer's desire to own a Mercedes or BMW, in local parlance, a "dickes Auto" (literally a "fat car"). Plumped up with styrofoam and fiberglass, his sports cars featured the same unsightly welts and bulges commonly seen on obese human beings, calling into question the compatibility of wealth, greed, and beauty. A more recent work, *Narrow House* (2010), exaggerated the sense of confinement Wurm had experienced growing up in rural Austria. Reducing his family's traditional suburban home down to a sliver allows only the most slender visitors to edge their way into the house which, in turn, becomes a sculptural representation of petit-bourgeois narrow-mindedness.

For his subsequent cause célèbre—unmasking the uniformity of taste among the design savvy intelligentsia, a group he himself had become a member of—Wurm once again turned to family history for raw material. Manipulating the nondescript traditional furniture from the 1930s, '40s, and '50s he had found in his grandparents' house, he created somewhat unwieldy storage pieces by piling up a cross-section of credenzas from different design decades. A chest of drawers with a cutout and turned on its side serves as a not-so-easy chair. The front of an armoire, complete with keyhole, has become the surface of a desk in Wurm's own house.

Working with cheap and readily available materials, initially out of economic necessity, has been a formative



principle for his artistic career, leading Wurm to turn common objects like street signs or electric outlets into commentaries on everyday life. When his traveling exhibition *Beauty Business* came to Dallas, Wurm took the opportunity to scour Texas thrift shops for new design raw material. And even though he's driving a Bentley now, he says deconstructing the collection of *Design Within Reach*, a project he's itching to undertake, would simply be out of his price range.

Struck by the contradiction that, though a contemporary artist, he had always been more drawn to designers from periods other than his own, Wurm decided to work his way through twentieth-century history—manipulating and appropriating pieces from different eras and making them his own. For the exhibition *Schöner Wohnen* ("Living More Beautifully")—incidentally also the title of a popular German design magazine—at the Museum für Angewandte Kunst (MAK) in Vienna in 2011, he deconstructed Gerrit Rietveld's iconic Zig-Zag chair. Now he wants to try his hand on pieces by Nakashima and Eames. And as supplies run low and

Wurm's irritation with petit-bourgeois status symbols, like *Fat Convertible* (2005) or the manicured suburban home (*Narrow House*, 2010) may well be part of his innate "Austrianness," putting him in the good company of compatriots Werner Schwab and Thomas Bernhard.





originals become more and more expensive, the artist plans to move on to the next design period. "My production goes with the flow of history," he explains.

Still, Wurm will not "worm" his way into just any designer's oeuvre. Works by the Memphis group, for example, do not interest him, perhaps because their design approach is too close to his own. That other artists and designers have used similar strategies to comment on product culture—Tejo Remy with his *You Can't Lay Down Your Memory* chest of drawers or Maarten Baas with his *Smoke* furniture—is of no concern to him. "I gave up researching what others have done before I start working. Otherwise you end up doing nothing," he insists. Furniture design as self-expression—or, like other more public works such as *Fat House* (2003) or *House Attack* (2006)—social commentary and happening?

Wurm's "drinking sculptures," created for an exhibition at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami in 2011, definitely go beyond the quest for an original interior. Chests of drawers, credenzas, nightstands, and closets fully stocked with hard liquor (which viewers are invited to consume) serve as provocative commentary on the lack of intellectual and physical excess and the increasing Puritanism of today's societies, with the United States taking the lead. "Early cultures knew that excess was an important part of life. And most artists are excessive," Wurm comments. That's why each component of his artistic drinking game is dedicated to an artist who suffered or died from alcoholism: Martin Kippenberger (who inspired the *Kippenberger Credenza*), Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and the Austrian playwright and Wurm's friend Werner Schwab. To truly connect

with the inner world of these artists, viewers are only allowed to move on to the next display, once they've drunk themselves into a stupor.

Despite the strong messages behind his work, Wurm is convinced that art does not change society—especially in a world where a YouTube video can reach millions in a matter of seconds, far quicker than any public art installation could in weeks or months. "I do my pieces for myself and a very small group of people who are interested in a specific kind of art," he says. That's why his furniture-cum-sculptures are not for sale, nor are they represented by his New York gallery, Lehmann Maupin. And, Wurm is convinced, they won't make it into MoMA's design collection, either. Still, he wants his furniture designs to be seen and acknowledged on a wider scale. When asked why, despite his disdain for design publications, he agreed to speak to MODERN, he says: "It's because you wanted to picture my furniture and put it in the magazine—and that's something I've never done before."

More ingenious than comfortable, the 2011 *Ladenstuhl #1* (Drawer Chair) turns a chest of drawers into an idiosyncratic perch.

Wurm's "Drinking Sculptures" at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami in 2011-2012.

