ARTOLOGY

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“Exceptional artist” is such a hackneyed phrase, beloved of provincial gallery-owners in their opening-speeches. Yet it immediately comes to mind when one engages the work and the person of Erwin Wurm. Wurm in all his work and self-image is the antithesis of the art industry’s self-proclaimers, and has created a world-renowned work far from any vanity acclaimed precisely for this lack of excitement. Since its Minute Sculptures and not least the design of record covers for the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, the Austrian is considered international size and as kind of hip. But even that did not make the 51-year-old light-headed. The international honors, as well as a recent religious ceremony in Lower Austria, he accepts with a small wink.
You have just been awarded the Silver Kompturkreuz of the province of Lower Austria, one of the highest orders of the country. Things like that happen. But since my esteemed countrymen like Michael Haneke or Arndt Rainer had no problem to accept this award, I thought to myself, I have to have none also.

Thomas Bernhard has made the somewhat misplaced awards part of his literary production, could you imagine integrating such a ceremony into one of your sculptures? I once wrote a choreography, when my fellow artist Edelbert Köb received an award. I wrote a detailed schedule, as he had to approach the Minister on his knees. It was not accepted, but I was still permitted to present it.

No less complicated then art’s relationship to power is its relationship to industry. How difficult is it to exhibit your VW sculpture in Wolfsburg? Not at all, the Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg has nothing to do with the VW plants. Nor the VW bus in the exhibition. We drove around in them as hippies, smoked joints in the bus as well as the street and both became strangely round. Under no circumstances would I do a work of art to accommodate a company.

A visitor to the exhibition tends to discover criticism in your inflated cars. About the car as a status symbol. Of course, they are also meant to. The first car sculptures that I did in the 70s were directed at the cars of big shots.

In another exhibition, you made your parent’s home into sculpture. What role did art play in your real parent’s home? It didn’t, it did not exist. My parents were good people, caring and affectionate. My father, a detective, had absolutely nothing to do with art or literature. Only at school I noticed something, and when we got our first TV I was twelve. It was like having a door flung open behind which lay a wonderland.

A wonderland in which war soon prevailed. Viennese actionism encountered enormous protest in the Austrian population. Did that effect you? I was impressed by their activism, but also already by Schiele, Kokoschka, who provoked the society in their time. Art, on the other hand, was not intended to be bourgeois society’s boogeyman. And one must not ignore the fact that people then go looking for less challenging artistic personalities such as the then very popular Ernst Fuchs with his golden cap, or Helmut Leherb who always had a dove on his shoulder. All very quirky, but as well-known at the time as a Nitsch or a Schwarzkogler.

How much are you annoyed by artist-performers? One is familiar with that from art colleges, where they begin dressing the way they imagine artists. Of me it has often been said that I do not look like an artist. Fontana said he looks more like a hairdresser than an artist.
Whereas today there are other unreasonable demands on artists, for example, that they necessarily have to be critical of society. Artists are supposed to criticize the state, fight for a better world and donate as much money as possible. The artist is appropriated to calm society’s guilty conscience. Migrants, women’s shelters and the children in India are apparently purely the cause of artists.

I wonder why we need to be better people than bakers, doctors, and bicycle manufacturers. It has become a form of exploitation, because there are many artists who would be noticed only if they continuously donated art, which is then auctioned off for anything.

Does the artist ever have a social function? I would say no. In the 60s it was said that art is always political. But the real task of the artist is to make art. Nothing else. Everything else is projection.

"Artists are supposed to criticize the state, fight for a better world and donate as much money as possible."
What role do art criticism and making fun of art have in your work? None, because I would not presume to criticize colleagues and their work. If I would pounce on something, then on the art market, which is a horror world in reality. Artists today are driven by the market, there are unimaginable requirements. You have to produce permanently, those who don’t are rapidly sidelined. Quality is no longer the issue, but recognition and saleability. From my perspective, the artist has not the task to create meaning, but to de-signify the world. For centuries, art was only exploited and instrumentalised by the Church, or the monarch, now they must serve for any philosophical current, this or that group, or simply sponsors, curators and serve the market itself. It’s really unbearable. Art should manage to break away from all that, and to be committed only to itself.

In your Wikipedia biography it says you are “one of the world’s most successful contemporary artists”. Which is not my fault, however. I do not even read the nonsense.

What would you say are the most important components of your success? There is no recipe, it’s all simultaneously right and wrong. Success today is no criterion, because many artists are so successful and known because they cooperate with curators and other power-brokers to push prices artificially upwards.

Your personal resounding success came with the One Minute Sculptures. Was it possible to see that coming? Not really, while making them I was personally rather desperate. It just happened to me, it was a coincidence. When my students have asked what it takes to succeed as an artist, I said, talent is not enough, you have to transform criticism into something positive to learn from it. And of course, have the ability to constantly re-adjust. But all this is no guarantee that it will work.
How dangerous is success for the work as an artist? You have to set priorities. I had never let it go to my head, because it was clear that it can quickly be over. The greatest danger is that you will be an official and one with which they have success, reproduced again and again.

The art of the former bogeyman now adorns the waiting rooms of doctors’ offices. How do you prevent such a stylization? You cannot. That was always the case, the Impressionists, the Expressionists; at first they were attacked, then they became collective taste.

Part of your work is ephemeral. Is this also an attempt to keep some things in your own custody, to prevent any other context? It was also a response to realizing how some art, such as the Fluxus artist, simply age badly. Or even to Marcel Duchamp. Take the famous bottle rack, which today is still just a curious object from the 19th century, which has lost its original idea. The radical aspect evaporated. The One Minute Sculptures are currently issued often and succeed in being updated, because they are implemented by the exhibition visitors according to my instructions. Over and over again.

Do the “One Minute Sculptures” differ in each local cultural background of the exhibition venue? Yes sure, the Japanese love implementing them. They are perceived differently everywhere. The Americans are extremely open, because they are accustomed to act, to have the media participate. In Germany and Austria it was difficult at the beginning, they found them difficult and were cautious.

You’ve often been quoted as requesting not to understand your art as a joke. Where does this fear of being misinterpreted as a joke come from? I need to be stringent about this because I work with humor, but after all my work is about much more. I am referring to psychological, psychopathological, philosophical phenomena. It is about how we see ourselves represented in the world, and a part of us is just ridiculous. Nevertheless, the work must not be shortened, it represents multiple perspectives.

The work “anger bump” showing a man with an erect penis in his pants, could be misinterpreted as ribald. The Bild Zeitung reported on it under the headline: “How horny art can be”. True, I even remember the headline. But it does not annoy me.

Can the misunderstanding or the superficial interpretation of some maybe even be part of the work? No, that would have a certain appeal, but you overestimate me now. I’m not that refined. Of course, the environment where the work is shown plays a role. “Anger bump” in an Islamic context would be impossible.

How do you relate to artists of the 21st century that cannot work freely, like Ai Wei Wei? Art happens essentially in the studio, where the artist is alone with himself and his work. This is the same for all. Of course, one has an attitude, an opinion. But that does not necessarily mean something for their own work. Concerning Ai Wei Wei, I’m of the opinion that you should not take advantage of political solidarity to complain you have to pay taxes. We have to pay here also. He exploited a prejudice against his country in the wrong direction.

How is it when you exhibit in countries like China? It is what it is. Once it could be somewhat critically understood against the system, it is not possible. Just as in Russia.

It is also part of artistic freedom not to prescribe how and to whom one addresses oneself? Exactly, as an artist I do not want to be pressured to having to fundamentally criticize a political system of the country in which I exhibit. The entire West, EU, America, all live an incredible double standard. I sometimes wonder, who is morally reprehensible. They all do business with each other, but point a public finger. Why should I not be allowed to show in China, but in the US, which by no means has a clean slate when it comes to human rights violations, it would be no problem?

Thank you very much Erwin Wurm for this interview.