Binx by Juergen Teller
POP CULTURE

A CELEBRATION OF ERWIN WURM

BY SOFT BAROQUE AND BY JUERGEN TELLER
Melted, tilted, flattened, flattened, stretched. Cars, pickles, houses, bricks, sausages. Unlikely combinations that celebrate distorted volume and the surface of everyday things. What is natural for Erwin Wurm is a believable paradox in common reality. Call it possibility of things, the possibility of a sausage.

Distortion of the ordinary and overturning the familiarity of reality, let us have new thoughts on what exists. One Minute Sculptures get the human body involved in this Wurm’s equation, its celebration of doubtful body behaviours passed in time, in cooperation with nasal objects like a tennis ball, chair, trailer, bucket, orange, pen, fridge, sweater and so on. As children we have this uncontrollable desire to interact with inanimates objects and architecture in weird or socially unacceptable ways. Put all the clothes from our wardrobe on, or crawl up into a ball inside a large sweater, or get two people to stand inside one pant of the trousers, stick our heads in between stair railings, crawl in the gaps between cupboards and walls, try to fill our mouth with as much food as possible, stick legs out from the car window, put pencils in our nose. It might be that we hadn’t yet developed psychological maturity to treat objects as they were supposed to be used, or perhaps we are now as adults oppressing the frustration of the prescription of functional objects. We dismiss all this as kids being weird, but it might represent some sort of subconscious inability to come to terms with a built and social environment.

Erwin Wurm presented a seminal One Minute Sculptures series in the Austrian Pavilion at the 2017 Venice Biennales. Soft Baroque was really excited about it and we performed these interactions diligently, taking it in turn. But it did strike me that you need a famous artist in a reputable exhibition (and a diagram of the sculpture) to give us social permission to enact simple meta urges. We need some sense to push us to the nonsense. More importantly, it highlighted that functional norms are artificial and constructed. For example, we agree that the pencil behind an ear is ok, but not in the nose. You kiss your partner, but don’t spit in their tea. Sometimes I have a desire to do both.

Bending a VW van with telekinesis or softening modernist icons into a viscous lard, Erwin Wurm is drawing attention to the fact that artists are alchemists. Converting one set of values to another, a material conversation is subverted, a body is like an object and a object is like a body. Let’s take his Fat House (2003) for example. It’s a cartoon-looking, self-conscious anthropomorphic house with some brand of existential anxiety. Inside the house a video is playing on a loop in which the same house has been given a voice to argue with itself and debate on topics of art and architecture. What’s the function of the house? What makes a house a nice house? Can a house be a work of art and a house all at once? Can a house be fat? Can an artwork be fat? Are all the overweight things and people pieces of art and who can answer all these things? Just as he is turning us into objects with the One Minute Sculptures, Wurm is giving a human person to inanimate objects. We start feeling sympathy, disgust, admiration and indifference for the works as he practices his particular form of transmutation.

To be honest, I was hit with a pang of jealousy when I first saw Wurm’s House Attack performance (2000), the artist bashing, gawking and sitting on clay models (scaled down to be a fair fit) of traditional European and modernist architecture, before setting the scenes in bronze or resin. An emotional and violent response to the design hegemony, a therapy session for frustrated architects, the bully becomes the bullied. We find our minds wandering to these anti-intellectual hidden desires, a most of the time keep them successfully oppressed, Wurm thinks they should be explored and memorialised in sculpture and video.

I try not to think of his work in a parallel universe or separate world, but a legitimate part of our own. With all the varieties distortions, he still maintains the possibility of functionality. Narrow House (2010) is still furnished with one dimensionally scaled furniture (literally a parallel universe), that altered ergonomics, suggesting everything has the potential for use and living. Wurn’s tilting Renault 25 (1981) still drives perfectly (handle left turns beautifully). Keeping some rules and throwing others away, no matter how strange it is, it all seems always familiar.

It’s kind of easy to caricature this Austrian maestro’s work as irrevocable or ironic, but humour is a mechanism to connect emotion and cognition. Is it serious? Sometimes the funniest things are about the most serious things. Instructions of Illness from 2001 seems to preempt a modern style in meme, truth bombs and Twitter culture that conveys a sense of pride of laziness, failure, self-depreciation, guilty pleasures and self-delusion. Here is a series of important self portraits that are captioned ‘express yourself through yawning’ or ‘don’t even close your mouth while eating’. They seem to imply that we should no longer have a social responsibility to do these things. Or that it doesn’t really make a difference either way.

Opposite and overhead: Puffy Brick Columns in green, grey and blue by Soft Baroque, July 2018. Concrete, 25cm x 45cm. By injecting concrete into a series of ballons and then arranging them in a mould, a set of perfectly fitting concrete bricks is created. This represents a new method of generating distorted soft architecture and objects as well as an exploration in the visual and tactile exchange between soft and hard.
Teller
Wurm