DREAM ON
Art and Optimism in Cataclysmic Times

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Erwin Wurm
“Fun is never enough.” Erwin Wurm’s works are incredibly playful. They include amusingly cloud-like “fat” car sculptures, the repeated use of phallic pickle forms, and invitations for viewers to go on all fours and bark like dogs. But, as the artist tells Charlotte Jansen, his motives are far more serious.
“So,” I ask. “What is it with you and gherkins?” Erwin Wurm chuckles in response. I am asking because I know the Austrian artist likes to play with these small pickled cucumbers in his work; he has taken plenty of “self-portraits” with them as a stand-in for himself, and has made public sculptures of them—he even has a boat named Gherkin. “It’s a simple thing,” Wurm explains. “It reminds me of a very specific part of the male anatomy, and this part has created so much drama throughout our entire history... all this mess!”

This only renews my enthusiasm for Wurm’s works. It is not often that you see male artists of his background and generation (he was born in the town of Bruck an der Mur in 1954) who are willing to prod at phallic representations. We’re talking via a WhatsApp video call; Wurm’s profile picture, of course, features gherkins. He speaks warmly and efficiently, and is straightforward and ungarnished. The artist is currently on the idyllic (and somewhat elite, though he insists it is “not posh”) Greek island of Hydra, where he bought a house two years ago. I am in London, staring out at a dreary day, with splashes of summer rain clinging to the grey window.

Success came quickly for Wurm. His father wanted him to have a proper profession, so he first went to study history and language; art was a second degree. A year after he graduated from art school, he was already able to make a living from his work. “I previously had moments when I didn’t know if I could make the rent, but from that point on, I never had to think about money,” he explains earnestly. “Thank god.” I’m acutely aware of the systems that privilege such seemingly straightforward success, but Wurm has always been sharply critical of those systems, and of the omnipotent gherkin driving it all. I suppose that’s why I’ve always liked his work, as it is a rallying cry against the patriarchy and its hellbent consumerism.

His first pieces proved immediately popular because they stood out: in a world obsessed with minimalism and conceptual art, or at the other end of the scale, Pop Art, Wurm came up with a fresh proposition that married all of it together. He started to make sculptural pieces with materials people had thrown away—partly for economic reasons—nailing wood to metal, welding items together, fashioning “very absurd classical sculptures, which didn’t look classical”. They were a fast success with galleries and collectors, but they became a gim-mick just as quickly. Wurm realised these works depended on eliciting “a reaction about a certain idea, about what art is, and I didn’t want to go on with this”. He began to delve deeper into his research about what sculpture is, and what its relationship can be to social issues. “I’m still doing this today,” he reflects.

Of course, framing Wurm’s work in terms of his material success is only one way to describe it. It’s not as easy as Wurm makes it sound to come up with ideas that shake up age-old notions, but he’s a master at making tricky things look simple. He has been as rigorous in his research as in his experimentation: a tightness of touch has sometimes concealed the complexity of his making. In 1988, Wurm struck upon an idea for the series of works for which he is perhaps best known and loved, and which I consider to be his masterpiece: One Minute Sculptures. These were the works that defined the decade, and continue to be hugely influential all over the world (even featuring in a Red Hot Chili Peppers music video back in 2003).

“Time is a very important aspect of sculpture,” Wurm explains energetically. “Being able to walk around the piece and see it from 360 degrees is a major part of it. So I thought, ‘If I stand still, is the artwork still a sculpture? And if not, what action has to happen to make it a sculpture?’” At the end of the 1980s, the artist asked a friend to stand still in his studio for a minute. Only his eyes could still be seen to move, but “the imagination projected movement, which is exactly what I was interested in”. The first period of the One Minute Sculptures was devised: Wurm would leave pictorial directions and carefully chosen everyday items in the exhibition space for the “viewers” to activate and transform into fleeting sculptural moments; quite the opposite feeling to the permanence and longevity that emanates from centuries-old classical monuments, and an entirely different experience of art and ourselves in relation to it. A few years after these first test runs, Wurm travelled to Germany for an exhibition, equipped with just a camera. He created improvised sculptures with himself, gallery staff and whatever he found there. “I thought it should have a kind of brand name, but it was never about a minute—it could be ten seconds, two minutes—it was about focusing very precisely.” Over time, the periods of existence of these sculptures became shorter and shorter, but they lived on as photographs.
Wurm wasn’t immediately confident about the work. “I was very unsure if it was good or not; I was hesitating, doubting myself, as artists do.” But then he began to hear about the reactions, and the exhibition catalogue sold out, twice, as did a book of the drawings Wurm produced. It resonated with audiences and went far beyond the art elite, something not many contemporary works of art can claim. “I didn’t know what was happening. I didn’t expect it at all!”

In the early One Minute Sculpture works, like his 1996 Psycho series, Wurm hung knitted jumpers in the gallery, “and when it was over, I could take them down and wear them again”. Knitwear appeared in a recent exhibition in Seoul, in the form of a giant beanie hat hung on the wall. The artist has used everything from buckets and bananas to bouquets of flowers as items in these pieces. Once, he even got people to pose as dogs, on all fours. Each sculpture-in-waiting has produced its own range of absurd, improbable poses and awkward poses, hinting at the puppetry of art and our willingness to be subservient to an idea, to turn ourselves into objects to be consumed. Invariably, the outcomes are also very funny, a sublime sort of slapstick, but, as Wurm emphasises, “Fun is never enough.”

“It’s a method, a way to be critical,” he tells me. “The most interesting thing is to be able to look at our world from another perspective; it invites us to see more, to see differently. My work was never about making a joke.” Wurm’s humour has teeth; he is interested in the philosophy of Montaigne, Spinoza and Descartes, and is aligned with the absurdism of Beckett. In the 2000s, he began to inflate, blow and melt two of the most recognisable symbols of capitalism: fast cars and big houses. Once again, these works were initially interpreted as comical, but more recently they’ve been recognised as cutting critiques of consumerism in a ridiculous world of pumped-up desire and economic greed, which is both turgid and bombastic. He refers to Narrow House, the 2010 installation that is a pinched version of his parents’ home (his nine-year-old daughter, meanwhile, has grown up with one of the Fat Houses in the garden). Wurm explains that the architecture and interiors of Narrow House all conjure the austerity of the postwar period; rather than being gimmicky, it gives a sense of the stifling claustrophobia he experienced there.

In January of this year, at his Lehmann Maupin solo exhibition, Yes Biological, Wurm presented new ceramic works that prove he is still invested in a sense of discovery, pushing to find something new in the old and hackneyed; the exhibition moved between surprising collisions, from clay to tennis balls, found antique furniture and oranges. It makes nonsense out of nonsense, a gracious nod to Beckett. To continue to make such work is an act of defiance, but also one of hope. During the global coronavirus crisis, Wurm had several museum shows postponed, including at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, Museum Hartberg and MAK-Expositur Geymüllerschlössel. He spent lockdown in rural Austria, where he lives and has a studio, which he invited the public to experience in a virtual visit made for Thaddaeus Ropac, one of his representative galleries. “Oh, that was a depressing video!” he laughs.

Is he optimistic about the future? “I have been optimistic my entire life, but I’m not now,” Wurm concedes. “Of course, the pandemic has been horrible and sad, but we are a whining society! I mean, come on! The real drama is what’s happening outside, how we destroy our world; this makes me mad, the way we treat animals and plants. This is our future, and the planet is suffering badly.” He does not, however, believe artists should become politicians. “That would be stupidity; throughout our entire history, art has been misused, by the church, the socialists, consumerism,” he tells me. “Art never directly influences politics, but it creates freedom, thoughts and space for different behaviour, attitudes and ideas about the world, so that we can learn to look at different perspectives. This is what I deal with all the time.” It’s true, perhaps no other living artist has done what Wurm has with sculpture. And certainly, no other artist has invited members of the public, balanced upside down with their heads buried in massive cushions, to think about “Freud’s ass” (2004). I think again of Beckett, and his novel Murphy: “Any tool can turn a blind eye but who knows what the ostrich sees in the sand.”