Times Are Changing

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Erwin Wurm is best known for his prominent ongoing series One Minute Sculptures, which began in the 1980s as sculptural pieces involving the public and remains a yardstick for the intersection of performance art and sculpture. Wurm’s other notable works include the Fat Cars series, in which the artist explores the biological and material connotations of adding or subtracting volume and mass – and Narrow House, in which Wurm humorously contorts a version of his childhood home as representation of a melancholic, post-war Austria. Although Wurm’s work is largely interpreted as playful, the artist implores those willing to look a little deeper. While in Greece, Wurm sat down with to Be to discuss his processes leading up to conceptualising work, his childhood in post-war Austria and his disdain for young artists’ entitlement to government funding.
“I do not want my work to become ridiculous and just hilarious or just funny. I’m not interested in this and so I am aware of the danger.”

Erwin Wurm, Untitled, 1997
C-print, 75 x 50 cm
Opposite: Erwin Wurm, Untitled, 2018
Polaroid, 80 x 56 cm
“I’m much more secure now than I was at the beginning. I was very unsure, I was always with my doubts and I still have doubts, I’m still fighting with what I’m doing.”
Annabel Blue: Hi Erwin, you’re in Greece right? Are there still fires?
Erwin Wurm: Yes, there are many fires unfortunately, but on the biggest peninsula there is nothing, thank God.
Sarah Buckley: So does that impact your ability to go back to your studio in Austria? Are you working on anything new in Greece?
EW: Here in Greece, I’m making paintings. I’ve never made paintings before ... I’ve made similar works, though, called fat sculptures. They’re very much related to my other work. It’s great here because I get into this flow and I can work very well. I decided, of course, when I go back to Vienna I go back to my sculptures and continue preparing for shows.
SB: What do you have coming up? Are the fat sculptures involved with the other works for a particular show?
EW: Yes, we have many exhibitions coming up — I usually say ‘yes’ because it’s a studio. The coming exhibitions are in Spain and then in Palm Springs in the United States. I don’t directly prepare work for a specific show, but I continue to level up my body of work and then when I have it I decide which pieces should go where.
AB: Can you tell us about your research process in the lead up to making works?
EW: Yes, I’m always reading constantly and developing ideas constantly, but slowly. When I have an idea, I’ll draw it down in a little booklet and then after a certain time I go back to it and check what is good, what is less good or what is not good at all. And then I decide what I should do with the ideas ...
SB: How did Fat Cars come about? Which company did you use to make them?
EW: The first Fat Car we made was in 2000. It came into my mind because it works my brain in danger. I often think, “What does it mean to make a sculpture? What is the meaning of sculpture anyway?” It’s about mass, volume, skin, surface, time, all of that. The second-strong line in my work is social issues, because I’ve always found that if you only work from the arts to the arts it can be a bit empty.
Getting back to the Fat Car — When I was trained as a sculptor, we had to make classical sculptures in clay, adding or subtracting that volume of clay. When we as humans gain or lose weight, we do the same. We add volume or we take volume away. So one could say that gaining or losing weight is a sculptural work. Fat Cars is about that. In a way, combine two systems: the biological and the technical. The technical system doesn’t gain weight and grow, the biological system, however, does. But when I combine those two things, what happens? What is the outcome? It is a creature, indicative of how we will possibly end up in the future? When technology has advanced so far that it combines with us technologically ...
AB: I was also thinking about the element of gluttony — The more material possessions we have, the more material possessions we make for getting bigger and better. Which social and sculptural connotation, usually a negative, attached to consumerism – which is all too much, what we have now.
SB: It’s great here because I get into this flow and I can work very well. Well whether it is or isn’t humour at its best, ‘fat cars’ is exactly what you describe, go deeper and really experience it. That would be the ideal observer and the ideal visitor for the piece.
SB: What do you have coming up? Are the fat sculptures involved with the other works for a particular show?
EW: Yes, that’s what I’m hoping for, that people are not only getting the joke — a Fat Car, ‘ha ha’, a Fat House, ‘ha ha’ — and then moving on, but that they do see exactly what you describe, go deeper and really experience it. That would be the ideal observer and the ideal visitor for the piece.
SB: Your career has spanned a few decades now. How do you feel about making art in 2021 compared to 1980s or earlier?
EW: It has changed. I’m much more secure now than I was at the beginning. I was very unsafe, I was always with my doubts and I was doubting, I’m no longer feeling that way. I’m thinking this is very necessary. Artists can be too sure and too self-confident about what to tell the public; the global climate is concerned, I haven’t felt anything negative about my work because I was always very sure of what I was doing. It is like photographing naked women or men. I always had the feeling that it was already done for my artwork. And I only once had a model or two models with naked breasts in pieces. But what I did in the 1990s — I made a photography series called Instructions On How To Politically Incorrect, which is pieces related to the world of George W. Bush and his restrictions in the USA — I made pieces called Two Ways of Carrying a Bomb, things like that. But when I tried to show them in the States, people didn’t like them at all, they were not open to expression of this society. With Narrow House, they wanted to show it in the States and it was a big problem because there was no wheelchair access. And then I had this upside-down Biennale truck where you could walk up through the truck and stand on it. The Forum in the States wanted to show it, but then in the end they showed something else because it wasn’t wheelchair-accessible. I suggested we build an elevator close to the piece, but that would have dramatised it so, I gave up.
AB: Do you ever feel that you have to compromise your work?
SB: Fear is the context of the gallery space or ...
EW: There are restrictions, of course. There are limits. My age is a certain restriction and a limit in a way. The market and the art world change constantly, with the intense influence of auction houses and the very big galleries. This influences everything, a lot, especially for young artists. It’s getting harder and harder for them to show their work. What I always found strange is a system we have in Austria — they have it in Holland too — with the state supporting artists. They give them this little money and buy pieces off artists every second year so they can survive, but hardly. I never thought about it. But what you always thought is that the artist was a unique person that many artists now believe that the state is there to give them money. I would rather see that the state make a framework, like selling art tax-free. Then more people would buy art and nobody would have to go to politicians with an open hand saying “Please give me something.” This corrupts the system. I’m very much against it. But whenever I say this, I get an unbelievable shudder [laughs].
SB: Were you saying that Narrow House was a representation of growing up in post-War Austria. Do you think that upbringing has influenced your works in other ways?
EW: Austria was such an interesting mixture culturally. There was a monarchical country for 700 years, so it was a very strict state. There was aristocracy and bourgeois and military and other people who worked for the state. This was the one side. The other side was the Catholic church, 2000 years of it, so the Austrian state was influenced by these two structures. At the beginning of the 20th century, when everything went down — the monarchy collapsed after the First World War — everything came out. All these artists and philosophers — Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler and so on. It was a vivid, very interesting history in Austria.
My father was a policeman and my mother was a housewife. Nobody was interested in art. My family is full of engineers and doctors, and I was the first one interested in art because I started to buy books when I got my first pocket money at the age of twelve. I started to read literature and it opened doors into another world, and I conquered the arts. For me this was my own world, where I could just be and hang on with my thoughts. It was very important to me. I was a professor for several years, and I told my students that it’s not interesting when your work is just about your grandma’s feelings. But if you’re able to transport this connection to your grandma to a broader context then it could be interesting. Which is exactly what Louise Bourgeois did. The issue of her father was following her entire career and she was constantly addressing it — it was the gasoline for her work because it burned her, in a way. So that’s always my goal: investigating the society in which I grew up — my family, my – the relationship between literature, philosophy, art and this so-called bourgeois society. This interests me a lot and my work has been about it ever since.
Erwin Wurm is showing in Via Veneto Contemporanea, Rome until November 14, 2021
Erwin Wurm most recently showed with Museum of Contemporary Art, Belgrade; Museum Jan Cunen, Ot, Netherlands; Galerie Thiessan Reip, Mann, Paris, France; P14, Lyon; Kurimanzutto, Mexico City; Lehmann Maupin, Pari. Best, Feria, Uklas, Münker, Vienna, Austria
erwinwurm.at