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Stand-up Artist

Erwin Wurm's diverse body of work is physical, funny and ephemeral. Often inviting viewer participation, the prolific Austrian artist both extends and undermines artistic traditions of the 1970s. Widely exhibited in Europe, he is finally becoming familiar to U.S. audiences.

By Stephanie Cash

Like Duchamp with his snow shovel, Austrian artist Erwin Wurm can make art with little more than a rubber band, a pickle or some dust. Wurm calls himself a sculptor, though many people might be more inclined to call what he does performance, and what viewers usually see are photographs or videos of these performative "sculptures," or their related instructional drawings. With feet firmly planted in conceptual traditions of the 1960s and '70s, Wurm riffs on those traditions with his own brand of comic conceptualism.

The artist is perhaps best known for his ongoing "Do It Yourself" and "One Minute Sculpture" series (begun in 1996 and '98, respectively). These consist of written instructions and diagrams and any props needed to carry them out, such as "show your tongue," "lie on the balls--no part of the body should touch the ground," and "put the felt markers on top of your shoes, hold this for one minute and think of Rene Descartes." Such is the popular appeal of his work that members of the music group The Red Hot Chili Peppers are seen carrying out the artist's instructions for various pieces--including bassist Flea sporting markers up his nose and ballpoint pens in his ears--in the video for their recent song "Can't Stop."

Wurm's One Minute Sculptures don't always involve people. Chairs balancing on one leg or with two legs propped up on carrots, a banana suspended between sliding cabinet doors, and upended and stacked configurations of hotel furniture are all examples of Wurm's fleeting sculptures.

Though his work has taken many forms since the early ’90s, the common thread is the question of what constitutes a sculpture. Is a person sticking out his tongue a sculpture? If that particular act exists only in a photograph, is it still a sculpture? Wurm’s works share strong affinities with those by German artist Franz Erhard Walther, who in his instructional pieces similarly describes an art work as an interconnected event between a human body, an act and an object. Certain examples by Ana Mendieta, Yoko Ono, Bruce Nauman, Joseph Kosuth, Charles Ray and Dennis Oppenheim also show an undeniable kinship. Wurm continues to explore issues similar to those of 1970s Conceptual Body art pieces that only live on in documentation. Whereas some artists are content to allow their works to linger in the realm of pure concept, Wurm encourages the implementation of his ideas. To wit, viewers participating in the One Minute Sculptures can have a Polaroid photo taken by a gallery attendant for a nominal fee. For an extra 100, they can send the photo to the artist, which he will sign and validate as an art work. Despite his work's irresistible humor, Wurm doesn't just play for laughs. Many of his photographs, particularly

when displayed together in a grid, reveal an attention to formal concerns, such as color, composition and repetition of form. His sculptural pieces and installations often resemble Minimalist works in the austerity of their studied arrangements. From the beginning, however, he has seemed intent on paying homage to established artistic traditions by undermining them.

Wurm's explorations in the ephemeral began in the early 19905 with a group of works using dust. Ghostly silhouettes, usually circular or rectangular, are variously seen in glass vitrines, on pedestal: or boards laid flat on the 11001', and sometimes applied directly to city streets. He has also produced less ephemeral sculpture using clothing or furniture. Some examples involve articles of clothing-sweaters, blazers, shirts-folded or otherwise shaped into simple configurations, attached to the wall or displayed on the floor. Others employ rectangular forms "dressed" in contemporary attire, such as a button-down shirt wrapped around a shelflike, wall-mounted form, the fabric neatly tucked along the edges, or a trench-coat-clad box that stands stiffly ill the middle of the room. In other variations, Wurm stretched colorful T-shirts across the tops of hollow wooden boxes, the arm and neck holes creating receding voids-a sort of Fruit-of-the-Loom take on Anish Kapoor.

Closer to the artist's recent work are photographs and videos showing people donning articles of clothing in comical ways, as if either trapped or trying to hide inside a turtleneck sweater. One example shows what could be a man bent over, with arms and legs stuffed into the arms of a pullover his head gestating somewhere near the newly formed "crotch." A number of diptychs evoke a "before and after" effect: a straightforward photograph of a thin individual is juxtaposed with another of that person made fat by multiple layers of bulky clothing, cheeks bloated and chin tucked to simulate a fleshy neck. Fatness, as an additive sculptural process, seems to be a favorite theme of the artist. Be wrote an instructional book on how to gain two clothing sizes in eight days (1993), and plumped up a car using Styrofoam and fiberglass, its chubby body oozing beyond the sporty frame.

It follows that Wurm would find laziness another topic worth exploring. "Instructions for Idleness" (2001) is a series of photographs with text showing the artist enacting directives seemingly taken from a slacker’s rule book, such as “be too lazy to argue,” “take naps on the office toilet,” “stay in your pajamas all day” and “smoke a joint before breakfast.” That series was followed up with sometimes mildly transgressive “Instruction for Political Incorrectness,” with such gems as “spit in someone’s soup” and “steal a beggar’s money.” Similarly, two videos that seem straight out of Monty Python follow a man who purportedly held a bowl aloft for two years while going about his daily business, and show another one who hops around a garden in his underwear like a wary rabbit. The fact that these were not one-minute poses but longer performances carried out in public lends both participants more of a cuckoo quality than their short-term counterparts.

There is an unmistakable sociological component at play in Wurm's work, which, it should be noted, predates the numbing abundance of reality. TV programs that have made public self-humiliation de rigueur. How many silly poses, or mini-transgressions, can Wurm entice willing participants to execute? Will any viewers be encouraged to actually spit in someone's soup in the name of art? Performing such acts in the relative seclusion of a museum or gallery is fairly easy, but how many

people are willing to stick asparagus or fungi up their noses, or wedge gherkins between their toes in public? Quite a few, it would seem.

Erwin Wurm's work was seen in a traveling survey curated by Peter Weibel and co-organized by the Neue Galerie, Graz [Jan. 26-Mar. 31, 2002]; the Centre National de la Photographie, Paris [May 29-Aug. 26, 2002]; the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna [Sept. 26-Dec. 1, 2002], and the ZKW Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe [Jan. 10-Mar. 16, 2003]. Solo shows were recently mounted at Vedanta Gallery, Chicago [Sept. 13-0ct. 19, 2003] and Jack Hanley Gallery, San Francisco [Oct. 17-Nov. 15, 2002]. His work is currently included in the traveling group show "Work Ethic," organized by the Baltimore Museum of Art [Oct. 12, 2003-Jan. 4, 2004]. A survey of his work will appear at the Yerba Buena Center for the Array, San Francisco [Oct. 16, 2004-Jan. 2, 2005[; it is scheduled to travel to the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, and other U.S. venues.