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# Erwin Wurm

## ADORNO WAS WRONG. WELL, SORT OF

by Frank Expósito

*They were the new technology. Soon all the kids had them, stand-ins for a single intent: “call me.” Beepers, over most things, became 3-D calling cards, each beep and code a modern update or tweet. Those little plastic boxes held so much, until they fell before the Motorolas, texting Sidekicks, and iGadgets. Communication has its price as new innovation. Blogging does too; personal choices are evocative of brands willing to pay for those clicks and likes—Facebook and its advertisers. It seems that nothing, not even identity through choice, has escaped the market. Theodor Adorno was the mid-century philosopher to address commercialism in this way, writing about monetary value as the sole identity consumers subscribe to over other features. He warned that if art fell into this wash, it would not come out clean, unable to tell the truth about the discounted (secretly dented) machine. The Austrian artist Erwin Wurm continues this conversation in the modern day, even though it might read as Adorno was wrong with his ideas about art (2005).*

Taking the precedent he set for himself with his One Minute Sculptures of oranges, chairs, and office supplies that made him famous in the nineties, Wurm’s Adorno was wrong similarly uses odd objects that invite performance: haphazardly strewn square boards of pink drywall have hand drawn figures and messages that say “follow the instruction and hold this position.” On one, a wall fallen on top, asking to lie down like wicked, eastern coast witches. On another, simply to “lay down—and don’t think.” The audience participates, experiencing the sculpture from within its meaning on the inside, making it whole as part object, part person. This is where Wurm’s chosen title comes into play, and where Erwin wins one over Theodor.

If art is no longer complete on its own, if it physically asks for the inclusion of another, how can art remain separate from society as Adorno wished it would? Wurm has found a way in which art becomes directly reliant on the other to create it. Adorno would

surely have hated commodity and those popular soup cans. But could he have resisted a manual that turns body into art, comprehension into product? I think he would agree that in making sculpture impermanent, Wurm has destabilized art into thin air, down to its very molecule and fraction of its cents.

Erwin Wurm was born in 1954 in Bruck an der Mur, Austria. Growing up in the handoff between Abstract Expressionism and Pop art, his generation saw Rothko give up, and post-modern art react, retreating into naked concept without its painterly book covers to speak loud and attract. Art still hides behind the question, “Well, what am I if I’m not self-expression or mass cultural concept?” For Wurm, he answers with absurdity, that “you” aren’t one but any, which can be funny, like pickles betwixt one’s toes or the improper use of brooms. Wurm pokes fun at the human condition for having to endure countless designations of what is right and what isn’t. Pickles are meant to be eaten, we know, and brooms to sweep, but with Wurm they have limitless possibilities. Cars, sweaters, and other luxury goods are also re-examined as objects that house the body in ridiculous ruse.

In readdressing the identity of things—not what they are but what has been determined they cannot be—Wurm challenges Adorno’s autonomy that would keep art in solitary confinement. Art seems to be where art usually isn’t. In 2003, the Red Hot Chilli Peppers acted out a Wurm sculpture in their video for “Can’t stop.” In recent years, fashion designers have also followed suit. Thom Browne did it in bulbous grey cable knit sweaters, the disproportionate man turned rugby hulk, as well as in a dress of Tronian pyramids that sprout like Wurm’s envious bumps breaking free from the common model form. Even the conceptual house of Martin Margiela packaged bodies in allusions to the grey leggy box men of constructed coats and reshaped contexts.

By constructing these new meanings for art and objects, however, Wurm seems to have taken a page right out of Adorno’s Negative Dialectics (1966). There, Adorno confronts the promises we’ve thrust onto materialism—the aspirations of beauty and symbols of wealth. In doing so, he says, we miss the actual object to buy into the dream. In order to access its true “non-identity,” we must seek the objects’ false identification. For Wurm this is misuse, a marker as earplug, a philosophical sparring partner. In a talk with the artist, TWELV asks Erwin Wurm to speak more about his art as different media and the reasons he feels he’s acting just like everyone else.



Studio Warm, Red Palmers, 1997.  
Gallery Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, Austria



“WE ARE  
TOTALLY  
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*You’ve made sculptures that aren’t permanent structures, but are fleeting, becoming more like props in a performance. Does impermanence result in vitality?*

Yes. I began this long ago. I realized that during my work the existence of each piece became shorter and shorter. The “doing” became more and more important and the “result” became less important. There was a change going on and I found this fascinating. I called them One Minute Sculptures, but I was afraid of the ephemeral. The work is invisible and I needed something to keep them present. So, I began to take photos and videos of them. I’ve always worked in variety, including drawing and more traditional sculpture. At certain times over the years, the public or the curators have focused more on one thing over another. In the mid-90’s, they focused on my One Minute Sculptures. Now, they focus much more on much my 3-D sculptures, my real sculptures.

*Would you say people inform your work as much as you attempt to inform them?*

At the very beginning, I was looking for issues that could be interesting for me to work on. In the first few years, I realized I had to study sculpture because they didn’t accept me in the painting track. I was always interested in colorful painting. I had to think totally differently because I had never done 3-D before, which made me rethink two dimensional skin, layers, and even time. All of a sudden, you’ve posed questions and created issues, and this started my artistic work. After being an artist for seventeen years or so, I had discovered that one good idea wasn’t enough. You had to be able to switch the method and the material to keep it fresh and exciting again. When you’re honest with your intention, the work goes the best. I had a problem for a time in the nineties because I was fixed on sweaters. I could not get rid of those fucking sweaters. I wasn’t ready to take the next step. But, I was very surprised when the catalogs for my One Minute Sculptures sold out. The second edition sold out as quickly. People told me it was because they got ideas out of it. And then I saw advertisers and photographers use them.

*Did you ever expect your art to be influential in fashion, showing up in the collections of storied brands like Maison Martin Margiela, Comme des Garçons, and Thom Browne?*

No, no. You can’t go around creating things thinking you’re going to be influential. When you reflect the world, the work can be very self-concentrated. The philosopher Montaigne was the first to write about the whole world just by writing about himself. I think that is what an artist is. I was always amazed by movie directors—how they are able to work with so many people—theater directors, producers, conductors. As an artist, you’re in your studio alone. I was never able to share ideas. Maybe it’s that I’m too selfish because I want to have my idea realized. Others can work on the social aspect, but that’s where I am unable.

*Do any designers influence your work?*

I like Martin Margiela a lot. And, that English designer that died last year—what’s his name—Alexander McQueen. Also, the Belgian designer Walter van Bierendonck. He’s crazy. His pieces seem to be between art and fashion, which is why I asked him to be a part of a show I did. I’ve known about his work for about ten years. He once used fifty models that looked exactly like him. They all looked like bears: bald heads, big beards, heavy, chests full of hair. And, imagine, they were just showing underwear. It was like an art piece. Walter had told me he liked my work and had made some pieces based on it. Most of his pieces are more art than what you can wear. I couldn’t wear it. But, he’s created pieces that are walking sculptures. Some fashion designers are also artists. Clothes are something we culturally wear, day-to-day, to change our personalities or the look of our personalities.





*Gallery Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium, Fat Convertible, 2007, Gallery Xavier Hufkens, Brussels, Belgium*

*What are some of the things that you identify with, personal objects outside your art practice?* My car, for one. Maybe not in New York, but in the rest of the world people can show off with the car, how cool they are. The house and the car are objects that can be used to present yourself to others. The Fat House (2003) and Fat Car (2001) came out of this idea. It's a reflection of an idea of what you've heard about being rich and of what it means to be rich. Then, you become part of the group; you've bought the membership to a group who can afford it. But, what actually happens is that you become unsatisfied and want the next thing, and nothing's changed. I've also stepped into this trap. I bought my first car when I got money. It's ridiculous. But, I did it. I'm the same kind of guy.

*You've mentioned before that your interest is not on the "body" but that your experiments with sweaters and adipose tissue recall skin and barriers. If one does not know when he begins or ends, because he has placed his identity onto objects, is the individual being oppressed for the sake of mass consumption?*

We are totally made of what we see and what we hear. We are made of genetic conditions and forced conditions, and forced social conditions, and where we grew up, and which people we met, and who our parents were, the social code of the society, of the continent of the country, the people with black skin or white skin.

We are a hundred percent conditioned. I'm pretty sure the people who lived in the past are not at all related to us in this because it has been perfected now. They were biological creatures, but they lived in a completely different reality. Did people feel pain differently than we do today? Before, people would easily get hurt and death was a daily thing, people dying all over the place. Now, it's blocked out.

*You've once said that we live in "an existence made of gesture and design [that] has become a reality of its own—the authentically false!" Why is humor the best way to expose the truth?*

You can tell the truth more easily through humor. It's related to meanness on the one side, and on the other it's healing through laughter. It's mean because you address a certain problem, and people laugh though we are hurt. There's a very thin layer between who we are and how we want to be seen. And, for many, there can be a big difference between the two. Some live how they want to be perceived, and others don't. I hope many don't because that would be really boring. I think there must be more behind it because the truth is not easily reached. I know there is more behind it. ♥





*Studio Warm, Two ways of carrying a bomb, 2007, Schmuun Mumpin Gallery, New York, USA*

