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Upping the Antic
Cheerful conceptual prankster Erwin Wurm creates a surreal universe where Bosch meets Looney Tunes

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The headquarters for Erwin Wurm's sprawling conglomerate of workshops, ateliers, and storage facilities in Vienna is situated in the historic district of Leopoldstadt. At the heart of the city's former Jewish quarter, once known locally as Matzoh Island, it was the site where residents were gathered before being sent off to concentration camps. A generation ago, students and artists, drawn by the area's low rents and proximity to the city center, just across the Danube, moved into its rundown buildings and were soon joined by trendy urbanites as well as a steady stream of immigrants. Today Orthodox Jews, most of them from the former Soviet Union, have also found a home here.

It is this constantly shifting society that appeals to Wurm, whose studio complex is located in the Taborstrasse, adjacent to a large discount shop owned by a Pakistani. On the same block is the school Sigmund Freud attended, and, across the street, a 17th-century Carmelite church, alongside Vienna's oldest outdoor market. The Japanese restaurant that Wurm frequents is only a short walk away, as is the floor-through loft he is renovating. "The multicultural mix often reminds me of New York," the artist says. He describes the office part of his studio as his think tank, where he comes up with new projects and manages his hectic exhibition schedule, which in the past three years or so has included major retrospectives in Vienna, Hamburg, Munich, Bonn, and Beijing. From 2002 until his recent resignation, Wurm taught at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. Today he and his wife, French graphic artist Elise Mougin, divide their time between Vienna and their residence at Schloss Limberg in the wine country.

Wurm has some of his sculptures fabricated in a building neighboring his Vienna studio, but most of the production facilities are outside the city. It is clearly difficult to maintain a single atelier or production facility, since his works are often executed in various materials at once, such as wood, polyester, and bronze. Wurm's cars, for example—both bloated and melting—are lacquered at the Opel facility in Rüsselsheim.

The teeming streets of Leopoldstadt offer obvious parallels to the eclectic universe Wurm has created, one where talking houses get fat, cars climb walls, and human bodies sprout cucumbers and bananas. The metamorphosing entities are like a collaboration between Hieronymus Bosch and Looney Tunes, cheerfully crisscrossing traditional boundaries between styles, mediums, and genres. From watercolor to film, performance to installation, photography, video, and sculpture, there is scarcely a medium to which the 56-year-old artist has not added his surrealist signature. He has even experimented with hypnosis for video projects. He exhibits widely and is represented by Lehmann Maupin in New York, where his show opens on November 4. Prices for his sculptures range from $35,000 to $175,000.

When he applied to study art at the Vienna Academy, Wurm's ambition was to become a painter, but the entrance exams required him to submit both paintings and sculptures, and it was the latter that got him admitted. "That's when I started to think about what sculpture could be today," he says. "It led me on a search for emptiness, possibility, and volumes—the fundamental qualities of sculpture." Exploring the phenomenon that a form can expand and then contract, hence changing its volume, resulted in his "breathing" (and speaking) cars and houses. "It's all about adding and subtracting," Wurm reflects, as in his pieces composed of dozens of sweaters pulled one over the other to make "fat" sculptures. Works like Speech Bubble and Sex Bubble (both 2007)—swollen, sorbet-colored spheres resembling knitted balloons—barely hint at their sweatered ancestry. "I'm interested in the shell," Wurm says, "and in the packaging of forms or bodies."

It's a theme that has comic resonance in works such as the video 59 Positions (1992), which, in 20-second snippets of action, demonstrates the steady deformation of a human body as it is encased in layers and layers of clothing. Since that piece, the comic element, verging here on slapstick, has played a central role in Wurm's art. It distinguishes his work from the tortured, guilt-ridden approach of the Vienna Actionists, although like those ritualists, Wurm sets the human body at the center of his oeuvre. The comic spirit also informs his own collection, with works by such artists as Richard Prince, Martin Kippenberger, Sarah Lucas, and Sylvie Fleury.

Besides employing absurdist humor, which Wurm sees as an instrument of social criticism, he frequently alludes to games like hide-and-seek, charades, and blindman's buff—drawing on his childhood for themes and strategies. He was determined, he says, from the age of 15, to make art his profession, although his father, a policeman, considered such a career only a few steps from that of a criminal. Nevertheless, Wurm recalls, his father was a popular figure, well liked even by the men he helped put behind bars. Prisoners used to send him objects they had made from matchsticks or straws—ships and church towers and bridges. "He had a whole collection of miniature sculptures," the son recalls. "Maybe that's why I became an artist."

Wurm remembers producing his first sculpture at age 14, and says he was encouraged by an art teacher who recognized his talent. When he was 18 he fell in with a circle of friends who were interested in literature, reading such writers as Thomas Bernhard, Samuel Beckett, John Steinbeck, and Michel de Montaigne. Suddenly, he says, "culture seemed a possible way out of the narrow world in which I'd grown up." Yet when he announced to his parents his intention to study art, "there was a lot of shouting and slamming of doors. In the end, though, my parents supported the decision."

Wurm also reflects on his youthful interest in furniture and common household objects. "I didn't know why, but there were material things that simply fascinated me. They included a crèche with carved and painted figures that I could play with for hours on end," he says. "My parents weren't particularly religious, but they were convinced I wanted to become a priest. For me, though, it was all about the carving and the painting of forms themselves, and had nothing to do with their religious significance." That Wurm's artistic vision is rooted in childhood may well explain why he chose to make a reconstruction of his parents' home the central work in his recent Beijing retrospective, "Narrow House," at the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art. Like the actual house, it is 26 feet tall; only in its shallow depth, 31⁄4 feet, does it depart from—or perhaps interpret—reality. For his first Fat House (2003), he

composed a text that the house "speaks" when visitors enter. It includes the following sardonic reflection:

who says this is an art work as a house and that is just a house? the architects—people who build houses or artists—people who make art or contemporary art people . . . who make contemporary art or contemporary architects . . . who built contemporary houses but wait there are just people who think and talk about art and there are people who just think and talk about houses they live actually by just talking about art and or houses they also write about art and or houses.

Here the artist derides intellectual speculation. Wurm takes a pragmatic approach to popular culture, as well as to the house and to art in general, viewing it as a cloak that defines a form while embracing its meaning and values.

It is no surprise that Wurm's favorite building type is the stuccoed, tile-roofed bungalow. Such a typically middle-class family home was a prominent motif in Wurm's 2006 show at Vienna's Ludwig Forum. There, a scale model of the building, seemingly fallen from the sky, was wedged upside down against the outside wall of the museum. The artist titled the work House Attack. Among the numerous other constructions were miniature houses into which the artist often sticks his head. His Confessional (2003) is a doghouse with two entrances into which any two viewers, lying flat on the ground, can insert their heads.

At first, Wurm worked exclusively with found materials—scraps of wood or metal and articles of clothing—all of which he saw in a sculptural context. His choice of materials had as much to do with the fact that he could not afford conventional supplies as it did with his sense of the poetry (and absurdity) of the commonplace.

"I wanted to keep it all close to the experience of real, normal people," Wurm explains. "The language I developed didn't come from the art world but from comics and advertising—from the global vernacular of our age." A self-confessed media junkie, he cherishes the tribute paid him by the Red Hot Chili Peppers in 2002 with their "Can't Stop" music video, which uses motifs from Wurm's "One Minute Sculptures."

Wurm recognizes parallels in his work, which he thinks of as a form of social sculpture, to that of Joseph Beuys, yet he is critical of the degree to which Beuys bound his art to his own person. By contrast, Wurm first became known for tableaux vivants that virtually anyone can perform. In these "One Minute Sculptures," which sometimes recall the early performances of Gilbert & George, the artist or his models strike absurd poses that can be held for only 60 seconds. A man sits with a bucket on his head. A woman lies on her back, legs raised, balancing two porcelain cups on the soles of her shoes. A man sits in a chair, but does so while standing on his head. Franz Beckenbauer (2005), a photo documenting a performance in which Germany's nattily dressed soccer legend leans against a wall with oranges pressed between his head and his shoulder, shows two oranges on a shelf alongside the image and a label reading "Being like Beckenbauer." The photo is intended to be exhibited along with a real shelf bearing two oranges. This part of the two-part piece carries the title Being Like Beckenbauer. In this way, as the artist puts it, "art makes the impossible possible."

In the series "Instructions for Idleness" (2001), do-it-yourself sculptures, operating on the principle of paint-by-numbers, offer the following suggestions: "Stay in your pajamas all day," "Don't care about anything," and "Express yourself through yawning." For the true activist, the series "How to Be Politically Incorrect" (2002–3)

offers simple formulas like "Spit in someone's soup" and "Pee on someone's rug," along with graphically documented how-to photographs. Wurm's expansion of the sculptural idiom includes his "dust pieces," which consist of nothing more than the shapes left behind when an object is moved—in a display case, for example—and for which the artist is prepared to issue certificates of authenticity. Far less ephemeral are the "tortured" constructions based on dysfunctional machines. Misconceivable (2007) is a replica of a cabin cruiser that seems to have gone soft at the center and be "melting" from a pier and into the water. Such conceptions rival Rube Goldberg in wit, complexity, and absurdity. Wurm's Telekinetically Bent VW Van (2006) can move only in circles, while his Renault 25/1991 (2008) bends the entire car into a slanting position to resemble something viewed in a fun-house mirror. At the heart of this surrealistic universe is a determination to erase the conventional boundaries of artistic practice. Even if it involves urinating on a friend's carpet.