

Artforum

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Critics Picks

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The Austrian artist Erwin Wurm has dedicated his practice to engaging complex ontological investigations from a playful, self-described “accessible” perspective, and his works generally feature humans in dialogue with the spaces and materials of their everyday existences. In his latest exhibition, “gulp,” he offers a selection of pieces that seem to physically embody the anxieties inherent in the fraught dynamics of those relationships.

Wurm’s figures contort and submit to the contours of the prisons to which he has assigned them—sink basins and sweaters, for instance. The aluminum sculpture *Big Gulp Lying*, 2010, is a writhing mass recognizable as a human form only by its feet, which protrude from the sleeves of the pullover in which it is hopelessly tangled. The photographic series “*Idiot*,” 2010, shows three people “wearing” their seats, lacing limbs between chair legs and jamming noses against chair backs; they struggle to conform their bodies to an object that was originally created to accommodate them. “And what if we are the sandwich and the sandwich is us?” queries the heroine of his short absurdist film *Tell*, 2007–2008. Indeed, Wurm’s protagonists and their accessories perpetually labor to acclimate to each other: Throughout the exhibition, they enact relational battles that symbolize our multifarious relationship to the stuff of our daily lives.

Though “gulp” features new work, Wurm has demonstrated a continued interest in materially articulating the moments in which, interior meeting exterior, our individual selves must interact with the pressures dictated by all that exists outside of us: fashion, reputation, culture. As illustrated by *New York Police Cap*, 2010—the larger-than-life model affixed to a wall at head level, inviting gallerygoers to step beneath it—the human experience often necessitates a proverbial wearing of many hats, requiring us to adopt various modes and postures in order to adjust appropriately. And some of these, Wurm suggests, don’t quite fit.