

Art Review

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Covered: Erwin Wurm

Mark Rappolt

The back wall of Erwin Wurm's living room at the Schloss Limberg (think château, not castle) in Lower Austria is covered by one enormous colourful woollen jumper. It has a human-size neck and arm, but these look positively Lilliputian in comparison to the architectural scale of the knitwear's body. Although given that we are in Austria, perhaps the reference to Swift is a little out of place; it's tempting to say instead that this monstrous knitted surface renders the neck anal by virtue of its relative size, and defer to Dr. Freud from there. Indeed, the temptation is not as circumstantial as that last sentence may have led you to believe. You enter Wurm's bathroom through a door at the jumper's centre.

Perhaps, though, the real point is this: one characteristic of Wurm's work is the extent to which it renders the banal – in this case a jumper, but in other works everything from buttered bread and unbuttered potatoes to deckchairs, crockery and traditional family houses – by turns horrible, monstrous, menacing and sinister. And then moderates that shock, but amplifies the effect, via an ironic veneer of comedy. This, for example, is an absurdly big sweater. "I think to be cynical – to make a joke about something – gives me more strength and more ability to be rude or to be nasty and not talk in that German way of pathos where you speak about death and everybody cries", says Wurm, with disarming directness. The idea, then, is that the jest sustains the victim so that he can be hurt some more. "The joke is subversive", Wurm continues. "I call it cynical criticism because you can tell someone the truth by making a joke; he's laughing, but it's still the truth and it hurts. Sometimes it's not good, but it's always the best when it's hurting and it's cynical and it's not nice. I don't like to make it nice."

As he says this, I'm thinking about Adorno Was Wrong With His Ideas About Art (2005), a work that attacks the influential Frankfurt School philosopher's exclusion of humour from art in favour of seriousness, and the adoption of this stance by a previous generation of artists – 'Germans especially', Wurm once said – during the 1960s and 70s, by inviting volunteers to lean, sit or lie against a number of wooden boards 'and think about Adorno' or 'listen to the board and fart'. There is, in case you hadn't guessed, a certain slapstick quality to Wurm's work as well.

"I'm from this generation that grew up in the 1950s, where we read Disney comics, Donald Duck", explains Wurm, who was born in 1954. "He [Donald Duck] was our hero – we didn't read it just for the humour. So this was a very important influence on my work. At the time it was forbidden to read comic strips in school and it was subversive and for that reason it was doubly interesting. Even certain literature – Thomas Bernhard or even Samuel Beckett – was subversive at the time because those writers weren't rated by the schoolteachers." And before I can ask it, he answers my next question. "It was important to do something against the environment in which I lived. Plus, my father was a policeman and he thought that art always had one leg in the criminal. For my parents and for my teachers, this was

the worst.”

There's little doubt that Wurm is an artist who, in a fundamental way, relies on the rejection of the status quo and other social norms to generate his work. Indeed, as much as he appears to oppose them, he also depends on them. In the extreme, Wurm is something of a Nestbeschmutzer (one who shits in his own nest), as Bernhard too was often tagged by his critics. 'This tiny state is a gigantic dunghill', the Austrian writer wrote in his final play, *Heldenplatz* (1988): as with Wurm, his repulsion hid an attraction; however excremental he might have found it, Bernhard didn't quit Austria. Coincidentally, it was in response to an invitation to create a public sculpture for Vienna's *Heldenplatz* ('Hero's Square') that Wurm originally developed his series of giant police hats – sculptures that symbolise protection, both official and, in Wurm's case, paternal (the sculptures are like giant umbrellas and are completed when the viewer stands underneath them) and the arbitrary nature of authority (anyone under the hat is a policeman). Indeed, if you are of sufficient height, you are also blinded. While Wurm now shows the hats in gallery exhibitions, the sculpture for *Heldenplatz* – where Hitler delivered an infamous speech announcing the Anschluss in 1938 before beginning a triumphal tour of Austria – was rejected.

Not content with expressing his feelings about what his father represents, Wurm (who, to be fair, does try to mitigate an overly patricentric reading by pointing out that his father, as a detective, never actually wore a police uniform) has developed a similarly antiauthoritarian approach to tackling the institutions and conventions of the artworld. In the *Be Nice to Your Curator* series of photographs from 2006, the artist is pictured carrying a limpllooking Edelbert Köb (then director of Vienna's MUMOK, where

Wurm was having a retrospective) around the museum as if he were either a cripple or a big baby, or stuffing a large slice of chocolate cake into the mouth of the German curator Harald Kunde (who wrote a text in the catalogue that accompanied the MUMOK show). The works are both creepy and bizarre, but perhaps most clearly display Wurm's fundamental dialectic of rejection and dependency.

But to return to the issue of banality, there's no doubt that the humble pullover has played an important part in Wurm's artistic output. In his video *13 Pullovers* (1991), fellow Austrian artist Fabio Zolly pulls on – with increasing difficulty – the required number of the garments, transforming himself from an averagesize guy (slight middle-aged paunch, but nothing too extreme) into something approximating the Michelin Man. In another video, *59 Positions* (1992), Wurm dons a variety of pullovers and contorts himself into absurd positions – which have since become the basis for a series of three-dimensional sculptures, some recently exhibited at Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York – so that they cover him entirely. It's hard to tell whether he's consuming them (stretching them to destruction) or they're consuming him (swallowing his entire body). So what's with this fetish for sweaters, jumpers and pullovers in his work?

“It's the doubling of the skin – of the surface”, Wurm replies. “When we wear clothes, they take on the shape of the body and show the person underneath. This piece itself is just the surface. Which brings me back to the very old sculptures of the Renaissance, or Ancient Greece: those bronze casts where the sculptures consist of a very thin layer of bronze and the real piece is missing inside – it's just the surface.”

As he says this, however, I'm not thinking of Renaissance bronzes; I'm thinking of the infamous B-movie director Ed Wood and his fetish for angora sweaters. Not just because Wurm, throughout an artistic career that has spanned almost three decades, clearly takes on a subject and material and exploits it until it or he is exhausted. But also in the way that he uses the pullover as a transformative material, something Wood memorably (OK, to some) did in his film *Glen or Glenda* (1953), in which a love of knitwear becomes a cipher for transvestism. 'What am I...' the film's promotional material reads, 'Male o Female!' While transvestism is a transformation Wurm has yet to tackle, there's no doubt that the idea of fluid change also runs through his work, from trucks bent at right angles and sculpted boats that flop like fish to sculptures of architectural masterpieces melting and self-portraits of the artist as a gherkin (literally gherkins displayed on plinths).

That's not to say that there isn't a large amount of B-movie material in Wurm's work: *UFO* (2006), for example, an ordinary saloon car melting into a flying saucer-like body, or *House Attack* (2006), in which an archetypal domestic house appears to have crashed, roof first, like some meteorite, into the monolithic grey bunker that is *MUMOK*, or *Telekinetically Bent VW Van* (2006), the classic bus bent, by Yogi Mahesh Abayahani, through telekinesis (at Wurm's invitation, if the email pasted to the bus's window is to be believed) into a curve. But just as I'm getting into my theme, Wurm continues with his. "I use the notion of sculpture and put it all over my work", he says, waking me from my sci-fi reverie.

He's right, of course. His art has consistently toyed with the idea of what a sculpture might be, from the famous *One Minute Sculptures* that he began during the 1980s – in which Wurm, or someone following his instructions, engages his body in a generally absurd relationship with objects or their environments (plugs his nostrils with marker pens or puts himself headfirst into a trashcan, for example) and holds the pose for a minute or the time it takes to capture the scene photographically – to his sweaters, cars, videoworks, instructional drawings, portraits of the artist as a useless human being and bananas stuffed into plug sockets. Indeed, such is Wurm's inability to leave the subject alone that even his catalogues are not free from the drive to sculpt. Gurke (2009) has an embossed gherkin emerging from its front cover, while *The Artist Who Swallowed the World* (2006) features the kind of swollen, padded, wipe-clean cover that would normally indicate literature for infants or self-harmers.

Given that we're in Austria, you'll be far from shocked to hear that where there's a symptom, there's a trauma, and Wurm traces his own to his attempts to get into art school. When he first applied to study art, he intended to pursue a career in painting. He was not accepted, however, and was sent to the sculpture school instead. "I realised that now I had to build myself a base that was related to this issue", he recalls. "That became an investigation into what sculpture can mean today, and how I could respond to this – how I might make a connection between myself and the idea of sculpture. At that time I had absolutely no money, but I had to make work, so I used materials that other people threw away. And this brought me to the idea of using everyday materials, not only physical material but also issues and ideas. I often use the idea of sculpture as a catalyst: I ask the question 'What is sculpture?' Sculpture is to add volume, to take volume away, and you can also say that's when you gain or lose weight. This brought me to these fat pieces."

Among these last are an obese house and a series of similarly overweight motorcars. One incarnation of the fat house includes the video *Am I a House?* (2005), in which the edifice, asking, "Am I a house and an artwork/or am I just an artwork/but that would mean I am no house", seems to reflect on its existence. "Oh, that's so confusing", it continues. "And why am I fat?... Can anybody tell me what's this greenish big dog shit over there? Is this art? Or dog shit?" This sense of existential crisis is not just an internal symptom of the work itself, but something Wurm passes on to the viewer as well. His fat cars are a case in point. "They say that over time a master becomes more and more like his dog", he explains. "That's what I was thinking with the fat cars." What I'm thinking is that we drove to the schloss from Vienna in Wurm's Porsche. He's tall and thin. It's sleek and fast. I'm not sure what to make of that. But enough about him. I drive a Mini. It's nearly six years old. I dread to think what that says about my future. I'm squirming a little on the inside. But I draw some comfort from the fact that my car's certainly not fat.

If one of Wurm's goals is to inspire other people to question their place within and relation to the world, then the means by which he places the viewer in this position have often been extremely direct. He writes instructions for actions or sculptures (in the 2003 work *Instructions on How to Be Politically Incorrect*, for example, these include spitting in someone's soup, peeing on someone's rug and 'fucking the Third World') performed by volunteers, curators or people who respond to advertisements. One consequence of this approach is that his works are imitated and copied – and then displayed, predominantly via the Internet. The *One Minute Sculptures*, for example, inspired the Red Hot Chili Peppers's video for *Can't Stop* (2002), in which the band performs its own versions of his work (and thanks him for the inspiration at the end). So I wonder if it's more important to him, given his professed interest in the everyday and in making the ordinary extraordinary, that his work be recognised in this way rather than through museum retrospectives (of which he's had a few). "Well, both are important", says Wurm. "I'm very much into art in public spaces. Not like the usual art in public spaces, or streets or houses or whatever, but the public space of magazines and newspapers or videos like this – I find it very, very interesting. I'm interested that my work finds interest. This would be enough for me, rather than making the work for 10 critics and 52 gallery visitors."

But given the extent to which Wurm's work relies on a degree of manipulation and control (ironically of the very kind – rules, instructions, prescriptions – that he claims to have rebelled against) in order to force the viewer into certain situations, I wonder whether or not he finds these bastard and viral versions of his oeuvre too random and ill-disciplined. Go ahead and Google: a lot of the time it's just students larking about. "Of course I try to control the work by speaking about it in a certain way", he replies.

"But then you can also forget it, because as soon as it's out, there are so many different opinions about it. When I look at these Internet pages where people make these 'One Minute Sculptures' it's uncontrollable – a lot of rubbish and stupid things came out. If

I had made the Red Hot Chili Peppers video, I would have made it differently. But when you give instructions, you never know what comes out. This is also interesting."

I feel more comfortable about evoking Swift after that. And of all the praise that the

Anglo-Irish writer received for his great satire *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), perhaps the most poignant came in a letter from the poet John Gay. 'It is universally read', he wrote of the recently published book, 'from the cabinet council to the nursery'. In an age when most art tends to be directed at either the market or the theorist, Wurm's particular talent is to have allowed his a similarly Swiftian appeal. That this has, at times, led to his work being dismissed as simple slapstick buffoonery is something of which the artist, who until recently taught at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, is very conscious. "When I speak with the students, I've realised that their studying art is not to do with changing society; it's just about becoming rich and important very, very quick. They want to be famous before they've even made their first show." What does Wurm want, then, I wonder. Does he want to change society through his art? "No, I cannot change it. It's even stupid to think so", is the rapid response. But then with typical perversity he qualifies that rather depressing finale: "But I am a political person, I live in my time, and I think it's a very important right to criticise our time."