**Erwin Wurm**

**The Good Policeman and the Determined Son**

Is Erwin Wurm a painter, a sculptor, or a photography and video artist? He is, of course, all of these things. A perfect example of one who inhabits the “post-medium condition”. He even uses magazine spreads as a form of public art, weirdly replacing the concept of “the turd in the plaza” with glossy works such as *Instructions on how to be politically incorrect, Pee on Someone’s Rug* (2003).

You can see a slice of his most recent creations at Anna Schwartz’s Carriageworks gallery in Sydney from 22 February until 10 May. These are sculptures that celebrate the physicality of paint and the possibilities of colour, as luscious as Jessica Stockholder and as transformative as Philip Guston.

But perhaps you’ve seen Wurm’s work before? Visitors to David Walsh’s Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) will be well aware of the astonishing lipstick pink Porsche *Fat Convertible* (2011) that comes with the swollen botoxed looks. This is one of a series, each fabricated in small, limited editions. But it is far from typical of this artists’ work. Few things are. Over the past three decades Wurm, who is in his late fifties, has made artworks from dust and from pullovers, from everyday objects like bananas and plastic buckets, and from social situations. He builds fat and thin houses that look like they belong to a cartoon world. He is the inventor of the “one minute sculpture.” In these, participants are photographed and videoed interacting with everyday objects. The end results are absurd and insanely funny. They spark the imagination. They make you look at the world with a new freshness. They are deliberately cynical and humourous. In other projects some of his sculptures look like furniture, but they are not. These de(constructions) with a do-it-yourself aesthetic can be stepped inside by gallery visitors. Once in place you are instructed, indeed encouraged, to take a drink from a bottle of liquor balanced on a shelf or built into a cabinet. In fact, for the “sculpture” to be complete it is required that you attain a certain level of drunkenness. On the phone from Melbourne to Austria, and prompted by these drinking sculptures, I ask him about the role of alcohol in his life.

“I don’t drink any more, and I was never a heavy drinker. My body just can’t take it. I saw old friends like Martin Kippenberger and Franz West die too early from too much alcohol. But I still use it in my work. I let others get drunk instead of me.”

Then the line goes dead.

“*Bitte warten!... Bitte Warten!...Bitte Warten…* a mechanical, yet obviously female, Austrian voice instructs. “I’m sorry, your caller is no longer on the line…” A minute later we are reconnected.

Wurm has just left hospital after a serious gall bladder operation. I am jet-lagged, returned from Europe the night before. Where were we? Haven’t a clue. I decide to ask him about his childhood and how he became involved in art.

“When I was a young boy, like fifteen or so, I started to paint, I was very attracted to it. My parents never took me to museums or galleries or anything like that, so it was very like a secret activity. It opened up another world to me. And so I told my father I wanted to study painting and it was a big drama for him, because he saw me more as a lawyer or a doctor or something like that. And we talked about it and debated it so many times until at last I was able to attend art school. I was very determined.”

Most artists I know have a story like this to tell. Unless their parents were artists themselves (which is often the case), there is great scepticism about allowing a child to enter the art world. What did your father do, I wondered, in his own life?

“He was a policeman. He was a very good man and a very good policeman. He kept in touch with many of the criminals he convicted and helped them move back in to society. Some of them would make very small sculptures to give to him as a present from jail. I remember a clock tower made from cardboard and some little bridges made from straw.”

“Do you still have them?” I ask.

“No, my sister has them all, and she does not speak to me. My parents are both dead and she lives in their old house. She fell out with me when I used the house as inspiration for an artwork. But I think those little prisoner sculptures would look very good in a contemporary space.”

Then it happens again. *Bitte warten!... Bitte Warten!...* and I feel like I we are caught in a trans-continental one minute sculpture, looping through satellites and cables.

“So I went to art school,” he continues, when we are reconnected, “to study painting. But I also had to take a sculpture exam and I did well in it and that encouraged me to move towards sculpture. However, I did not like much of the work that was being made at that time in bronze and in wood, all the sculpture of the fifties and sixties. So I had to do something different.”

For the rest of his life, as far as I can tell, he has continued to “do something different.” And thereby lies his genius.

Wurm worked with The Red Hot Chilli Peppers, through their video director Mark Romanek, on a now famous clip called *Can’t Stop* (2003) featuring those *One Minute Sculptures* – remember the five yellow buckets on head, arms, and feet? He worked with Claudia Schiffer on a series of photo-spreads for *Vogue*, and he has collaborated with Hermès on projects which he refuses to describe as “advertising campaigns.” The catalogue for his recent exhibition in Europe: Erwin Wurm *Wear Me Out*, quotes him as saying, “I’m very interested in the public space of the media, as it is a place where art can be placed in a different way. And Hermès I found exciting as a fashion icon…I just tried to make an artistic work with a fashion label, an icon of the fashion world as a medium.”

This turn towards fashion and expanded forms of creativity led him to collaborations with Walter Van Beirendonck, kingpin of the Antwerp Six school of fashion designers whose work was recently exhibited at RMIT’s Design Hub. In the *Wear Me Out* catalogue he tells his interviewers “I love fashion and I want to destroy it.”

“What interests me in this collaboration,” Wurm says, “is that Walter Van Beirendonck is a fashion designer who has a lot of affinity with the graphic arts and also sometimes creates objects for exhibitions, and the fact that he was inspired by some of my work and virtually let my work flow into his work. Walter has brought the fashion aspect of it more to the front. I had given him drawings as specifications that left a false trace. His reaction to it, and what results from it and how, appeals to me.”

In some of his instructional pieces he might, for example, ask a participant to put on every piece of clothing in their wardrobe. A bulbous *Michelin Man* figure eventually emerges, and some of the most interesting aspects of these works are the colour combinations. Not so much a colour wheel as a colour sphere. I ask him about this.

“Colour… sure, colour comes back always…colour became a sort of second skin in a sculptural sense. And with this second layer of skin I realized I could also change volume. Colour became a sculptural tool and this I found fascinating.” But it could also be divisive as I find out when I ask him about David Walsh’s purchase of his *Fat Convertible*.

“This was a strange story,” Wurm recounts with some amusement in his voice, “because David wanted to have this unbelievable pinkish colour and I wanted a more normal red, but he was insisting on it. And so he bought it from a Belgian gallery and it was just around the time that I decided the buyer could be part of the game and choose their own colour. So it was OK. This situation of other people choosing grew from the works I did with sweaters. When I was having shows in America, or Australia, or Russia and I was unable to attend to set up the work, I started asking the curators to go to a local shop and choose the type of sweater and the colour themselves. And so David went ahead and chose this very shiny, bright red. It turned out to be very difficult to photograph. I still would have liked to see it in a quieter red. There’s a convertible and a limousine in the series and they come in editions of three plus two. The last one we sold to Abu Dabai. In the beginning I had to self-finance the *Fat Car* projects and so I made little models of them and sold them to raise money for the first full-sized car. For example, the production costs alone of each *Fat Car* is 70,000 Euros, it’s really fucking expensive. And I could not make them so well in my studio, to that level of quality, so the work had to be made by a private company.”

Interested in the progression of his ideas I ask him to tell me about the slow journey he made from clothes, through dust, to everyday objects. Was that a logical progression, or perhaps an illogical one?

“No, it was very logical, he replies. “When I studied in the 1970s, and up to 1982, I heard teachers saying that in a way you have to overcome your fathers. You have to not trust your fathers and find something else, find something new. But in a way the people telling me this *were* my fathers, so it was them that I had to not listen to. And they were teaching at that time Conceptual Art and Minimal Art. Then everything changed and the new painting started, the Neue Wilde, the transavant-gardia: Schnabel, Kiefer, Clemente, Fishl. At that time I started to paint wooden boards and I would nail them together to make simple sculptures that represent standing, walking, or horse riding. They were more traditional sculptures. And with these works I had a quick success in a local, or I suppose a regional sense, in Vienna, Germany, France etc. But very quickly I found it was not really what I wanted. I realized I was doing something against a certain idea in the art world. And I thought, I’m trapped in this and I want to get rid of this. It did not have much to do with my real self. At that point I had some good galleries and the critics were writing nice things about my work. But all that changed when I stopped making my usual work. My galleries got rid of me and didn’t want to work with me any more. The critics became strange. And I had no money. But I believed I had to start from a sure point, and that sure point for me was the dust sculptures. So I kicked everything out and started afresh. And for me this was quite difficult. It took time to resolve - let’s say from ’87 to ’90 - three years of trying out and experimenting, nights of desperation, and days of fighting. So by 1990 I had a new body of work together and I started showing it. My ideas advanced from there and at that time it was also very much to do with video because I could show movement, and this lead me to many things. For example I made the instruction drawings because I could not send the sweaters. I had to demount them all the time. So I made drawings for the collectors and the gallerists and with those they could realize the piece and hang it on the wall.”

I ask about the dust sculptures. What did they look like?

“The dust sculptures always looked the same. It was either a plinth or a pedestal or sometimes a vitrine where I laid a paper or a piece of cardboard on the floor. I would then place the pedestal on top of the paper and scatter dust from my vacuum cleaner on it and then take the pedestal away. And you would see a rectangle or a square of dust on the pedestal. This spoke very much about the absence of an object, or the absence of a sculpture as anything you could recognize. For me it was important that it was not an obvious image, like a pair of scissors outlined in dust. I wanted it to be more secretive and about the imagination. So to come back to the idea of the logical progression of these projects, I went from the absence of an object in the dust sculptures to the absence of the human body when I made these pieces with cloth – empty clothes where people were missing. So this was the beginning of the new body of work.”

“I know that doubt is very important to you,” I say, “perhaps in the way of Beckett’s “try again, fail again, fail better”. Would the philosophies of Karl Popper or Paul Feyerabend be of interest to you, especially Popper’s ideas of falsification?”

“Yes of course, but Popper was especially political, although he worked in so many different areas. I have always been a very political thinking person, but I have never wanted to put it into my artworks. I tried it two times, I think, and it failed on both occasions, so I think art and politics do not work for me when they are brought together.”

The phone line drops out one final time and, lost in space, we never get to say goodbye. The next day, just as I thought I’d got my head around Erwin Wurm’s *oeuvre*, I wandered, jet-lagged as a cloud, in to the NGV bookshop at Federation Square. There on the shelves I found *De Profundis* a 2013 catalogue of a recent Wurm project published by Hatje Cantz. It is a chilling meditation on the male ageing process. Photographs of nude friends, most still alive, others not, have been painted over in expressionist style. Sometimes the heads are obscured by a flailing brush stroke, more often the shriveled genitals, with hints of impotency, are revealed like left-over fruit in a dry bowl. Wurm enlisted twenty-four friends, many photographed multiple times. Some are recognizable by what remains of their physical presence beneath the paint – others only by their titles: Hermann Nitsch, Franz West, Christian Stock, Leopold Kogler, and Franz Graf. Wurm also includes some self-portraits. But everything he does is a form of self-portraiture. It always has been.

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