

ERWIN WURM AND ORI KLEINER

ORI: One of the themes that seem to unify your work is the notion of reconsidering the way in which art has been constructed (metaphorically and literally), the spaces in which it has been traditionally exhibited, and most importantly, the relationship between spectacle and spectator. In the “Dust” series, you eliminate the artifacts from what were once museum exhibits, leaving only the telltale traces of dust at the bottom of vacant display cases. The “Dress” series includes pieces that conceal objects by meticulously encasing them in cloth. The “One-Minute Sculptures” series invites spectators to participate in planned artistic performances in which the spectator literally embodies the sculpture. In essence, it appears as if you hint at vacating the art institutions, populating them instead with active participation that seeks to emphasize the role of the spectator as a vital component in the actual conception of art. How do you react to such a reading of your work?

ERWIN: From the beginning I was very much interested in the relativity of realities and the picture of the reality.

ORI: Tension appears to be at the very foundation of your work, as we can see in the tightly fitting, often stretched material covering the human body in the “Dress” series; a house made out of butter just before it is spread; an image of a woman laying on the floor, placing the leg of a chair on her eyelid; a grotesquely bloated house a moment before it loses all definition. In a sense, many of these works may simply be read as a disaster waiting to happen, one that is happening, or one that has happened. Tension is the result of a fragile balance between two opposing elements. What would be the driving forces you wish to balance in your work?

ERWIN: Tensions—my tensions.

ORI: Another level of tension evident in your work is that which exists between its tongue-in-cheek facade and its manifestation of the unbearable fragility of human existence. Which of the two serves as your motivation when you approach a new project?

ERWIN: First, I believe that the main question or the issue that concerns me the most is the fragility of us in relation

to our conditions. The picture we have of ourselves is often just a picture of a reality and I mistrust this picture. The fact that I sometimes use the language of aggression or violence or ridiculousness or even nonsense is very often set up as a trap—it means that the real thing I am talking about is fragile, very often hidden and sometimes even misused, but it is there. That’s what I would call the “me” in my work.

ORI: The pervasiveness of natural and man-made disasters, as well as other newsworthy events enhanced by the wide reach of media coverage, overloads our consciousness with powerful images that often challenge our perception of reality. I find that some of the most iconic of those extreme images bear a strong formal connection to your work (a jet plane stuck in a building, human torsos sticking out of windows in mid-air, bloated bodies, people fleeing floodwater atop cars and roofs, images of conjoined twins, and so on). I want to ask you about your relationship to such images in particular, and your view on the symbiotic relationship between the news media and art in general.

ERWIN: Yes, as Descartes said, subjectivity is the only safe way to begin a rational reconstruction of the world. The news media are to a very high degree purely subjective. Art is a subjective discipline too, and both are creating a kind of parallel reality to our world. We make the image—the public creates the icon.

ORI: The “One-Minute Sculptures” series places people in the impossible position of supporting or being supported by everyday consumer products. In the “Dress” series, human bodies are completely concealed by clothing. The *13 Pullovers* video, the *Fat Car*, the bloated house in the *Fat House/I Love My Time, I Don’t Like My Time* piece, and the “Outdoor Sculptures” in Taipei all seem to ridicule and criticize the Western culture of overconsumption and its by-product culture of leisure. It is my long-held position that the multifaceted relationship between humans and man-made products exemplified by overconsumption is the driving force behind national and international policies that often place profit above human lives. How would you characterize the social and political aspect of your work?

ERWIN: This is a highly intense aspect in my work. Some people write that my work is about the human body—that’s totally wrong. My work is about humans with all our different aspects and relations to our time and the world. Maybe it’s just about me and my connections to all of these different aspects...

ORI: The “Incorrect” series highlights the importance of a social and cultural reading of your work. Few of us want to think of ourselves as being psychologically rooted in a specific culture. What role, if any, do you think your cultural makeup plays in your work, and would you agree that possible readings of your work might vary based on the cultural contexts in which your work is presented? What themes in your work would easily transcend cultural boundaries?

ERWIN: Of course I come from a very specific culture—the neo-liberal, postmodern Western society with its critical and understanding view of ourselves and others. The others are the others in us and the others outside of us. (Some people want us to believe that we are like the others and are therefore able to feel and think like them.) We reflect the relativism of truth and believe that we have a critical distance to observe our actions as well as those of others. I have doubts about our critical distance and I have doubts about this way of thinking and I have doubt about our society. And my work is also about this.

ORI: The “One-Minute Sculptures” series relies heavily on the documentation of the performance of your instructions. Where does the series come into existence? Can it exist as a set of instructions only? Do the instructions become secondary to the performances once acted, or does it fully exist in its documentation? Personally, I read the series as existing first and foremost in the ephemeral space embodied in the transition of power between the artist (instructions) to the spectator (performance) and back to the artist (documentation). What are your thoughts about the artistic essence of that series?

ERWIN: The artistic essence of that series is the ephemeral result of a connection between an action, objects, and a person with its endless possibilities of philosophical, psychological, or social aspects.

ORI: What is your greatest fear and how does it manifest itself in your work?

ERWIN: I fear sickness of the body and spirit—and maybe my whole work is about this fear.

ORI: Which other artists intrigue you the most and why?

ERWIN: Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, Duchamp, Beuys, Boetti, and Nauman were important for me—each for different reasons. Or artists like Wolfgang Laib and On Kawara, but also artists from the past like Piero

della Francesca, Caravaggio, Fra Angelico, Vermeer, van Eyck, Hans Memling, Rogier van der Weyden, and Hans Holbein...

ORI: How do you perceive the role of the artist in our culture?

ERWIN: As an interpreter of the invisible.

ORI: If you were not an artist, what would you be?

ERWIN: There is no other choice for me.

ORI: What influence, if any, does Austrian culture have on your work and how does it manifest itself?

ERWIN: The fact that I was born in this country and raised in the context of its cultural diversity and past is a very strong influence. Austria is a country with a long past—from seven hundred years of monarchy (during which the country was ruled by the Habsburg family) and two thousand years of strict Catholicism, until the time of fascism, to democracy—that has had a strong effect on its people. The Austrian spirit or soul or character was developed in between all these huge blocks of history.

Maybe my strong interest in psychology could be called Austrian or maybe my search for reality and truth came out of this, but frankly I never thought about this. I feel more European and there are so many traditions and such a richness in European culture.

ORI: Which of your own works do you feel the strongest connection to? What is it about that specific work that makes it special for you?

ERWIN: I am very much interested in art that is dealing with questions about truth, reality, and the picture of reality—philosophy as the search for truth, employing the means of the temporal and social perspective. Art makes a similar attempt. Yet both philosophy and art fail constantly. Searching and failing—I feel attracted to them both. I am not a philosopher; my study is that of a passionate amateur. The astonishment I feel is like the astonishment I feel when I look at great art. Astonishment burns inside me and stimulates my creativity. Other art that produces a similar effect is very interesting for me. ■■



Clockwise from top left, by Erwin Wurm: *Outdoor Sculptures Appenzell*, 1998, C-print, 120 x 80 cm; *The Artist Begging for Mercy*, 2002 (dedicated to Mauricio), C-print, 180 x 126 cm; *Looking for a Bomb*, 2003, Paper, pen, 29.7 x 21 cm; *Outdoor Sculptures Taipei*, 2000, C-print, 126.5 x 159.1 cm



Clockwise from top left, by Erwin Wurm: *The Idiot*, 2003, Chair, instruction drawing, realized by the public, 83 x 55 x 53 cm; *1 Min. Sculpture*, 1999, C-print; *Fat Man with Bad Feelings*, 1999, C-print, 180 x 200 cm.