

Interview with Erwin Wurm

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Interviewer: Nakagawa Chieko (Towada Art Center)

First of all, please tell us about your background to becoming an artist. What originally motivated you to create your work?

When I was twelve or thirteen, I got pocket money from my parents and started to buy and read books every week about literature and philosophy. I didn't read everything but I did try to read a lot. I got interested in art when I was fourteen or fifteen. I had a teacher who was very supportive and helped me a lot with decisions. Books and art were very important to me. It was like I had opened a door to another world. It was my private world to which my parents basically had no access. I could escape.

I started to make little drawings. I don't know why they were very little. It was basically a little line with these little figures on the paper. Later, I started to make very little sculptures.

I didn't have much space in my house. My father was a police detective and we lived in a small apartment. I had to share a bedroom with my sister. I only had a small desk where I could do things. I got more and more into it. My family thought it was just a phase; that I would stop doing it one day and pursue by something more serious and better, but this never happened.

I then started to paint. I was able to buy some paper and watercolors, and later oil paints and canvases. When I turned seventeen, I started to paint regularly. I was very much influenced at the beginning by different things, especially from Surrealism. I started to paint these paintings, realistic and a little bit surrealistic as well. My big dream was to study painting.

When I was eighteen or nineteen, after the baccalaureate, I wanted to study art but my father told me that I first had to study something so that I can make a living. So I studied art history and teaching. After three years, that was finished and I finally started to study art. My father thought I had forgotten about that plan. I took the entrance exam at art school and they didn't accept me for the painting course, but for the sculpture one. This is the point when everything really started.

What was the process of installing *Fat Car* and *Fat House* in Towada like?

Everything went very nicely and smoothly. The production team in Towada traveled to Austria to get an overview of the local building culture, including gardens. They then went back and built this fence. The result is a typical Austrian fence around the work.

I sent an assistant over and I also went myself. We did it like this quite often. The first house was made in Athens, Greece, at a big show by Denys Zacharopoulos. And then I made another house in the United States. We went in person and built it there because it was expensive to ship such a big thing.

You use different materials such as FRP, resin, and concrete to make the same motifs. For example, you have done this for *Fat Car*, *Fat House*, *Pickles*, and *Sausages*. What meaning does making the same motif in different materials have for the work itself, and what impact do you think it has on viewers?

The difference in material relates to the nature of the specific piece. *Fat House* is mostly made of Styrofoam and then with a specific layer of plaster for outside. All Austrian houses have to have this protective layer, even Styrofoam, to protect against the heat and cold. For *Fat Car* too, there is always a real car under it.

We've heard that *Fat Car* and *Fat House* are not installed right next to each other at any other site. Do these two works next to each other convey an impression of Austrian lifestyle, a kind of Austrian landscape?

A sports car is not realistic. It is less common in Austria and more a symbol of American or Chinese lifestyle these days. My themes are very much related to our world: that is, consumerism. Obesity is a direct result of junk food and consumerism, as are the cars, bags, and clothing I use. My work is critical of society and patriarchy in terms of how it relates to food. The sausage is a Central European icon of unhealthy food. I was basically raised on sausages. It's an almost phallic symbol that I play with and place in my artworks.

Why do you make references to these banal objects from everyday life? Is it to talk about consumerism and questions of reproduction?

No, everything started from the idea of wanting to become an artist and to make a living out of my work. I had no money. So I was using cheap materials with which I could work. I started to work with

dust at first and then with my own clothes, just because I had them. And then with materials that other people threw away. It was basically a certain kind of garbage, just for economic reasons. Later, the economic reasons evolved very slowly into a critique of our society.

The first idea was to explore the notion of sculpture in relation to social issues. Can a sculpture transform social ideas? Can a sculpture be embarrassing, for example? The idea of a sculpture was as a tool and means of talking about our world from a different angle. I have been engaged in the expansion of the concept of sculpture for a long time and am still doing this.

What's also important to say here is I am very much interested in absurdity and paradoxes because I think this method enables me to see, show, or get further behind things and ask questions about circumstances and issues, about the topics I explore. I think when we look at our world from this angle of absurdity, we see more. We see different things and that's exciting for me.

This seems relevant to *Fat House* and *Fat Car*.

Yes, they are works with mass and volume. The basic idea is: What does sculpture mean?

For example, if I make a sculpture with clay, I add volume or take it away. When we eat, we add volume or take it away. Eating and gaining or losing weight is like making a sculptural work. This was a very interesting method for me to ask questions about many things from daily life, to ask: Is there an outcome? Is it interesting to look at the world from the perspective of the artist as a sculpture? Does it bring something new? Does it help us to understand the world? I thought yes and I found it opens exciting doors to other realities, which I found very interesting.

Likewise the form and content. When I change volume, the content changes. I am skinny but when I make pieces about myself, I put on many layers of clothes and put something in my cheeks to make me fat. People get a different impression of me. This simple idea of sculptural issues becomes, all of a sudden, a social issue.

Just as you use clothes and also form as a way to express the context, do you also consider the house and the car as materials that cover or belong to an entity to create some sort of identity or context?

Our skin protects us from the outside. Clothes and houses do the same, protecting us from the world, just on another level. Basically, we are very much connected with the clothes and the house in which

we are living. Not only do they protect us, they show certain values and social status. They show many different things, many different layers.

With your representative work *One Minute Sculptures*, the viewer follows your instructions and stands on a pedestal, becoming the sculpture themselves and reversing the gaze: the viewer becomes object of the gaze. On the other hand, works like *Fat House* and *Fat Car* seem to encompass the personification of the object.

Very correct. In fact, this is the theme that runs throughout my entire work. I was always very interested in creating sculptures about human beings but never about specific personalities. I tried to cut personality out. With the *One Minute Sculptures*, I wanted to anonymize personality and explore psychology. The *One Minute Sculptures* are fully loaded with such psychological and philosophical content.

For example, take free will. I invited the public to follow my instructions and realize the *One Minute Sculptures*. This has nothing to do with free will. Free will is something else, because they can decide what they want to do. But in this case, I instrumentalize them. They have to follow my instructions if they want to become my artwork.

It seems like you perceive the sculpture as something that has a form but that form is not static. You make the same sculpture many times because they are not static, they become more fluid. The mass changes or the weight changes, and so on. Is that the right way to understand your work, that the concept of the sculpture has form but it's changing?

Yes, I think so. I'm interested in these aspects because, as we all know, a philosopher once said nothing is fixed, nothing is static, but rather everything is moving. This applies even to form. Stone moves too, after a certain amount of time, or it very gradually degrades. So the viewer moves the sculpture and acts on it in the form of following the instructions.

What makes a sculpture a sculpture?

I think it's the conscious act of deciding something is a sculpture and something else is not. I believe it's the act of an artist to decide that this is a sculpture, this is not.

Because there are no elements or recipes that define what a sculpture is. It's the same with all the arts. Remember Duchamp. He decided that the urinal is a piece of art. A normal urinal is not a piece of art.

It's a specific decision of a human being who calls themselves an artist.

I'm interested in what artists do in terms of the transformation from one thing to another. When you make an artwork or when you paint something, you transform the material into a certain idea. You transform it spiritually or philosophically or in some other way.

By the way, I don't actually care if something is art or not. It can be a great piece, but it need not necessarily be an *art* piece. That's why they can be exciting and have a lot of relevance for our world.

English translation: Marina Amada Art Projects

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