

## Parkett 2006

### Erwin Wurm

By Abraham Orden

The Erwin Wurm many of us have become familiar with over the past ten years is changing rapidly before our eyes. Until recently, it has sufficed for critics, as a general rule, to begin their studies of his work with a distillation of the challenge he poses to existing sculptural norms. In his new essay on Wurm, Robert Pfaller characterizes the artist's oeuvre as a series of "pinpricks applied with devilish pleasure to a sedate, traditional concept of sculpture." But when faced with Wurm's most recent work, this critical frame begins to flounder due to pieces like FAT HOUSE (2003), and the series of *Fat Cars*, which began in 2001. These life-size sculptures were produced at great expense, and through intensive labor they made a pronounced and immediate break from the artist's iconic *One Minute Sculptures* and *Instructional Drawings*. In their unexpected materiality—their plastic promise to exist forever—Wurm is seemingly producing the kind of sculpture that he has always protested, problematized, and undermined since his early "hanging sweater" sculptures of 1990.

These new works – the houses and the cars – were originally brought into the fold of the existing critical discourses by writers who have partially appealed to their fatness, a quality more directly contiguous with the artist's previous work (pieces like ME/ME FAT, 1993, and the *Curator/Imperator* series from the early 2000s.) In these photographs, the subjects – in the former case the artist himself, and in the latter a series of museum curators – are depicted first as themselves and then as themselves fattened. Weight gain is thus seen as yet another "sculptural moment," one just as sculptural as his "folded clothing hanging from a gallery wall" or "girl with a bouquet of flowers protruding from her trousers." This interpretation is enhanced by acknowledging a bit of cultural criticism: we know, for example, that Wurm associate tile luxury of a fancy car with the wealth of the well fed. But this interpretation, though a good enough sort of patch-job, isn't robust enough to adhere these most recent works to older conceptions of his work. It cannot, for example, explain Wurm's thinking in making THE ARTIST WHO SWALLOWED THE WORLD (2006) and THE ARTIST WHO SALLOWED THE WORLD WHEN IT WAS STILL A DIST (2006) – two life-size sculptures, human bodies that are radically distended like a cartoon snake that's just eaten something—the former possessing a giant bulging sphere, and the latter a similarly distorted disk. Nor will knowledge about the artist's politics help with WITGENSTEIN'S RAUMKRUMMUNG (Wittgenstein's Space Warp, 2005), a small statue of Wittgenstein lying on the floor and bent impossibly backwards, like a body possessed; nor with BUTTER BROT (Bread and Butter, 2006), an aluminum replica of a miniature house, sculpted in butter and smeared across a piece of rye bread. These works are clearly the product of a different mode of artistic practice, or an operation of thought unsounded by earlier critical distillations. The challenge is thus to relate Wurm's new work to the rest of what he has done.

It is most telling that in looking backward at Wurm's work one finds as great a distinction as when looking forward. Before he began his *Dusk* works in the early nineties, before his iconic *One Minute Sculptures* and his *Instructional Drawings*,

Wurm was an obscure artist just out of school, making sculpture as in a colloquial, somewhat exotic idiom totally out of keeping with the times (a quality that took great pains to cultivate). "This work was meant to be confrontational," he has said. "That was the era of Minimalism, of Conceptualism, of Land Art; you didn't see a single figure standing anywhere. Reason enough, thought the young Wurm, to take up the figure in his own practice, for the idea was to "pose a challenge" to art's established hierarchy, and so adamant was his desire to do so that something needed only be considered "incorrect" by others for the young artist to take an interest in it. Through his constant effort to position himself in exactly the wrong place, on the antipode of the zeitgeist, by the mid-eighties, Wurm had arrived at works like UNTITLED (Lowersepik, Newguinean sculpture, 1987) and UNTITLED (Colonie Française sculpture, 1987). In these totem-esque statues, human forms interact in uncanny ways with various containers, like an oil-can or trash bin. The decidedly primitive motif of these figurative pieces, which harkens back not to a primordial age so much as to a high modernist one, was, in this manner, defined negatively for the artist. This is not an anti-aesthetic exactly, but it is an aesthetic of the anti. "My work itself was conservative, a step backwards," Wurm has said, "but it was a provocative step." Though this body of work gives no hint of the sculptural thresholds the artist's work would come to challenge, a concrete connection is made between the two through the reference to "stepping." Both the early figurative works and the later mature works begin with Wurm's disbelief - a thought given shape through the act of stepping away from the established norm. The young Wurm first took a relatively small step away from the aesthetic status quo of his milieu: in the more recent work he steps further out, pulling himself at a skeptical distance from the history of sculpture.

If we replace our image of Wurm as an artist concerned with pushing sculpture to its ephemeral boundary with a picture of him as an artist concerned with this disbelieving step, we find the heterogeneous modes in which he has worked to be not only unified and historical but eminently contemporary. Wurm's early strategy of forcing himself into opposition as a means of searching out his place as an artist is itself the classic image of the avant-gardists, of the rebel, in other words, aspiring to overturn the existing order and replace it his own. In this sense, Pfaller is right to identify Wurm as an artist of the high avant-garde. But by the eighties, Wurm's deviation from that model revealed itself, causing the crucial change in his worldview to surface. For some time, these early primitivist works had done little, materially speaking, to advance Wurm's career, yet there did come a moment when he began to gain recognition for this body of work, when the tide of fashion turned and what the artist calls a "wave of nostalgia" produced a taste for the figurative in art once again. For the classical avant-garde, such a moment would be considered a triumph, a coup by which the rebel-artist establishes him or herself at the top of the cultural order-their place, their faith had assured them, where they had always belonged. Not so far Wurm. It was at precisely this moment that he renounced the figurative, turning to the new problems he would generate with his *Dust* pieces. In so doing, he formalized his original gesture of stepping away from the consensus, and showed there to be no system to replace the existing order-only disbelief, which must be rigorously maintained even in the face of ostensible success.

With age, Wurm has evolved from provocateur into observant bystander: the most recent work represents the artist's turning on his questioning gaze away from art, and toward life itself. His pieces now exist as props he has planted in the world. This

makes the site of such ideological constructs not just apparent but pronouncedly strange, if not funny. The much-touted elements of mirth and mysticism in Wurm's work offer an important final point on his practice. The form of stepping away, of sustained disbelief, has proven itself to be thoroughly contemporary, but does this make it a thoroughly contemporary form of art? Is it not simply a form of critique? Wurm would perhaps not be so alone among the artist peers had he substituted the mode of the postmodern critic for the old revolutionary artist of the avant-garde, but when we look at a piece like TAKE YOUR MOST LOVED PHILOSOPHERS (2002) from the *Instructional Drawings* series, we can mark the distance he has put between himself and yet another trend. Here, the works's participants wedge classic philosophic treatises into the space between their arms and legs and simply hold them there. Wurm thus rebukes the encroachment of contemporary theory onto the field of artistic practice, an invasion he feels too many artists comply with: "Everybody [has been] throwing the names of these philosophers around, sounding so important and esoteric and intellectual. But that kind of art has a stronger connection to philosophy than to life itself, which strikes me as strange. So in my works with philosophy I have tried to rethink that connection, between texts and artwork, for instance. I would say [I am] making a little fun of it." What is germane in this work to the question of critique is not only that Wurm takes critical discourse-in the form of philosophy-as an object, thus declaring it other than art itself, but that the resulting work of art is so wholly un-rhetorical so un-dialectical. Critique is mere rhetorical practice, bound to reason, ensnared by language. The work of art, by contrast-as this elegantly dumb piece shows us-cannot speak, but can only be. Art, then, may go where language may not; it may access life as discourse may not. A work like the pair of ARTISTS WHO SWALLOWED THE WORLD, seen in such a way, becomes Wurm's lyrical step away from the discourse of science. Again, these works do not amount to a constructed argument with science, which we are to "read" (for if it were, how bad it would be!); it is simply a distancing from that field, that kind of knowledge. The work's crucial, humorous spirit is the vehicle by which Wurm brings us in step with himself. Its whimsy ensures that we see the world-when looking at it through the lens of this piece-as he has seen it, as something for a moment totally alien, fundamentally other.