

## Easy, Fat, Building

Austrian sculptor Erwin Wurm's corpulent *Fat Convertible* (2004) is a striking object, not only for the polished craftsmanship of its fabrication, a baroque *tour de force* of industrial arts, but more for the ease with which it presents itself. The familiarity of both the glossy red Porsche and the swollen folds of obesity cloaks the uncomfortable combination of man and machine in a kind of *easiness*, in which the result is less a contemplation of formal meanings or even the satirical political overtones of gluttonous consumerism or overwrought financial markets, but most immediately, in quasi-sensational fashion, humor and delight.

The cartoon-like convertible exhibits an active anthropomorphism in which the sculpted obesity suggests an activity: The fat holds an indexical relationship to eating, suggesting that consumption constructs a kind of interior for the object. If an object can eat and swell, the object has an inside. The abject interiority of his fat sculptures and their easy presentation—eluding contemplation—are characteristics that resonate with architectural practice. Throughout his *œuvre*, Wurm not only metaphorically takes on architecture but often also enlists it as direct fodder. Besides his *Fat House* (2003), sculptures like *Fat House Moller/Adolf Loos* (2003), *Mies van der Rohe Melting* (2005), and *Art Basel Fucks Documenta* (2006) reference a curiously pronounced preoccupation with buildings.

I spoke with Erwin Wurm this past summer from his Vienna studio to discuss architecture, humor, and the role of the *easy* in his work.

**PZ:** I'm interested in thinking through your work, focusing on architectural concerns more than on sculpture *per se*. Your work confronts a quintessential problem of the designer and the architect: how does one make the banal contemplative? How did the banal originally enter your work?

**EW:** This didn't happen quickly. It involved a long development. When I was a young artist, I didn't have much money, and I needed cheap materials. So, I found myself using things which other people had discarded, materials like old boards, old cans, old clothes, things like that. And, of course, I found that using those materials automatically made the issue of the banal part of the work's content. At first, I used my own clothes, but I could not continue to do so for long because I would have run out of supplies. So, I bought these materials very cheaply, or I got them from institutions where people donate their clothes. Once I started to work with them, I realized that I got not only the material, but also parts of the people who wore them—people who had feelings, thoughts, and passions—and this also conjured up their daily life, which raised questions about consciousness of conditions in our society, questions about health care and being overweight. Of course, these matters are, on the one hand, banal. On the other hand, they go directly to the core of every person's psyche. My interest lies in combining these things, in mixing them up, and bringing these issues together.

**PZ:** There is something compellingly easy about your work. Through humor, basic iconic references like houses or vehicles, or even the simplicity of the parts that make up some of

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your one-minute sculptures, one *gets* it. There's an immediacy to it. What value does the *easy* have for you?

**EW:** I once read that [finding] the short way is the most important thing. I took this maxim to heart. For a period of time in my work, I decided to try to find this short way and express myself through it. It is a reflection of my belief in directness itself. It is the kind of directness that you can find in comics, which I often use in my work.

**PZ:** Do you consider humor more of a material or result?

**EW:** First, I think that it's a way to look at the world. Most artworks try to represent something lofty and important, but I find pathos repulsive. I want to address serious matters but in a light way. Even when we speak about illness or tragedy, for example, it should be possible to speak in a light way. Speaking in a light way is not the same as making superficial conversation or small talk but rather it is to speak in a positive, edifying way. And, of course, humor is a strong part of this agenda. When I speak about death with humor, I can eliminate the pathos because this seriousness then loses its solemnity and grimness.

**PZ:** Humor is one of the techniques that you use to mix something easy with something of strong political content. When you see the "Twins" series or the fat car sculptures, the content remains fairly accessible. Fat immediately suggests gluttony and over-consumption, themes with populist appeal. Yet, a lot of your work also makes reference to philosophical issues from the rather difficult writings of Gilles Deleuze and Theodor Adorno for example. Will you speak a bit about the concept of the easy and the difficult?

**EW:** Many artists are good at making the easy difficult. I'm interested in making the difficult easy. That does not necessarily mean making it light in a stupid way. I'm not speaking about the surface. I'm speaking about the content.

**PZ:** Do you feel that there is a role for the easy in architecture?

**EW:** I'm surrounded by ugly, easy architecture here in Vienna because, since the 50s or 60s, we've had this strange tradition of people building their houses in total ignorance of architectural principles established in the past. This is why people are unable to relate to any architects and have no sense of aesthetics. They build their houses using horrendous construction methods with prefabricated elements and materials sold in big DIY stores. It's such a mess because in choosing and installing elements like windows, roofs, or other construction materials, people lack all sense of proportion and aesthetics, and because the DIY stores dictate the taste. That's what I call really easy architecture—easy in a negative way. It's horrible, and I don't like that it's happening everywhere. People don't have enough money to hire architects, and they have no knowledge about rules of aesthetics and the art

of architecture. Such rules barely exist anymore. It is a tragedy what those people are doing to the urban and suburban landscape.

**PZ:** One of the things that first brought me to your work a few years ago was your use of fat. Your first *Fat Car* (2001) is a kind of drag show in which the fat hangs off of an otherwise untouched original. Your later *Fat Convertible* (2004) and *Fat House* (2003) start to have a swelling of the interior as well, a kind of post-operative version in which the transformation is not just clothing or cladding, but a change that effects the entire anatomy. What caused the fat to turn inside?

**EW:** With the first car, I didn't think about it. But if I had thought about it carefully enough the first time, I would have also made it fat inside because the idea was to combine a technical system (the car) and a biological system (the human being or animal or whatever). And I thought that if I looked at the car from this point of view, I would have to decide where the bones would be. What are those parts of the body that don't grow even when you're really fat?—like the eyes, the teeth, the navel, the knees, and maybe the elbows. So, I decided that several parts of the car are related to the body, equatable with bones, eyes, and so on. And then, I realized that fat not only grows outside, but it also grows inside of us. Fat also destroys the inside of the biological organism.

**PZ:** Concerning your work with clothing and fat construction, do you find value in the art of sculpture to deal with enclosure rather than form *per se*? This is one of those classical architectural problems, as buildings are forms but ones that enclose space. The form is also a surface boundary.

**EW:** Of course. There's a strong relationship between the center—inner space—and the surface. The coat pieces deal specifically with this, like a collage that brings different systems together. It's the anthropomorphic form of the human body signified by the coat or the jacket brought together with basic geometrical forms. These forms could be a cube or a cylinder, and through this combination, something else happens: the resultant volume is only defined by the surface and not by the mass. So, yes, it's a basic sculptural question as well.

**PZ:** I enjoyed your discussion of the technical and the biological and the idea that between them lands a process that results from noticing the parts that don't grow. I think that the window and headlight are moments of aperture between the inside and the outside area. That's one of the major dichotomies by which architects have always been plagued—between inside and outside. Is there something in the inside of your objects to which you

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give thought?—as opposed to the outside or the whole.

**EW:** Do you know the cats discussed by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg? He said that what amazes him so much is that the holes in the fur of the cat are exactly where the eyes are. This is such a big coincidence. To look at reality with this strange, disturbing perspective makes it interesting and astonishing—and it can bring about something interesting.

**PZ:** Given the prowess of the computers that are used to design, there's a degree of curvature and form-making that's possible in architecture now. How do you make such baroque curvature? Where does the liquid meet the solid for you?

**EW:** With the first car, I tried to collaborate with the automotive industry. I asked Opel, General Motors in Germany, if they could help me or collaborate. They agreed, so I drove to their big construction hall in Frankfurt, and they allowed me to use the 3D modeling computer on which they design all the new cars. I was there for a week. It was enormously expensive, but the result was not at all satisfying because those computers, I realized, are unable to construct biological or even anthropomorphic or organic forms. They are only able to produce technical forms, and that's the reason why all these cars now look the way they look. Finally, we decided that it wouldn't work out with the computer, so we went back to the old way of making cars: we made the forms by hand. We see the same problem with architecture because everybody who uses a computer program uses a predefined aesthetic, which very much influences the work. It's the reason why all these buildings look like they do. They actually look the same because of the computer program that was used.

**PZ:** When you work with buildings, you often do so in miniature models. They fit in galleries. Yet, you have also built a full-size fat house. Architecture is almost always too big to be made of one piece. It has to be made of parts, but it still wants to be a whole in some way. Do you have advice or thoughts that you would offer an architect thinking through the puzzle of parts and wholes?

**EW:** I look at architecture as a type of sculpture. I look to icons of architecture like Frank Lloyd Wright, Adolf Loos, and so on, but I try to look at them from the sculptural point of view. When I look at construction drawings of houses, I find that they usually show two-dimensional images of the façades; you have to combine these mentally in order to imagine the building as a whole. When I look at works by Loos, I realize that he constructs the house in a certain way: when I see his Moller House in Vienna, it's comprised of four or five pictures: the front façade, the right, the left, and so on—all of the façades plus

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the roof. I never get the idea that it's a sculpture, which is a body of mass with volumes, empty spaces, and full spaces. I always have the impression that it's all pictures—that façades do not reflect the logic of the interior. This is how I feel about many buildings. But in my houses, I try to reduce them or work on them from a sculptural perspective. I make little models for them, model them in clay, and therefore, they are not empty inside; they have a sculptural quality. And for that reason, it's also possible to make these houses melt because melting, for me, is the process of slowly transforming their form into something liquid. It's this change of medium, the hard form of a building becoming fat, which means the dissolution of order. It becomes something *not* anthropomorphic, *not* abstract, but rather *amorphic*. And by melting, changing into something liquid, it totally loses form. If it's still in the process of melting, it's like ice cream. It's liquid in a way, but it's softer in consistency, like a pudding that is neither too firm nor too fluid. I'm actually very interested in potatoes because they are amorphic uniforms. There are thousands of different potatoes, but they are all very easily and very quickly recognizable. And yet their forms are different.

**PZ:** Considering the architectural works that you've used, I understand the Austrian connection. But why use iconic modernist buildings as fodder for your work? Why Loos as opposed to contemporary architects like Coop Himmelb(l)au?

**EW:** It has historical consequence because Loos comes from the end of a specific European society, Habsburg-ruled Catholic Austria. At the end of that society, when it was breaking down, there were, all of a sudden, Loos, Rudolf Schindler, Richard Neutra, and all these people. For a long time, I was interested in working on this period. Wolf Prix, the founder of Coop Himmelb(l)au, is a very good friend of mine. We spoke about doing a project together, and I wanted to do an interview with him in the form of a house and so on.

**PZ:** Loos's façades often suggest faces, perhaps more so than any other architect's façades. Besides fat and sex, what are some other anthropomorphic aspects that hold value in your work?

**EW:** I didn't do the face on purpose. While making the car fat, this face appeared all of the sudden. Then, with the house, there was a face again. And then came the idea of letting the face, the car, and the house talk. So, I made a video in which the fat car and the fat house are talking.

**PZ:** Loos spent a lot of time thinking about the interior of his houses. The exterior is mostly subservient to his interior design strategy—*Raumplan*, as he calls it. Does this

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preoccupation have any impact on your work?

**EW:** Regarding the material he used, of course. He created a new way of building. On the one hand, he was a follower of a nineteenth-century aesthetic. On the other hand, he was radical in the way he used traditional materials. You can easily see this in his house on Michaelerplatz in Vienna, in which he uses materials on the façade that are traditionally used in interiors. I look at his houses for their structure, not so much for their old-fashioned interiors. I collect 1940s, 50s, and 60s furniture, like that of Jean Prouvé or the industrial furniture of Eileen Gray and many others, and by comparison, when you look at furniture by Loos, it looks really dated. That's the reason why I'm not so interested in his interiors.

**PZ:** You've dealt with color more in your recent work. Have you thought about the relationship between matte and shiny and the quality of materials along similar lines?

**EW:** Absolutely. I recently made shiny sculptures, which were fantastic because they work like mirrors. You can reflect yourself in it, and all of a sudden, you're a part of the piece, and in a different way from that of the one-minute sculptures. I recently made a house in which the roof is a piece of cloth. It's like the houses from the 1940s and 1950s. They all had knitwear coasters on the tables on which they placed vases. So, the roof is one of those knits, and it's fantastic. I spoke with Wolf, and I told him that he should make a roof like this. Maybe it'll happen one day.