



other spaces

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Erwin Wurm's One Minute Sculptures by Thomas Morgan Evans

In a photograph belonging to a series of 'one minute sculptures' by the artist Erwin Wurm, a man balances on a pair of polka dot footballs, one for each foot. The photo is taken from behind. At the bottom of the man's blue sweater, a shirt, blue again, sticks out and meets the faded crumples of the seat of his blue jeans. Only the protruding tail of the man's shirt is in clear focus, the rest of the figure is slightly blurred. This middle section of overlapping fabric must have been the only still part of the figure, and therefore the only part which we could say was really balanced when the camera clicked. In another photograph the same man holds on to a desk partition keeping himself above the ground.



Here that idea of conceptual art's aesthetics of administration has collapsed into a spectacle of office-bound pissing about. Yet much of what typified conceptual art is nonetheless present in these works too: the apparent objectivity and dead-pan documentation, the idea of the experiment, the testing and interrogation of the immediate environment and institutional space; the questioning of reality. For conceptual art this unmasking was urgent, perhaps paranoid. Conceptual art pointed away from things in its exercise of dematerialisation, things dissolved, they blurred to the point of transparency to reveal language, system, theory, information; even if these enquiries were manifested physically, for example in the photograph.

Another pair of Wurm photographs. In one photo, a box, which is painted white and looks sturdy, opens at the top and a pair of legs sticks upwards from inside, as if a person had been dumped rigid and headlong into the box. In the other, the box is bare brown cardboard and is held above the ground by a person, the same person, this time standing inside the box, legs, again, appearing through the open bottom.



The objects that are the props in these One Minute Sculptures seem indifferent, nonplussed, about the use they are being put to, even when they are animated by action like the blurry balls. These objects don't appear to belong to the image that they nonetheless also constitute. They stand, I want to say, on the sidelines of their own representation, or at least they resist it whilst being roped into taking part. In the tension captured in the photographs between objects and people this resistance becomes, ironically, visibility, it makes the surface of the everyday dense. Objecthood becomes party to image making; but not part of it. The objects frame the actions of the performers. It functions as a bringing into relief, as if the props were sculptures on pedestals above a flat world, a framed world, a world for which the photograph might stand.

Like these sculptures resting on photography, the punch line of a joke is the moment of shifting register after a build-up. An attempt to explain a joke: this is perhaps akin to conceptual art's project, a task that rarely achieves the same interest as the joke itself. Partly, jokes are defined

by their resistance to satisfactory explanation. Writing on Wurm's sculpture one must not attempt to explain the joke, they are funny sometimes; humour is a word Wurm uses. They are not all jokes, but they are of the order of the joke.

In the coming together of bodies and things that Wurm orchestrates, there is simultaneously maintained a condition of apartness, the everyday remains in the preserved singularity of the object. Sculpture materialises through association not an integration here, each part framing the other in relation to itself: 'part by part, by addition, composed' said Donald Judd, of traditional sculpture.

This way Wurm's funny sculptures rebuke the subject centeredness, the narcissism even, of conceptual art in its contrast to the mute parallel dimension in which things seem to exist within in these works. A real attempt to connect to the world illustrates a distance between subject and world, a space full of possibility that conceptual art's structuralist conspiracy theories had filled with vectors and matrixes.

This gives photography a double status in Wurm's work therefore. It is both parochial and it is transformative: it both smoothes and normalises relationships and represents their transitory nature.

In these works photography does not 'picture' the sculpture but interjects in a process of the sculpture's falling back into life. Sculpture in this case is suicidal; its objective is to collapse back into reality, to disassemble. Sculpture is 'held up' by photography in the same way that so many of Wurm's sculptures contain humorous acts of balancing. A man has hooked a coat hanger on his bottom lip, another man sits on an upside down broom propped against a wall: he seems to be levitating.



If sculpture takes place on a platform, that platform of which we say 'it is art', and is held in position by the tension it maintains between its figure and ground: between art and life as well as positive and negative space, sculpture here, in attempting to leap off that platform, instead balances on the slender structure of photography.

Wurm's work is the product of photography's interception with an attempt to get in touch with things. It sends this attempt off sideways into a kind of alternative universe, but, as I have suggested, it is one that points us back in the direction of the everyday, the apparent, the happening: things, because the big punchline has not been delivered yet, not considered serious, which we barely pay attention to.

Wurm's sculpture-photographs bring to attention the difficulty of things. This difficulty is there to disrupt the blithe insouciance with which we are encouraged to keep calm and carry on. The sustained effort of the One Minute Sculpture project is to make and to perform and to photographically hold sculpture, while, on the one hand, avoiding becoming out of touch, and on the other, becoming immersed in the invisibility of the everyday, but to remain fixed on the cusp of things.