

For more than four decades, Erwin Wurm has radically reshaped the language of sculpture, replacing its traditional weight and permanence with a more fluid and responsive approach. His focus is on the conditions that allow something to exist as sculpture at all. What defines its duration? Where does its surface end, and its meaning begin? For Wurm, sculpture is not a fixed object but a fleeting dialogue between body, space, and time.

# God Is a Sculptor

## In conversation With Erwin Wurm

**ANASTASIA YOVANOVSKA** Your artworks often deal with everyday objects—cars, clothes, furniture. What draws you to the ordinary as a starting point?

**ERWIN WURM** It didn't begin as a conceptual decision—it began as a necessity. As a student, I had no money, yet I had the urge to produce work. So I turned to what was available: dust, my own clothes, whatever was around me. But very quickly, this constraint opened into something much larger.

I realized I wasn't interested in objects as such, but in the conditions of sculpture—volume, mass, surface, the relationship between interior and exterior, and above all, time. If you think about classical sculpture—Greek or Roman figures—they appear monumental, solid, eternal. But in truth, they are hollow. What defines them is not their mass, but a thin layer—a skin.

Clothing became, for me, a kind of second skin. It is intimate, social, and cultural. It carries identity. So through something as simple as a sweater, I could engage not only sculptural questions, but also social and psychological ones.

author  
ANASTASIA YOVANOVSKA



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**AY** You’ve often challenged the idea that sculpture must be permanent or monumental. So what, in your view, is the minimal condition required for something to be considered sculpture?

**EW** Sculpture, for me, is not a fixed category but an effect. It emerges from the relationship between an object, space, and time. A sculpture can exist for 30 seconds or for centuries. Duration is irrelevant. What matters is the articulation of presence—how something occupies space, how it relates to the viewer, how it unfolds in time.

We live in a society that no longer repairs. Everything is disposable. Objects have short lifespans—just like us. So I became interested in this temporality, this fragility. A sculpture does not need to endure forever. In fact, perhaps it becomes more truthful when it doesn’t.

**AY** That seems especially relevant today, in a culture shaped by fleeting attention and digital immediacy.

**EW** Yes—and I find that deeply troubling. These short-lived images, these endless streams—they are addictive. I am not outside of it; I am also a victim of it.

What disturbs me most is not just the speed, but the algorithm—the way it reflects your own desires back to you. You see what you want to see. And that is frightening, because it reveals something about yourself you may not want to confront.

**AY** Let’s turn to architecture. Your work often engages with it—not just physically, but psychologically. What role does architecture play in shaping the experience of your work?

**EW** Architecture is fundamental. It is, in a sense, our third skin. It protects us, defines our social existence, and structures our behavior. Every architectural form reflects the society that produced it. When I look at contemporary architecture, I often feel uneasy. There is a loss of intention, of responsibility. So I intervene—I distort, compress, melt, or deform architectural forms. I treat them almost like biological entities. Take a house: it is never just a structure. It carries ideology, memory, power. So what happens if you soften it? If you compress it? If you destabilize it? These transformations allow us to see what is otherwise invisible.

Image COURTESY



Untitled, 1998, 16 c-prints



<sup>1</sup>*The Idiot II*, 2003, chair designed by ROLAND RAINER, instruction drawing, performed by the artist, 83 x 55 x 53 cm  
<sup>2</sup>*Narrow House*, 2010, mixed media, 700 x 130 x 1600 cm, installation view – Place Léon Meyer, Le Havre, FRANCE, 2022



**AY** Your *Narrow House* is a powerful example of that. It compresses a childhood home into an almost uninhabitable space, creating a visceral sense of claustrophobia. Is this work autobiographical?

**EW** It is deeply rooted in my personal experience—but it goes beyond that. When I was a child, everything felt normal: strict discipline, physical punishment, social rigidity. It was a post-war society—closed, conservative, shaped by unspoken histories.

Only later, when I gained distance, did I recognize how restrictive it was. The *Narrow House* is an attempt to materialize that realization—to give form to a psychological condition.

What interests me is that visitors often recognize their own childhood in it. It becomes not just my memory, but a collective one. And yes, it produces discomfort—because it compresses not only space, but also thought.



1. *One Minute Sculpture*, 1997, c-print, 45 x 30 cm  
 2. *Palmer's*, 1997, c-print, 94 x 74 cm  
 3. *Psyche—As You Like It*, 2024, Aluminium, paint, fabric (knitwear), instruction drawing, 262 x 115 x 68 cm, photo MARKUS GRADWOHL  
 4. *One Minute Sculpture*, 1997, c-print, 45 x 30 cm

**AY** There's also a strong element of absurdity in your work. Do you think exaggeration—or the absurd—reveals truth more effectively than realism?

**EW** I would say yes. The absurd allows us to step outside of normality. When you are inside a system, everything appears natural. You don't question it. But if you shift perspective—if you exaggerate, distort, or create paradox—you suddenly see things differently.

The absurd is a tool. It reveals what is hidden by familiarity.

**AY** And yet, your work often provokes laughter before reflection. Is humor a deliberate strategy?

**EW** No, not a strategy. It's simply how I perceive the world. I see both tragedy and stupidity at the same time. When you emphasize the stupidity, people laugh. But beneath that laughter, there is something darker. Sometimes this frustrates me—when people interpret certain works as purely humorous. But perhaps that tension is necessary. Humor opens the door; reflection comes later.

**AY** Your *One Minute Sculptures* radically expand the definition of sculpture by incorporating time, participation, and the human body. How did this idea develop?

**EW** It emerged from a long process of questioning. I was not originally trained as a sculptor—I was placed in a sculpture class almost by accident. So I had to ask very basic questions: What is sculpture? What defines it? I began experimenting with actions. Standing still, brushing my hair—these are everyday gestures. But what transforms them into sculpture? Is it duration? Compression? Repetition?

At one point, I hung a sweater on two nails in a specific way. It existed as a sculpture for the duration of the exhibition—and afterward, it could be worn again. That was important: the work had a beginning and an end. Later, I sent instructions to a gallery instead of objects. They executed the work themselves. This was a turning point—the sculpture became an idea, a set of conditions. From there, the *One Minute Sculptures* evolved naturally.

**AY** Do you feel that sculptures still offer new ways of understanding the present?

**EW** In a way, yes—but only if we understand art as an interpretation of our condition. It depends on whether people are willing to engage with it. Today, many people immediately frame art as political. And of course, art can contain political elements. But historically, it has also been continuously misused. From the very beginning, art served power: it was used by monarchies, by the Church, by ruling groups to communicate their values and reinforce their authority.

And this hasn't changed. Today, culture is still instrumentalized by political systems, by ideologies of every kind. Conservatives, revolutionaries, communists, fascists—each has attempted to shape art according to their vision of how the world should be.

But this is precisely where I draw a line. I believe art must remain free. It should not be reduced to a tool that delivers a clear message or serves a predefined purpose. The moment art becomes explicitly political in that sense, it risks becoming contaminated—it loses its openness, its ambiguity.

**AY** Finally, I'd like to ask about your place of inspiration. You spend most of your time in Limberg, Venice, and Hydra—where do you feel most drawn to return?

**EW** Hydra, in particular, is very special. There is a different sense of time there—slower, more physical. We rebuilt an old windmill near our house, respecting its original 17th-century structure. That act of preservation is important to me.

But I don't work there in the traditional sense. It's more about living—observing, experiencing. The simplicity, the relationships, the landscape—it all feeds into the work indirectly.

Sometimes, stepping away is the most productive thing you can do.

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During the conversation, Wurm returns to the idea of sculpture as a time-bound experience—one that resists both monumentality and certainty. By exaggerating familiar forms, whether through audience participation or architectural distortion, he reveals the hidden systems we rarely notice. Wurm's practice is grounded in pause and in the value of stepping back to see the bigger picture—a gesture that continues to captivate. Bravo to the genius.