Words
RAMONA HEINLEIN

ERWIN WURM

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In Erwin Wurm's work, nothing feels entirely fixed. Forms seem caught between solidity and dissolution, as if sculpture were less an object than a temporary agreement between matter, gravity, and time. What first registers as lightness gradually unfolds into something more searching: an invitation to question how we assign meaning and permanence. For decades, Wurm has approached sculpture as an open field where everyday materials and gestures shift roles and suggest new ways of seeing. His practice resists closure, favouring transition over resolution, possibility over certainty. Wurm shares his thoughts about duration and deformation, authorship and disappearance, and sculpture as something that happens rather than simply stands.

RAMONA HEINLEIN Your works are very often described as humorous. Do you actually understand humor as a deliberate strategy within your practice, or do you feel that this description is, at least in part, a misunderstanding? Because, as funny or comical as your works may appear at first glance, themes such as transience, invisibility, and disappearance clearly play an equally important role. This becomes especially visible, for example, in the *One Minute Sculptures*, where you invite exhibition visitors, through short and very precise instructions, to interact with everyday objects and to hold a pose for one full minute.

ERWIN WURM There is always a certain horizon of experience from which we perceive things. What some people experience as funny or playful may feel oppressive or even uncomfortable to others. So perception really depends on where you're coming from. But no, it's not about trying to be funny. I'm not a joke-maker. What interests me is rather the possibility of dealing with things lightly. In the 1960s and 1970s, many artists worked with a great deal of pathos. For me, that kind of pathos tends to make the viewer feel small. And I believe that art should do the opposite — it should elevate the viewer, open something up, not press them down. Of course, the *One Minute Sculptures* are formally quite close to slapstick. That's precisely why I very consciously decided to show them only in museums and institutional spaces, and not at parties, clubs, or commercial contexts.

RH I've noticed that these works keep reappearing in exhibitions. You've been making them since the 1990s, and yet they still don't seem exhausted or historically closed. They feel strangely current.

EW Yes, for me — and apparently for many others as well — these works and the questions they pose are still very much alive. They haven't lost their urgency. Only recently, an entire room dedicated to the *One Minute Sculptures* opened at the Tate Modern. I still genuinely enjoy showing them.

RH You repeatedly challenge the traditional idea of sculpture as something stable and permanent. Even your massive sculptures often look like temporary states, frozen moments, or tipping points rather than timeless monuments. How would you describe your relationship to sculpture?

EW What really drives me are very basic sculptural questions: the move from two dimensions into three, issues of mass, surface, skin, and volume. And time is equally important, because you never experience a sculpture in a single glance. You have to walk around it, move your body, change your perspective. So duration automatically becomes part of it. Then the question arises whether, as a sculptor, you want to stretch time or compress it, slow it down or condense it. Those kinds of questions really interest me.

RH On the occasion of the 61st Venice Biennale, you'll present a solo exhibition at the Museo Fortuny. In the first half of the 20th century, the palazzo served as the studio and home of the Spanish fashion designer Mariano Fortuny.

EW Calling him simply a fashion designer is actually too narrow. Yes, he designed clothes and fabrics — pleats and textiles — and dressed many European and American intellectuals. But he also worked for the theatre, engaged with architecture and sculpture, and in that palazzo, he created something like a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The place is completely filled, almost overflowing with objects and materials, and of course, there's also junk among them. For me, the challenge is to deal with that abundance without disappearing in it myself. On the ground floor, there will be a concentrated solo presentation of my work, and upstairs, my works will enter into a dialogue with the existing collection.

RH You're also showing the work *Balzac* (2023) in Venice. The figure seems almost swallowed by clothing. The sculpture is inspired by Auguste Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1898), who also dealt extensively with the processual nature of sculpture. What fascinates you about Rodin?

EW I like leaving traces or references, small paths that lead elsewhere. For example, I also did a work on Donatello and on Gilles Deleuze. With *Balzac*, I returned once again to very fundamental sculptural questions and to the story behind Rodin's piece. Balzac was a rather corpulent little man, and Rodin almost despaired trying to model him realistically. It took years until he simply dipped a bathrobe in plaster and hung it over the body. In this way of working with clothing — that's where our interests meet.

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RH You will also exhibit Polaroids of the *One Minute Sculptures*.

EW Yes. I've always called my photographs sculptures. I began photographing the *One Minute Sculptures* simply to document them. Because they're ephemeral, there's always the risk that nothing remains, that everything dissolves. And as an artist, you can't really exist if nothing remains. That's why I started taking photographs. And I did that for quite a while. But then I decided to stop when the history of photography kept knocking on my door. I realized that it didn't really interest me. I am a sculptor.

RH Polaroids have a particular material presence and a certain magic because the image appears immediately.

EW Exactly. I'm interested in that short

development time and in the uniqueness of each image. I had only been familiar with small-format Polaroids, but then I met someone who had a huge camera that could produce images measuring 70 x 50 cm. You can't retouch them, and you can't reproduce them. Each one is singular. That fits perfectly with the temporary and unrepeatable character of the *One Minute Sculptures*.

RH You often play with the uncertainty of where the work actually begins and ends. These works do not exist as stable objects at all, but rather as transitions — between pose and movement, form and deformation. Are you more interested in sculpture as a state or as a process?

EW I constantly ask myself: What is sculpture? That question was already the starting point of the One Minute Sculptures. How can an action like standing become sculpture? At what moment does a body suddenly become sculpture?

RH The *One Minute Sculptures* represent something like an almost anti-monumental attitude. To what extent is the work also about democratizing the relationship between the visitor and the artwork, about shifting hierarchies between who acts and who observes?

EW I'm not particularly fond of the term democratization, to be honest. It's a word that gets misused constantly. You can see that very clearly with social media, which promised democratization and ended up producing something quite different. For me, it was primarily about authorship. In the early works, I signed the photographs that visitors took of the situation. So they suddenly had, in a way, an original by me. Authorship became completely confused and destabilized. But if we talk about something like democratic aspects, then this interested me more in relation to furniture, which I also use repeatedly in my work. Furniture has a social dimension. I consciously work with pieces from the 1950s — there are wonderful designs by Scandinavian makers or by American companies like Herman Miller.

RH Your approach to authorship is also interesting in relation to the instructions you give — the way you delegate actions to others.

EW Yes, that actually began with a series of sweaters in the early 1990s. I treated sweaters as sculptural material and playfully transformed them into something else. Anyone could simply take off their own sweater and hang it on the wall. So the sculpture emerged through a very ordinary, almost casual action. Later, there was an exhibition in the US where I wanted to realise this idea, but I couldn't travel there myself. So I wrote instructions instead. That became the performative part of the work — almost like a musical score — something that functions even when I'm not physically present anymore.

RH Works like the *One Minute Sculptures* seem to require viewers, in a certain sense, to surrender themselves quite courageously to the situation and to the work.

EW Yes, exactly. The subject-to-object relationship shifts quite radically in these pieces. The viewers, as part of the artwork, are suddenly no longer the observing subject but the observed object. They become visible, exposed. It's a very particular experience that you only really understand once you've tried it yourself. And the reactions differed quite a lot from place to place. In Austria and Germany, people were initially rather hesitant. In the US, by contrast, people had far fewer inhibitions about posing in front of the camera and putting themselves on display.

RH Ideas of movement and transformation keep recurring throughout your work. In 2025, you made a series of ceramic sculptures called *Idols*. Deformation seems central there. And there's also this tension between abstraction and something anthropomorphic — your sculptures always seem to retain a human quality. Many other works — cars, houses, items of clothing — appear inflated, warped, or almost collapsing, as if caught in an intermediate state. How do you understand this tendency?

EW Yes, deformation has always been a key theme for me, and also reduction. Sometimes the human figure is simply removed altogether. The works tend to oscillate between realism and abstraction. I often feel as if these are two different sides of myself arguing with each other. That tension keeps the work alive. What about you? What's your personal conflict?

RH To write or not to write. That's my question.

EW (laughs) I recently read an interesting theory that Shakespeare might actually have been a Moroccan Jewish woman from Venice. Because Shakespeare supposedly came from very modest circumstances, people doubt that he could have had such extensive knowledge. A Moroccan Jewish woman, on the other hand, would have been discriminated against on multiple levels and, as a woman, would hardly have had a public voice at all. I find that speculation fascinating.

RH That's very interesting! Are there any writers or authors you're particularly interested in at the moment — anyone you've been reading recently?

EW I've just read the diary of Samuel Pepys, an English civil servant from the 17th century who meticulously recorded his daily life and the events of his time. I find that kind of writing fascinating, this very direct chronicling of everyday existence. I also pulled out Peter Handke's "History of the Pencil" again, which I always enjoy returning to. And recently I read a palaeontological book about the Denisovan hominins discovered in Asia. In general, I'm very interested in our history, in the long arc of where we come from and how we became who we are.

RH This also gets evident in the way we dress. Where does your interest in clothing come from? You've been working with garments since very early on.

EW I'm actually not so interested in clothing per se. What really fascinates me are questions of surface and skin — the way clothing doubles the skin. Clothing is basically two-dimensional, but when worn, it becomes sculptural. If you look at large classical equestrian statues in bronze, they're empty inside. They consist only of a thin outer shell. Clothing functions in a similar way. It's a kind of protective cover, a second skin. At the same time, it reveals something — it communicates personality, social position, identity. It's a way of presenting yourself publicly. In that

sense, clothing is always social and communicative. Clothes make the person. The same logic applies to houses as protective shells, which is another theme I keep returning to.

RH You're also repeatedly noticed in the fashion world.

EW Yes. For example, Issey Miyake used my work as inspiration for an entire collection last year. I even showed works during the runway show at the Louvre during Fashion Week. And Balenciaga, for example, has also taken up certain ideas of mine.

RH Why do you think the fashion world is drawn to your work?

EW I honestly don't know exactly. Maybe simply because I do unusual things with clothing, things that don't follow conventional logic. When I first started making the *One Minute Sculptures*, I kept a diary. At that time, I wasn't doing very well. I felt insecure and unsure of myself. Then suddenly success arrived, and with it a lot of interest from the fashion world — photographers, magazines, and different collaborations. I even appeared in German Vogue. But it's important for me to say that I never did advertising with my works. The fashion world and I have always instrumentalized each other rather pragmatically.

RH In your *Substitutes* series, which you've been developing since 2022, you present what are essentially empty shells of clothing — garments that outline the human figure but leave it absent, almost ghostlike. There's something paradoxical about them, a kind of ambivalence that feels both present and missing at the same time, and that can be slightly unsettling. Are you deliberately aiming to create that sense of discomfort?

EW Yes, I'm glad you describe it that way, because of course these works are also uncanny. That slight unease is important. It's similar to many of my sculptures that deal with houses or architectural forms. Take the school I built in 2024, for example. The relationship between upbringing and education is incredibly complex, and I tried to express that through the building itself. The architecture is very tight, almost compressed, so that you feel a certain psychological pressure when you encounter it.

RH You also reconstructed your parents' house as an especially narrow, compressed structure.

EW Exactly. And even here in the studio, I'm currently looking at a sculpture of my father as a policeman — completely flattened, still wearing his cap.

RH The absurd, the paradoxical, and the slightly surreal within everyday life — things that seem to escape reason and logic — often appear as a driving force in your work. What fascinates you about that territory? And do you think the absurd carries a socio-political potential?

EW The absurd in my work developed quite slowly over time. It wasn't something I set out to pursue from the beginning. A so-called "normal" approach to the world has simply never interested me. It never really has. Only when you start looking differently, when you step slightly outside what is considered normal or reasonable, does the potential arise to see more, or at least to see otherwise. Part of that is certainly a matter of character, but it's also something you can learn or train yourself to do. It has a lot to do with self-perception and with questioning your own position. We all want to be happy and successful, of course, but the parameters that define those ideas constantly shift as society moves forward — and sometimes backward. Often, the madness and the drama of a particular era only become visible in hindsight. And as for the political dimension: as artists, we inevitably interpret our world and our time. That is always political in a broader sense. Not party-political — that seems hopeless to me, and I actively resist that — but political in the sense that it reflects how we live together.

RH A quote by Camus comes to mind: "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." We long for meaning in what may ultimately be a meaningless world. What role does art play in that tension?

EW Art has been instrumentalized from the very beginning: by religious institutions, by aristocratic societies, by revolutionary movements, by conservative systems, by fascist regimes, and, of course, also by capitalism. Again and again, art is used for propaganda or for very specific agendas. I think art should resist that. For me, art should be meaningless in the best possible sense; it should step outside of this constant demand for meaning and usefulness.

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RH Still, a lot is expected of art today — an educational mission, for example, or the responsibility to offer a critical reflection of society.

EW Yes, there's always this expectation that artists should somehow provide meaning, that they should make a constructive or morally valuable contribution to society. I'm very skeptical of that idea. For me, it borders on abuse. I refuse that role. Of course, art is political, simply because every social system is political. But through art, I want to preserve a certain freedom for myself, to create a space where things are not immediately functional or instrumentalised. Whether that really succeeds is another question altogether.