

Playtime



Photography Knocks at the Door

Erwin Wurm in conversation
with Max Hollein

Austrian artist Erwin Wurm's principal medium is sculpture, but his ephemeral works are often realized through his use of photography. His *One-Minute Sculptures*, an ongoing series begun in the late 1980s, are documented performances carried out according to Wurm's instructions and characterized by playfulness, slapstick, absurdity, and an engagement with the ordinary. Citing a range of conceptual influences, from Yves Klein to Joseph Beuys to Bruce Nauman, Wurm's spontaneous sculptures are an intriguing form of portraiture, an awkward physical comedy of contortion and gesture. His 2012 project *De Profundis* continues this interest in the body by drawing on poses found in Gothic and early Renaissance art. Wurm once remarked that his greatest fear was of "sickness of the body and the spirit." "Maybe," he continued, "my whole work is about this fear," an observation that points to the pathos that often resides within the comedic. Here he speaks with Max Hollein, director of Frankfurt's Städel Museum, Liebieghaus Sculpture Collection, and Schirn Kunsthalle, about the unique role photography plays in his work, the ways in which his projects have seeped into the commercial world—sometimes co-opted without his permission, other times purposefully, as with his work for the Austrian lingerie brand Palmers or with Hermès—and the possibilities and risks that accompany humor in art. The following conversation took place in Munich last April.

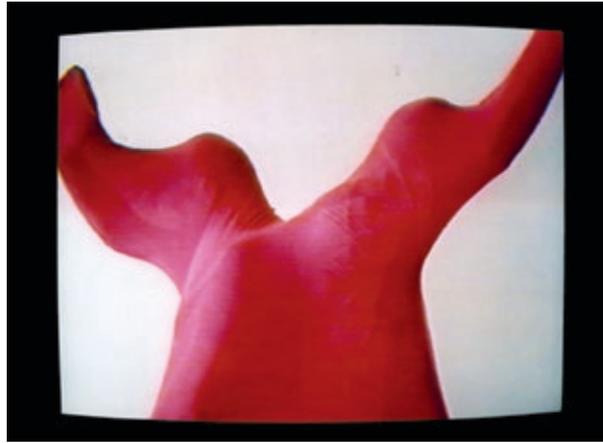
—The Editors

Max Hollein: In our everyday culture, and particularly in digital media, we are seeing an increasing tendency to spontaneously exchange and publish private photographs. Interestingly, these are often pictures that show people in precarious and even physically ambivalent situations. For example, there is the phenomenon known as "planking," where people stage themselves as stiff boards in public spaces and let themselves be photographed. This could be interpreted as a continuation of an Erwin Wurm sculpture. Is this something that you follow or see as part of a new development?

Erwin Wurm: I don't directly follow it but I am aware of it. For example, there were forums on the Internet displaying posed *One-Minute Sculptures*. From the beginning, it was a strong desire of mine that these *One-Minute Sculptures*, initially made as snapshots, should appear like private photographs with a touch of clumsiness, like a private game of ineptitude. What chiefly interested me was the fact that public space is no longer only squares, streets, and house fronts. The contemporary public space for art is now the media space: newspapers, magazines, television, the Internet.

MH: Do you consider it an interesting form of continuation that your works, thoughts, and aesthetic formulations are being picked up, copied, and actually reproduced in various contexts in the advertising and entertainment industries? Do you want to regulate this or do you see it as an interesting expansion of an idea?





Video stills from
59 Positions, 1992
Courtesy Lehmann Maupin,
New York

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EW: On the one hand, there is the positive element of development in the direction of the public. On the other, it comes with a danger. Take the example of Constantin Brancusi's famous *Bird in Space* [1923]. By being reproduced thousands of times, it can no longer be *seen*. I found it fascinating that the first *One-Minute Sculptures*, which were exhibited in the Bremen Kunstverein a while back, were adopted or interpreted by many viewers—for example, by fashion photographers, by musicians like the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and by fashion designers like Walter Van Beirendonck. I realized that my work had broken free, in a certain sense, and that my ideas had found their way into an aesthetic of the everyday, of the mainstream. On the other hand, it irritated me how much had been co-opted in a cheap and superficial way by advertising. My aesthetic was diverted onto completely false paths.

MH: **Your work deals with fundamental questions of sculpture, sculptural practice, and the integration of other media that are normally regarded as separate. Here we are talking about elements such as text, video, architecture, photography, and lately, painting. You have defined and established them all as “sculptural” forms of expression. When did you actually begin to work with photography?**

EW: It happened gradually. I was interested in the question of whether a physical action can become a sculpture, and if so, when this transition occurs. With the help of looped sequences showing someone standing still, I wanted to discover when and if this transformation takes place. Our eye... our brain is not designed to process *lack* of motion, but rather movement. The observer is inclined to project suggestions of movement onto what is seen. Afterwards I began to film this performance, this aspect of movement, this action. The result was my work *59 Positions* (1992). In that project, someone had to put on a pullover sweater, and remain for a short time in an abstruse, bizarre position

Right:
Untitled (Palmer), 1997
Courtesy Xavier Hufkens
Gallery, Brussels, Belgium



Above:
Erwin Wurm, Untitled (Erwin) 2 from De Profundis, 2012
Courtesy Thaddaeus
Ropac Gallery, Salzburg
and Paris



Right:
Untitled (Palmer), 1997
Courtesy Xavier Hufkens
Gallery, Brussels, Belgium

while being filmed. For the first time in my work, I left things in that I would normally have excluded, such as embarrassment or ridiculousness. Naturally you could see that someone was inside the pullover because he trembled a little bit. When the work was finished I saw that it actually looked incredibly good, even as a still picture. As a result I began to photograph.

MH: Photography as a medium—in contrast to sculpture or painting—creates the strongest suggestion of a sort of snapshot of time, a temporary condition or momentary situation. Many of your works deal with delicate or precarious situations. There is no assurance of any sort of permanence. Photography is a medium that supports this type of sculptural form. The task here is to capture a sculptural moment whose permanence really cannot be assumed.

EW: This is also the reason I came to photography. Naturally, the history of photography knocks at the door and wants to be let in. One walks out onto strange, scary terrain. The first photographs really were just snapshots, dramatically miserable from an aesthetic standpoint. Of course you want to improve upon that,

One-Minute Sculpture,

1997

Courtesy Galerie Thaddaeus
Ropac, Salzburg and Paris



and that is where the problem begins. Those early works were defective because I was more interested in sculptural matters than in photography.

MH: Humor, irony, and paradox play an important role in your work. However, when I think about your artistic development, I would say that your early work is based on Viennese Actionism, as well as on Minimalism, post-Minimalism, and Conceptual art. Humor plays a more subordinate role in these artistic movements. In your early *Dust Sculptures* (1990), which essentially represent spatial configuration by showing only the remainder—dust—along the perimeter where there was initially a rectangular object, I see no sign of humor. Instead I perceive the very stringent framing of an absent space and a physical *becoming*, in the tradition of Yves Klein, for example. Can you pinpoint the moment that marks the beginning of this development, where you started to employ humor and irony as conscious stylistic devices, or was this also a slow, gradual process?

EW: During my studies Minimalist art, Conceptual art, and Pop art were the trendy directions, the valid artistic doctrine,

so to speak. But I read somewhere that if you want to be successful you have to overcome your fathers. So I began to take old discarded wooden boards and nail them together into classical figures. I consciously wanted to create something completely different by way of separating myself clearly from Minimalism, Conceptualism, etc. After a while I realized that these works were based on a counterreaction. Suddenly, I found myself included in the classification of “New Sculpture” (parallel to the “Neue Wilden,” a neo-Expressionist art movement in Germany during the 1980s) because I still longed for color and went ahead and *painted* boards. But then I saw that I had been pushed into being an integral component of a movement that made me very uncomfortable after a while. This was not something I wanted, so I tried to produce something that was oppositional, rebellious, defiant.

Theodor Adorno absolutely dominated art discourse at that time. According to him, art and humor were incompatible, because art was noble, serious, and profound. I, too, came to think that the art of the twentieth century was very heavy and solemn, and that the great truths were represented with the help of pathos. I found that the lightness that cynicism and humor produce raises us up, in contrast to pathos, which makes us seem small and presses us down.

MH: **This is an almost anarchical form, a subversive way of communicating. The attempt to establish easy accessibility, hand in hand with a subversive, anarchical form of overthrowing regular expectations, has enjoyed a long tradition. On the first level, an initial relationship with the public is established through humor. Whether or not the various other levels into which we may penetrate actually develop depends on the subtlety of the work.**

EW: Unfortunately, many people remain stuck at the first level.

MH: **How great is the danger of remaining stuck at this first level of reception? Can someone love a work too much or can one become too enthusiastic and, as a result, remain stuck at only reflecting the humorous punch line, while the more disturbing or revelatory social, personal, or art historical implications might get lost?**

EW: That really is a danger. There are various possibilities that I employ either to avoid this or to attack the problem in another way. Integrating texts, for example. Some of my video works were created for this reason, in order to convey content through text.

MH: **Your approach of using all media sculpturally is fascinating, particularly when you work with the grotesque. Suddenly you yourself become part of the process while you are contemplating the work. I make a conscious decision if I carry out the instructions of a *One-Minute Sculpture* and open myself up to this situation.**

EW: It's up to you whether you participate or not. The sculpture still functions as a simple Conceptual work even if it remains unperformed. If a person decides to take part, however, the rest occurs only according to my will. During a certain period of time, I made a special offer that if people sent me Polaroids of posed *One-Minute Sculptures* I would sign them and return them (for a hundred euros). But I signed only those photographs that were really the way I wanted them. I excluded the others.

MH: **That means that you still retained control over the complete work.**

EW: I think that this is absolutely important. Otherwise things would get completely out of hand. This strategy is essential for maintaining an unadulterated work.

MH: **You can see that the desire to co-opt your work and even in various ways to co-opt you personally is enormous.**

EW: People have tried from many directions to co-opt my work, but I have usually resisted that successfully. On the other hand, about sixteen years ago I was the first artist to receive an invitation from Palmers fashion house to be part of their advertising campaign. The Palmers advertising campaign in Austria was conducted with unbelievable hype back then. The most famous models and the best fashion photographers of the time worked for Palmers. Naturally there was a great temptation to get into this line of work, especially since I was convinced that the modern public space for art was the media space. So this correlated very well with my ideas and convictions. I had underestimated the fact, however, that product advertisement has completely different parameters from those of art. And so I failed miserably! My work was not accepted, but I was able to make wonderful use in my exhibition of the

pictures that I had taken. That was the first and last time. The work that I did later for Hermès was carried out on a completely different basis because the word "advertising" never came up. On the contrary, I had it contractually stipulated that none of the subjects that I developed—not a single one—could be utilized in any form for advertising or anything similar.

In the course of my development I have dealt with various issues of our times. The icon is such an essential phenomenon of our time. It doesn't matter what sort of icon, whether an architectural icon, a pop icon, or even a fashion icon. Hermès is one of the biggest fashion icons. That's why I was interested in working with that sort of icon, to poke around in that kind of work.

MH: **Your work is characterized by a great variety of media and materials and also by complex production processes. Lately, however, you have turned back and begun working with wood—as a classic, perhaps a "poor" material.**

EW: I have come to realize how much contemporary art suffers, or has suffered, from the fact that artists' studios have been transformed into manufacturing workshops. I have noticed that many artists do almost nothing at all themselves, but rather let their works be produced by others. That really strikes me. It irritates me because I have lost contact with my work, so to speak. And so I am trying to get that contact back again by creating everything myself, or at least for the most part by myself.

MH: **In this connection photography, as a sculptural vehicle, is an ideal medium for you, because you are back in a situation where you can determine everything about the sculpture yourself and also carry out on your own what you have decided.**

EW: Exactly. To me, photography is a medium that I will gladly return to for specific projects, as I did for the exhibition *De Profundis*. At present, however, I am again concentrating more on making sculptures.

(Translated from the German by Alan G. Paddle)

Erwin Wurm will have solo shows at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Krakow, Poland, October 17, 2013–January 26, 2014, and at Lehmann Maupin, New York, March 3–April 26, 2014.

Max Hollein is currently preparing an exhibition of Wurm's *One-Minute Sculptures* for the Städel Museum's Old Master, Modern, and Contemporary Galleries in Frankfurt am Main, to be presented next year.