

COS magazine  
Autumn & Winter 2013  
On Stage

COS



Limberg, AT  
Tuesday 21 May 2013  
16:05 CET

The Austrian  
artist ERWIN WURM  
celebrates  
the absurdity of  
the moment

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The fantastic sculptor Erwin Wurm is regarded for his humorous takes on humanity and society. He's best known for his ongoing series *One Minute Sculptures*. Though not always one minute, they do always entail a subject, a few simple props and a brief set of instructions such as "position a high-heeled shoe between your forehead and the wall". Erwin's work has had a huge influence on the fashion, graphics and advertising industries. The 59-year-old Austrian artist is a charming, lively and bluff conversationalist. We spoke a week before he was to open a new exhibition of his *One Minute Sculptures*.

ON THE PHONE  
ARTIST'S STUDIO, LIMBERG  
16:05 CET

PAUL:

How are you doing today?

ERWIN:

I'm very good today, thank you.

PAUL:

Are you busy preparing for your show that's opening in Lille, France, next week?

ERWIN:

No, that was already prepared a long time ago. Now we just have lots of other things to deal with. I have people helping me out with construction problems, and we had a photo shoot, and we've been running around.

PAUL:

I imagine there are a lot of logistical issues involved in the creation of your work.

ERWIN:

Oh yes. I always wish I'd been a painter. As a painter you have your brushes and your canvases and that's it. You don't need 20 people to work with you.

PAUL:

Is there a degree of masochism involved in what you do then, to make it work?

ERWIN:

(Laughs) Definitely. I envy painters. A painting is so much easier to pack, and easier to ship, than a sculpture. Perhaps it's even easier to sell, although we sell very well.

PAUL:

But doesn't the way you create your work give you the instant gratification of performance? The absurdity and enjoyment of the work must bring you joy?

(Continues)

ERWIN:

Yes, and all the difficulties involved in it are things I have created myself, of course. They're all homemade problems.

PAUL:

At what stage in your career did you know that you were doing something right?

ERWIN:

You never know. I still don't know if what I do is right. I'm not joking. Even when it's going well for me, I'm still very critical of my work. I can't just sit back and say, "I'm such a great sculptor, this is great." I'm constantly working on pieces, thinking how could I do this better. It's a constant battle. I might have a certain idea about something but I'm never sure how I'm going to be able to make it work. How will I make this performance or this 3-D sculpture or this photograph happen? Sometimes I decide to do it in a certain way and it doesn't turn out right. That's the most important part of the creative process and the part that I like most. It's really exciting. You're always unsure. If I feel too sure, I always think the work is weak in some way.

PAUL:

Is this uncertainty what drives your work?

ERWIN:

Absolutely. You know, I have a mission to make a really great piece one day. I'm trying hard and getting closer to it. Do you know the film *Jiro Dreams of Sushi*? It's a documentary about a Japanese sushi chef who is 85 years old. He's been making sushi since he was 15. In the film he says, "Yes, I've been making sushi for 70 years but I'm still not at the top of what I do. But I'm getting closer. I'm just learning how to make great sushi." This is sushi, but with art it's the same. You're transforming and moving every day, trying harder all the time. That's what's fantastic about creating something. You'll see people who make three pieces and then step back, happy. I'm more the critical type.

PAUL:

What was it that drew you to art in the first place?

ERWIN:

My father was a policeman. He was a detective, actually. Art didn't exist on either my father's or my mother's side of the family. Nor did literature or classical music. We lived in a building where rents were subsidised – what do you call that?

PAUL:

Social housing?

ERWIN:

Social housing, that's it. When I was little, a comet – a piece of rock from the universe – flew over our house. Three of the people in the building went on to become artists,

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though nobody knows how or why. I was one of them. I really believe it was due to the comet.

PAUL:

Wow, that's amazing. Did you consider your father a hero for solving crimes?

ERWIN:

My father always told me his crime stories; he handled murders and robberies. What was most interesting to me, what most astonished me and attracted me to his world, was that the criminals that he put in jail all loved him. He put them away, sometimes for many years, yet they would make little pieces of handicraft art that they would send to him.

PAUL:

They'd make presents for their arresting officer? He must have been quite some man.

ERWIN:

(Laughs) Yes, he was!

PAUL:

You hear about close relationships being formed between prison inmates and wardens, but not between inmates and the officers who sent them there.

ERWIN:

He'd speak to them, like, "Come on, Charlie, not you again!" Or, "Oh, have you made the same mistake again?" And they would say, "I know, I know, I'm so stupid. I'm sorry." He became a father to them, in a way: a nice authority figure that they liked. Isn't that intriguing? They would send him these strange sculptures made from matchsticks or paperclips or other office supplies. I think that's what first drew me to sculpture.

PAUL:

Do you still have any of them?

ERWIN:

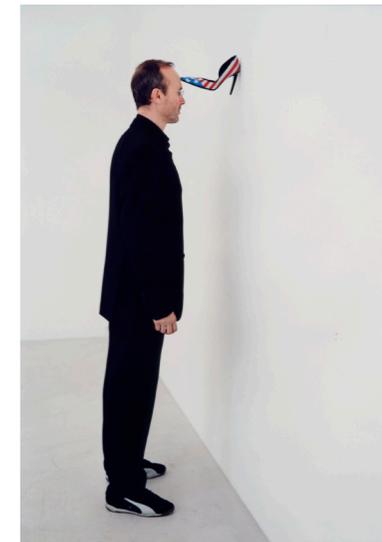
I'm afraid not. After my father died my sister sold a lot of his possessions at a flea market, including those sculptures and even some of my early paintings.

PAUL:

Oh my God, that's devastating!

ERWIN:

Oh, but the story continues. One day I received a letter from this guy in France who liked my work. He wrote that he was so happy because he had bought one of my pieces and he was asking if I could give him any information about it. I was curious as to what it was so I asked him to send me a picture of it. Indeed it was one of the early



A selection of Erwin's *One Minute Sculptures* including *The bank manager in front of his bank* (1999), below, left, and *Indoor sculpture Zürich* (2002) below, right.

(Continues)



Erwin at his home studio in Limberg, Austria, with a number of works including *Melting House II* (2009) and *Melting House III* (2010), the two pieces behind him.

pieces that my sister had sold – a horrible painting. I told him it wasn't by me but that I was more than willing to buy it from him for the same amount he had paid for it. He got his money back and I got to destroy my horrible painting!

PAUL:

What on earth did you say to your sister when she told you she'd sold all those things at the flea market?

ERWIN:

This tells you exactly what my sister thought of my work! Of course it's different now. Back then everyone thought what I did was totally nuts. My father was quite worried about me. I remember when I sold one of my dust sculptures – an object made of household dust on a pedestal – for 30,000 schillings, which would now be a few thousand euros, my father couldn't believe it. He couldn't stop laughing and he told all his friends about it. "Look at my son! He's selling dust! And he's made so much money from it!"

PAUL:

That's so sweet. Maybe coming from that background you don't get as caught up in the painful reverence the art world attributes to itself?

ERWIN:

Absolutely, I agree. Humour is important to me but I'm not really one to tell jokes. The Austria I grew up in was such an interesting society. The country had been hugely affected by two World Wars, the end of the monarchy, the German occupation and the demise of the Catholic Church. Everything that had defined the country had been broken down in the first half of the century and people were really naïve about it. The society swung from the extreme right to the extreme left and back to the right; it couldn't find any balance. I think that's one of the reasons why so much art has come from Austria.

PAUL:

How would you characterise Austrian society now for somebody who doesn't know it well?

ERWIN:

It's a part of Europe, but it has issues with being a part of it. Europe is so necessary for the future. Austria can't exist in relation to Brazil, India and China without Europe. There are a lot of contradictory feelings at the moment. A large part of the Austrian population wants to remain part of Europe. They're looking forward to the future. And the other part wants to revert to the past.

PAUL:

It sounds very comparable to Britain. We're also going through a debate about our relationship to Europe. Indeed that seems to be the most dominant dialogue of the moment.

(Continues)

ERWIN:

Yes, isn't it frightening? Perhaps some British people are scared of the idea that they are now part of something bigger and that they are not as important as they previously were.

PAUL:

Can you take me back to your decision to do your *One Minute Sculptures*? What was the idea behind it, a reaction against the permanency of art?

ERWIN:

Yes. Something struck me about the times I had lived through. When I was young, a radio was something that you kept for a lifetime. If it broke, you would get it fixed by someone – a radio doctor, if you like. Then in the late '70s and '80s people began throwing things away. The lifetime of our possessions was getting shorter and shorter. Consumer goods were being thrown away very quickly. I thought I'd like to create a body of work that was related to this. Another thing was, I wanted to show my art all around the world, but how was I, as a young artist, supposed to ship my heavy, heavy sculptures to other countries? I wanted to make something lightweight that could still exist for a long time. That's how I came up with the idea of taking photographs of my *One Minute Sculptures*. The sculptures could disappear, but I could always re-perform or reinvent them at a later date. I needed a name for it, and "One Minute" was my synonym for "short".

PAUL:

In so many ways it feels exemplary of the speed and disposability of culture now.

ERWIN:

Yes, yes, yes, I hope so. People have really responded to them. At first I would sell maybe ten or a hundred catalogues, but later I would sell tens of thousands – to graphic designers, photographers, artists, fashion designers. So many people used them as inspiration, which was incredibly interesting, but also frightening. When an idea is copied a lot it can make the work weak.

PAUL:

What about the financial implications of people taking your work as "inspiration"?

ERWIN:

I quickly found out that the ownership of an idea doesn't mean much. Some people were really good and professional about it, especially in the US, like the Red Hot Chili Peppers, or perhaps I should say Mark Romanek, who directed their *Can't Stop* video clip. In Europe, people just stole everything. It's a way of life – it's called "sampling". The city of Antwerp used my idea of the *Fat Car* in an advertisement for energy saving. We sued them, but they didn't care.

PAUL:

Have you always lived in Austria?

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ERWIN:

I lived in Berlin and then in New York City for some time, but you know what I realised? I need Austria. I need the atmosphere of these sometimes strange people. In the US I had trouble reading all the subtleties and nuances in conversations. I missed out on things. I found out that I just love Austria and all its strangeness and sickness.

PAUL:

Did your father live to see you become successful?

ERWIN:

No, he passed away 15 years ago.

PAUL:

Would he be proud of his son, the artist Erwin Wurm?

ERWIN:

Of course. The best thing about my life is that I get to do what I want, and not many artists can do that. I only do what I want to do.

PAUL:

As your father's son, what is the great crime of our age that you'd like to solve?

ERWIN:

It's the misuse of everything. We misuse everything. The older I get, the more I see it. My God, it's shocking. We misuse the Third World and we misuse the First World. We misuse the economy. We misuse nature. We even misuse ourselves. People dramatically misuse mankind.

PAUL:

Does that mean that artists can in some way be detectives? Is it their job to solve such crimes?

ERWIN:

Well, no. We can only open people's eyes to what the problems are. Artists can't win wars. Artists can't save the world.

(Ends)