Erwin Wurm: Our One Minute Man

Known for redefining the concept of sculpture and exploring the limits of form, Erwin Wurm speaks to us about his upcoming exhibition at Lehmann Maupin, Hong Kong, featuring works from his most iconic series: One Minute Sculptures.

Erwin Wurm, Untitled (P89), 2018. Polaroid. 31.5 x 22.05 inches / 80 x 56 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul.


Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop
(https://www.cobosocial.com/user/sonia-kolesnikov-jessop/)
Erwin Wurm likes to distort forms. Over the years, he has slimmed down houses, fattened up cars, and used his own body to redesign the shape of furniture. “A lot of my work is about destroying one thing to create another,” the Austrian artist says of his process.

One of his latest series, Stone, continues this exploration by setting small rocks on a pair of legs, giving a twist to the expression “carrying the weight of the world on your shoulders”.

The small humanoid sculptures recall the Hypnosis series Wurm created in 2008, when Wurm used potato-like shapes to form the torso and head of a body in a highly polished aluminium finish on top of legs, in a contrasting matte finish. In the Stone series, the shiny aluminium potato shape has been replaced by a rock covered in greenish moss. Each work has a distinct and expressive personality due to the treatment of the white acrylic resin legs (variously posed, either standing, running, barefoot, or dressed).
Erwin Wurm, Stone, 2019. acrystal and stone. 11.81 x 12.2 x 8.66 inches / 30 x 31 x 22 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul.
Inspired by German philosophers and their different approaches to dealing with the world surrounding them, the work implies historical baggage. “Germany and Austria also have this heavy weight on their shoulders, from the first and second World Wars,” Wurm explains.
Throughout most of his career, the 64-year-old artist has focused on expressing philosophical concepts of time, freewill, and absurdity through his sculptures. His most iconic series, the *One Minute Sculptures*, which was first conceived in 1997, focus on the notion of time and the absurdity found in mundane actions we perform everyday.

With these sculptures, Wurm invites a person to create a unique pose with an common object (a fruit, a pencil, a chair or a bucket) and photographs them in that pose. The short-lived sculpture requires the participant to follow a set of precise written instructions that is usually supplemented by an explanatory drawing created by the artist to help the person enact the simple yet awkward pose.

“Stand on your head, lean your legs against the wall and think about Freud’s ass” was the instruction for one. Others have been created by balancing bottles of detergent on toes; holding a
banana in a strategic location; and balancing a chair on one eye (a visual trick involving laying under a suspended chair).

For Wurm, who has “one minute forever” tattooed on his arm, the actual timeframe is not important — “it can be one minute, it can be 15 seconds, the one minute is really a synonym for short,” — but he’s hoping the participant enacting the sculpture will become aware of time passing by and reflect on their own experience of becoming an artwork.

Though the One Minute Sculptures are often described as surreal, Erwin believes they are closer to the absurd: “I think Surrealism is something else because Surrealists like the big picture and it's full of drama, in the same way as Viennese Actionism. I'm more interested in the marginal drama, the little embarrassment and the ridiculousness of the everyday. Of course there is an element of Surrealism, but also, I look at reality from a different angle. I call it absurd.”

While Wurm initially developed the photographs of his One Minute Sculpture series as digital C-print, he has now changed his focus to large (80 x 56 cm) polaroid prints, which give the photographs a painterly quality: “With C-print you can make multiple copies, and I didn't like it. So I gave up photography for 12 years, until I met someone who had a huge polaroid camera. It's very cumbersome to use, it take three men to work it, but it takes less than a minute to develop and the photographs are totally original,” he says, adding “Yes, you can take another photograph, but then it's something else. With a polaroid each work is truly unique.”

The exhibition at Lehmann Maupin will present several recent large Polaroids Wurm has created featuring him or friends of his. Each one grapples with specific to a subject, such as aging, sexuality, and heavy drinking, which can be inspired by the person he is photographing. “Sometimes it's planned, sometimes it's very intuitive, sometimes I get inspired by the person,” he says.
Erwin Wurm, Untitled (P105), 2018. polaroid. 31.5 x 22.05 inches / 80 x 56 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul.
Erwin Wurm, Untitled (P89), 2018. polaroid. 31.5 x 22.05 inches / 80 x 56 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York, Hong Kong, and Seoul.
Each week, visitors to the gallery will also be invited to activate one of Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures* with the durational sculpture captured in a small Polaroid photo that may be taken home.
Wurm will also unveil a new art installation involving a large Austrian mountain cap made of polyester resin and cloth, mounted on the wall. “It’s a performative piece with the aspect of protection against physical and psychological threats,” Wurm says, adding the public will be invited to stand under the colourful knitted ski hat and take a picture. The work is reminiscent of his 2010 Polizeikappe, when the artist created an oversized police cap, hung it on the wall, and offered visitors the opportunity to ‘take shelter’ under the cap. This highly interactive exhibition reflecting Wurm’s engaging and performative take on sculpture opens today.

Erwin Wurm
(https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/exhibitions/erwin-wurm5)
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About the artist

Erwin Wurm is an Austrian sculptor, known for the distinctive pieces in which he uses the human body as an object. His paradox installations, photographs, drawings, and videos are shown in an ironic, sarcastic and critical way. Since the late 1980’s the artist is involved in the famous One Minute Sculptures and One Minute Figures projects, that represent the shortest and quickest path to creating clear, direct and catchy artworks. Author's sculptures and performances are the cynical reflections of contemporary art and consumer society. Everyday elements and surroundings transformed into something completely new, aspirations towards
twisting reality as such, are some descriptions of Erwin's works. The final products are usually the consequence of Wurm's personal and professional catastrophes. The bottom line of his art is to draw viewers attention and make them think and observe things thoroughly.

Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop is an established freelance journalist, who has written about art in Asia since 2002 for numerous publications, including The New York Times/International Herald Tribune, Newsweek, South China Morning Post, and Prestige. She was the editor in chief for Europe and Asia at BlouinArtinfo.com between 2012 and 2016.