LaKeith Stanfield

Idris Elba, Lorde, Glenn Close, Nikita Dragun, Nick Cave, Chloe Zhao, Adam Sandler, Red Velvet, Whoopi Goldberg, Cazzie David, Alfonso Cuaron, Carrie Mae Weems, Maya Rudolph, Erwin Wurm, Aubrey Plaza, Wangeci Mutu, Emma Corrin, Joan Didion, and Regina King
ERWIN WURM tells PETER MARINO why he's always blowing everything out of proportion.
Erwin Wurm does not make art for the aloof aesthete. When encountering a sculpture by the 66-year-old Austrian artist, the “viewer” might be asked to put her head in a box, shove pencils up her nose, stand in a bucket with another bucket over her head, or lie horizontally counterbalanced on two stools; and while doing so, think about the philosopher Baruch Spinoza, or enjoy a minute of silence, or stare out at a distant sea. These and other instructional activities have been a part of Wurm’s ongoing series of “One Minute Sculptures,” developed in the late 1980s, in which, for the length of 60 seconds, the artwork and viewer meld—in a sense activating each other to create an original and paradoxical masterpiece.

Some might find these sculptural performances amusing, but just as many find them profound, meditative, or indicative of the lengths a human is willing to go to make a connection. Wurm’s penchant for the absurdist reimagining of the ordinary world extends to cars (sleek convertibles reconceived with obesity issues), houses (disturbingly skinny cottages, or the exact opposite, bursting with flab at all sides), food (jumbo pickles and hot dogs), and clothing (sweaters stretched over heads like unending sleeves or furniture dressed up in human garb). Wurm never seems to run out of ideas, and unsurprisingly, the recent lockdown, which he spent in his studio on the outskirts of Vienna, didn’t stop him from working on a number of new pieces for a raft of upcoming international shows.

This past fall, Wurm embarked on a special project exclusively for Interview, opening up his countryside estate to shoot a fashion story with both recent and archival artworks—and improvising a few new “One Minute Sculptures” in the process. To accompany the pictures, Wurm got on the horn with his old friend, the prolific architect Peter Marino, to talk about stretching a good idea to fit all shapes and sizes.
PETER MARINO: Erwin, how are you? How's your wife? How are your kids? How's everybody?

ERWIN WURM: Everybody is fine. We're lucky. We were in Austria during the lockdown and then in Greece for the whole summer. We have a house there.

MARINO: Don't forget, the last time we saw each other you said you had a really cool pickle bar [a series of sculptural counters, poked through with giant gherkins, made between 2018 and 2019] for me back in Austria.

WURM: That's right. I forget.

MARINO: Now we see how these artists are! They forgot all about you.

WURM: Oh, come on! You know I'm not a pushy artist. I'm shy and I never bring myself into discussions with a collector.

MARINO: Do you think I'm a pushy architect?

WURM: No, of course not.


WURM: It started in the mid-'90s when I decided to look for the zero-point in sculpture. I had been working in sculpture and thought, "This doesn't have a future. I have to stop and find the zero-point." That's where the dust sculptures [a series of pieces made between 1990 and 1994, in which Wurm would add an object to a pedestal, let it accumulate dust, and then remove it] came from, as well as all these other things. I was working with sculpture on one hand, and on the other I decided to connect with social issues—issues of daily life, issues of youth culture.

MARINO: How do the pickles fit in?

WURM: A lot of things in my work are related to my childhood. When I worked with my grandpa making books, or when I was a good boy, I got a salt pickle, which was something special at the time.

MARINO: Some of your pickle sculptures are very large and intersect with tables and bars. Some of these tables with pickles have alcoholic drinks on them, creating a twisted tension.

WURM: They're my "Drinking Sculptures" [2010-2019], and I invite people to have drinks at them. The piece is finished when the people are drunk. That's a very important part of the work.

MARINO: Do you collect the art of other artists?

WURM: Yes, I do. I buy everything from older to newer pieces. I have some vintage photographs by [Constantin] Brâncuși. They're very, very beautiful.

MARINO: The salt prints? I have some, too.

WURM: I also have photographs of all the early Viennese Actionists. I feel connected to them, although not in terms of my work. They were so important for us here in Austria. The work of Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, and all those guys. They were really radical.

MARINO: Do you have any affinity for the [Viennese art cooperative] Wiener Werkstätte? As an architect, I think Josef Hoffmann was a god.

WURM: Hoffmann was fantastic, absolutely. I have a few bowls he made. And I also collect Americans like Alex Katz and George Condo and Warhol. And Germans like Martin Kippenberger—but mostly paintings, not sculptures, because I make my own sculptures. No need to buy somebody else's. What brought you to collect art?

MARINO: I was originally an art student and I'm a bit of a frustrated artist. I went into architecture because I needed to work and I couldn't earn a living as an artist. As a frustrated artist, I think I have a very good eye. I'm very good at curating art. I'm building a foundation to house my collection in Southampton. I hope there will be a few melting buildings on display.

WURM: I will send you a picture of my new series.

It's called "The German Bench." It takes the houses of important philosophers and scientists of European intellectualism like Sigmund Freud, Henry David Thoreau, Karl Marx, and Martin Heidegger. These men were respected and hated at the same time. I made these houses so the public can use them as benches.

MARINO: I can't wait to see them. I think one of your most impactful works, which was shown at the Venice Biennale in 2017, was an enormous freight truck standing on its orange nose with its ass up in the air. And there was a little staircase inside so people could climb up and get a view from the top. It's what we refer to as "interactive art." What was the inspiration for that work?

WURM: I call it "performative sculpture," and it's part of my series of "One Minute Sculptures." People climbed up to this platform at the top where they could look out toward the sea, although you couldn't really see the sea from there. It also related to that particular time, with the refugee crisis.

MARINO: How did you like showing in Venice? I'm on the board of Venetian Heritage, so I like to hear how artists respond to the city. Were you glad you participated in the Biennale?

WURM: I must say it was very complicated from an artistic point of view, showing as an artist representing one country. But it was also great because I got a lot of responses worldwide. After that, I was invited to show that piece in New York, but we couldn't in the end because people in wheelchairs couldn't go up the staircase. Instead, I did "Hot Dog Bus" [2015]. It was made out of an old Volkswagen Microbus and we gave out free hot dogs to the public.

MARINO: I want to talk about your fascination with hot dogs. I have a small sculpture of yours called "Smack! (Abstract Attack)" [2013] that's a bronze hotdog. I used to keep it on my desk and found that it profoundly disturbed people. I had one client who actually said, "Would you please remove that?" So, tell me, did your grandfather give you a hot dog when you were good as well as pickles?

WURM: You laugh now, Peter, but it's exactly the same story! My grandfather took care of me for five years and when I behaved well, he gave me a hot dog. In those days, we didn't call it a hot dog. It was a sausage—with bread and a pickle. I also got a Coca-Cola.

MARINO: I haven't seen Coca-Cola in your sculptures. I'm waiting for a giant can that I can climb into.

WURM: There are already many Coca-Cola art pieces, so it's not necessary to make another one.

MARINO: I've always been curious about another work of yours called "Confessional" from 2008, where two people are lying on the floor with their heads inside a little wooden house. Were you brought up Roman Catholic?

WURM: My mother was very Catholic and we went to church every Sunday. This was a part of Austrian history. Austria was, for 2,000 years, more or less ruled by the Catholic church. And in a way, it defined the Austrian character. So it often pops up as a big theme in my work. I have done portrayals of priests and nuns.

MARINO: I find the "Confessional" piece particularly disturbing.

WURM: It's also a "One Minute Sculpture." People can get on their knees and lay down and talk to each other or confess in this little house. It's useful.

MARINO: When did you know you wanted to be an artist? Did you consider yourself an artist back in high school?

WURM: I started to look closely at art when I was 15. I wanted to become a painter and I tried to paint every...

"The fatter they are, the more human they become."
day. But then some drama happened with the entrance exam when I wanted to go to art school. The teachers put me in sculpture class instead of painting class. That’s when everything started.

MARINO: Maybe somebody knew.

WURM: You said that you were a frustrated artist. But there is no need to be. You are a great architect who makes fantastic houses.

MARINO: Thank you. But keep in mind, the world doesn’t recognize architects as artists. For some reason, the world considers us closer to a cabinet maker.

WURM: It’s like Helmut Lang, who is a great fashion designer and wanted to become an artist.

MARINO: A lot of fashion designers were architects, like Gianfranco Ferré or Virgil Abloh at Louis Vuitton, who studied architecture for five years. I tease Virgil about it, saying, “Oh, now you like working with softer things?” As an architect, I like working with harder, firmer things. But I think architecture is never considered in the same realm as fine art because we have to produce for a patron. Whereas artists are free, we can’t produce a building without a patron, because somebody has to pay for it.

WURM: You are dealing with much more complicated situations than I deal with. I don’t have all of the authorities involved to make this big thing, thank god.

MARINO: I’m jealous that you don’t have that. Dealing with the government every day becomes more and more difficult all over the world. But let’s get back to the softer works. Your soft cars really fascinate me. What makes you blow up these cars full of air with round edges like big, fat cheeks?

WURM: The fatter they are, the more human they become. All of a sudden, they have a face. It’s like when you and I gain weight. We add volume. So going back to that first sculpture class, I was thinking about dimensions. What is a three-dimensional object? I was going back to zero. And that’s where all the work comes out of.

MARINO: I love your fat convertible. I want to send it to an exercise class.

WURM: You know, one American in Santa Monica said, “Erwin, we should make a real cast out of this and let people drive it around.”

MARINO: Would you ever make one of your melted buildings big enough to enter?

WURM: In Vienna, they asked me to make one out of those existing big, old, beautiful houses. I took one and gave it a huge belly. They didn’t accept it.

MARINO: I need to see that. You know, one thing I really appreciate in your work is your dry sense of humor. There are artists like [Mark] Rothko who I can’t imagine ever laughing once in his life. Then there are artists who I think probably told jokes and smiled and laughed all the time. And I imagine you’re in the second group. Are you happy if people see your sculptures and start laughing or smiling? Or what kind of reaction do you hope for?

WURM: When people laugh, it can be good or bad. But humor is not the center of my work. My work is very much related to the absurd. I love absurdist theater. I like Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco and Thomas Bernhard, and all the Austrian versions of this. When I try to look at our world from these paradoxical angles, I see something very different. Reality changes. And this brings some people to laughter and some people to tears. Some people get happy and some people get strangely sad. So it’s just another perspective from which to look at our reality. I think our reality is so fucking crazy as it is that it’s necessary to look at it from as many angles as possible. That’s my recipe.


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