Erwin Wurm, with “one minute forever” tattooed on his arm, began his fast-paced works in the late ’80s with startling prescience. His “One Minute Sculptures,” “Word Sculptures,” “Drinking Sculptures,” and “Dust Sculptures,” all invite the viewer to complete the work, usually through a set of instructions. Influenced by the exponential increase of global capitalism and pop culture, the philosophies of Baruch Spinoza, and the sculptural ideas of Michelangelo, Wurm creates work that could be perceived as fiction. His intention is to dramatize, entertain, and engage his audience. There is a sense of naivety in the way he presents his work, mixed with irony and cynicism, all dressed neatly in humor. Wurm moves us through visual gestures that often result in a release of emotions and emotionally charged messages, but at the same time, he never loses his penchant for a good gag—some sculptures solely exist for the funny factor. What Wurm is really good at, is placing something familiar in an unfamiliar context, almost forcing the participant to see the real essence of things; things that are usually taken for granted. The boundaries of what is real and what is not are blurred, granting us imaginative access to our other selves. He once said, “We are all actually two people; one who is trusting and one who is not, and that’s a good thing.” Engaging in Wurm’s sculpture gives the artist the power of trust—and we trust him not to fuck us up.
ERWIN WURM: Can’t Stop

Courtesy the artist, Erwin Wurm Studio. (2) Erwin Wurm, Bar, 2019. Metal, bronze, plaster, leather, alcohol bottle, glass. Courtesy the artist, Erwin Wurm Studio. (3) Erwin Wurm, Fat House, 2003, iron, wood, fiber, fur, paint, graphites, ball thrower. © the artist and Erwin Wurm Studio 2019. All rights reserved. (4) Erwin Wurm. © Erwin Wurm. All rights reserved. 

KASIA HÖRVARTH: Erwin, why do you make art?
ERWIN WURM: When I was a little, I started to draw, and then later on, I started to experiment with little sculptures and writings. Everything was little because of the lack of space.

HÖRVARH: So because everything was little back then, you are making things big now?
WURM: Some pieces are big, but some are still small. It’s a mirror of our world. Sometimes we feel big, and sometimes we feel little—with work it is the same.

HÖRVARH: That is all true, but I still do not know why you make art?
WURM: Yes. I got a little distracted. When I was a teenager, I associated being an artist with freedom, coolness, long hair, smoking weed, etc., and I was interested in painting. I told my father I wanted to be an artist, and he absolutely hated the idea, he wanted me to have the best life possible. He was a policeman, so for him, the idea of an artist was the idea of a junkie and a criminal.

HÖRVARH: I mean, all parents want their kids to be doctors or lawyers.
WURM: They really do. My dad wanted me to be a lawyer or judge.

HÖRVARH: To be honest, I think you would make a great lawyer. Anything, I once read that artists make work for other artists—they create work to surpass others. Would you agree?
WURM: Sometimes an artwork can be inspiring, but who wants to use the ideas of others? I am more interested in doing it myself.

HÖRVARH: Who are some artists that influence you?
WURM: For a certain period of time, I was influenced by Joseph Beuys, but this was years ago, before I have already done. It’s like when you have a body of work, that's one of the best things you can do for your practice. Overdone work is almost like a bad comedy.

HÖRVARH: You know how musicians usually have that one song that they hate to perform, but everyone wants to hear it?
WURM: Similar! When that happened to me, I had to stop and make a system for myself—a system where all my practices could co-exist and not get exhausted. For example, I only created about 100 variations of the One Minute Sculptures in the last twenty years. And I’m refusing to make more—I just desire the positions that I have. Apparently she was a fan. She was nice to work with, but she upset me later.

HÖRVARH: What about collaborations? You are quite good at it.
WURM: They are organized by Claudia Schiffer. They asked Claudia first, and she immediately said yes. Apparently she was a fan. She was nice to work with, but she upset me later.

HÖRVARH: In 2008, I was in a show at Tate Modern, “Performing for the Camera,” and they wanted to use one of my photographs of her for the exhibition posters, and the book cover, but she refused. I was not pleased. Her manager told them she was going through a divorce or something like that. Anyhow, a lot of unfair drama.

HÖRVARH: Sounds like a good joke!
WURM: Now it does, but not back then.

HÖRVARH: Do you take responsibility for how people look at your work? Do you think there is a right or wrong way to look at something?
WURM: Sure! But you also have to know that once you put the work out into the world, it’s gone, it is not yours anymore. People can do whatever they want with it, basically. Of course, I want a certain perspective as to how people look at it, and a certain level of understanding, but that is extremely challenging.

HÖRVARH: What’s the best and the worst constructive criticism you’ve ever received?
WURM: Frank West sent me an SMS saying he really hated my house on the roof of the MUMOK [Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien] in Vienna because it wasn’t his idea.

HÖRVARH: What about you? Is there any work you wish you had come up with first?
WURM: There are great pieces out there, but the older I get, the more critical I get: consequently the number of great pieces is shrinking.

HÖRVARH: I always try to! Not long ago, I made a series of ceramic sculptures, which I showed at the Gastrid Thaddaeus Ropac, that was a new aspect of my work. I also came back to making photos, because I haven’t made any in more than twelve years. I’ve started to take photos with a huge Polaroid camera. The technique is old and is out of business, but I love it because it fits so well with the One Minute Sculptures.

HÖRVARH: What is the best trait an artist can have? For instance, I think if you have the ability to know when to stop working on a successful work, that’s one of the best things you can do for your practice. Overdone work is almost like a bad comedy.

WURM: That is something I always struggled with because when I was a kid, I felt conditioned with a certain method. When I made the clothes pieces, I could only think in this specific artistic language. When I was making the video pieces, it was the same.

HÖRVARH: You know how musicians usually have that one song that they hate to perform, but everyone wants to hear it?
WURM: There are great pieces out there, but the older I get, the more critical I get: consequently the number of great pieces is shrinking.

HÖRVARH: I always try to! Not long ago, I made a series of ceramic sculptures, which I showed at the Gastrid Thaddaeus Ropac, that was a new aspect of my work. I also came back to making photos, because I haven’t made any in more than twelve years. I’ve started to take photos with a huge Polaroid camera. The technique is old and is out of business, but I love it because it fits so well with the One Minute Sculptures.

HÖRVARH: What is the best trait an artist can have? For instance, I think if you have the ability to know when to stop working on a successful work, that’s one of the best things you can do for your practice. Overdone work is almost like a bad comedy.

WURM: That is something I always struggled with because when I was a kid, I felt conditioned with a certain method. When I made the clothes pieces, I could only think in this specific artistic language. When I was making the video pieces, it was the same.

HÖRVARH: You know how musicians usually have that one song that they hate to perform, but everyone wants to hear it?
The Doppelgänger
ERWIN WURM
Can't Stop

THIS PAGE, from left: (1) Erwin Wurm, Untitled, 2020. C-print (80 x 53.33 cm). Courtesy the artist, Erwin Wurm Studio.
(2) Erwin Wurm, Untitled, 2020. C-print (80 x 53.33 cm). Courtesy the artist, Erwin Wurm Studio.