

RIKA



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PLAN,

INTENTION,

IDEA

INVENTION

CONCEPT AND ART Erwin Wurm



SCULPTURE 2
Skirt by **COMME DES GARÇONS**
(vintage at 20AGE Archive)
Shoes by **BALENCIAGA**







SCULPTURE 4
Trousers by JW ANDERSON
Jacket by COMME DES GARÇONS
(vintage at 20AGE ARCHIVE)
Shoes by BLESS







SCULPTURE 6
Top by **BALENCIAGA**
Trousers by **JW ANDERSON**
Shoes by **BOTTEGA VENETA**



INTERVIEW Hans Ulrich Obrist



The mind-bending world of Erwin Wurm is one populated with impossible meetings between human and object: a cottage that turns into a strange animal as it bulges with fat; a truck contorted to curve up against a museum wall, as if in a yoga pose; his *One Minute Sculptures* and the subsequent photographs of 60-second-long, surreal interactions between members of the public and Wurm's chosen inanimate objects. Eerie, absurd, or humorous, depending on how you look at it – perhaps all of the above.

The restrictions of the past 18 months might have left many feeling creatively stifled, but not Wurm. Alongside a portfolio of new *One Minute Sculptures* created for RIKKA – a pair of belted chinos floating as if worn by an invisible dancer here, a trio of pastel-hued angora jumpers thrown into the air so they blossom like tulips there – Wurm sits down with Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator and the Artistic Director of the Serpentine Galleries, for a typically outlandish conversation on lockdowns, the sculptural qualities of Arnold Schwarzenegger, and the cosmological significance of an Austrian sausage.

HANS ULRICH OBRIST *Hi Erwin. Where are you right now?*

ERWIN WURM I'm staying in the countryside where my ateliers are located. During the past month, I have been working more than ever before in my life. It's fantastic! I'm not travelling. I just sit here and work.

HUO *When we last spoke, back in 2019, we mainly talked about your exhibition at Thaddaeus Ropac's London gallery, titled "New Work". You say that this year has been one of the most productive times for you. What have you been working on?*

EW Well, at the beginning of 2020, I was still exhibiting my work, as I continue to do now. It was just the travelling part that stopped, which is partly because I am a high-risk patient. Not only am I over the age of 65, but I also suffer from severe asthma. All of a sudden, I found myself at the hospital last year, struggling with choking fits, so I decided not to travel anywhere any more. We produced an exhibition in Taiwan, at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum, where we constructed long-distance instructions for building sculptures and captured the process on film, which we then forwarded to the museum. It was a vast project, a 1,500 square metre space, conducted solely via instructions sent long distance.

And it worked surprisingly well! Which is another argument against the unnecessary habit of travelling, instead being more present with one's work and eventually sending it to a particular destination. You are familiar with my *One Minute Sculptures* and some of my other work which leans on instruction manuals, right? Since the first lockdown, I have been developing these further.

HUO *These works are very collaborative. The "do it" project, which I have been continuing for 27 years, has a very similar approach. "do it" is a project where we invite artists to write instruction pieces and how-to manuals which are then interpreted in many different ways.*

EW Absolutely! One of my first artworks was inspired by your *do it* exhibitions – I remember it clear as day.

HUO *So, how did you implement your creations in Taipei? How did you translate your approach into another context? Was the show in Taipei a retrospective featuring your previous instructions, or did you give entirely new instructions?*

EW We gave new instructions. We also created performative sculptures with houses, drawing on traditional Taiwanese architecture and the international influences on those design models. Visitors had to actually perform on the buildings according to my instructions. They were given specific text passages to read while walking on the houses. Because of the stepping on and interaction with the constructions, the houses became deformed. We designed *One Minute Sculptures*, too, and took various photographs. Even though the city underwent a very strict lockdown, the museum had more than 160,000 visitors. It was tremendous. You rarely have this many visitors. While it might be expected in cities like London, it's quite unusual in most other places.

HUO *You often express your fear for our planet and the environmental crisis. It's interesting that like the "do it" project, this type of exhibit is highly eco-friendly: one sends an instruction manual, the required material is sourced locally, and often returned or recycled.*

EW Indeed. At the beginning of the pandemic when we weren't allowed to fly, I started to send the instruction manuals for the team in Taipei to create the pullover sculptures, which the visitor is invited to unfold. However, after a specific time, it became increasingly important that the pullovers could be restored to their original function and reused, independent of the individual exhibition's duration. It also became essential that after an art collector purchased the pullover, the cloth would not feel tied to a specific moment or period. I ascribe great importance to

the spirit of renewal, so the artwork doesn't fade, and is preferably continuously replaced. Unfortunately, only a few museums play along.

HUO *Because of the lockdown, a new urgency for this way of exhibiting has arisen. By now, you could easily create a retrospective of instruction manuals.*

EW That's correct. As you said before, it is absolutely crucial for our planet that we ship and transport less. I remember that you started reasoning based on telekinesis very early on. Meaning that you moved an exhibition from one place to another to perform it there as if you used telekinesis. I have always liked this a lot.

HUO *The Viennese quantum physicist Anton Zeilinger even speaks of teleportation.*

EW Exactly! This type of transportation already works, in a tiny sphere at least.

HUO *What happened in your studio during 2020?*

EW I worked on a whole new series. I developed the ceramics further, which you have seen at the London exhibition. Also, I looked at popular philosophers and the houses and hideouts to which they retreated – like Henry David Thoreau, or Ludwig Wittgenstein in his cabin in Norway. I referred to their works through architecture, which took an entire year. Then again, there are works that have a more specific and culturally historic background. I have been working with iconic foods, like the *semmel*, or sausage, which stem from Austria in the 1950s and 1960s. For the resulting art, I redefined the icon from a different angle. But again, this project is better seen than explained. I created stone sculptures in the shape of a *semmel*, which resemble a spiral nebula, or the Milky Way. A large sausage almost carries astronomic qualities, because one can see a depiction of space or extraterrestrial realities through the stone and material. It might sound strange, but that's how the project is constructed.

HUO *Recently, there have been many discussions around the function of public art, especially during the lockdown, given art installed in parks and across a city was the only art one could experience, since most museums were closed. Simultaneously, there are many conversations connected with debates about accessibility and exclusivity, as it's important for art to reach people who would not usually visit a museum. In my opinion, there is this parallel with the 1930s during Roosevelt's New Deal in America, which resulted in a blossoming of public art. Art came to the people. Can you tell me about some of your public art projects, whether realised or not?*

EW Several examples exist. One, which made quite a splash in America a few years ago, was the "Hot Dog Bus", from which we handed actual hot dogs to visitors. The Public Art Fund in New York sponsored this project. Later, a Chinese collector bought the bus, which tours China now, and as a matter of fact it drove through Wuhan just recently. People are invited to eat hot dogs and experience the sculptural element's phenomenon with their own bodies. This phenomenon is the problem of gaining and losing weight. I've also done series of editorials; basically, sculptures as photographs, which are then published. It's something I'm doing for RIKA MAGAZINE, of course.

HUO *Can you tell me more about these?*

EW I want to do sculptures where the subject is whatever I can create with myself, my family, and the objects and clothes I have available in my immediate surroundings. This doesn't necessarily have to refer to the lockdown, but just to whatever can originate from being alone or alone with one's family at home.

HUO *Being at home has also led to the highly fascinating phenomenon of drawing increasing in importance. Did you, like many other artists, start drawing again?*

EW Yes, I did. Drawing is the stuff of life for me. It is the easiest to access, the fastest to carry out, and it varies with one's mood. Depending on how I feel on a particular day, I draw well or badly. Then, drawing almost becomes a meditative practice that is important to me, just like photography. I use both as a tool to fathom the world around me.

HUO *Following up on our 2019 interview in London, what are some of the projects that remain unrealised that you would still like to create? There are many categories of unrealised works: projects which are too big or too small, censored projects, self-censored projects because one doesn't dare to realise them; forgotten projects, and straight utopian projects.*

EW One of my favourite projects was with Coop Himmelb(l)au and Wolf D. Prix. We were asked to create ideas for a school building from the Nazi era, located very visibly on a hill in central Germany. Prix had asked me to collaborate with him. Thus, we jointly suggested pouring concrete over the entire school and placing a large pickle or banana on the roof. Unfortunately, our proposal was declined. I would have loved to see this project realised, because seeing a pickle or a banana from afar invites ridicule. In Austria, we have the sayings "to pick the pickle" and "to receive the pickle", which describes someone's disadvantage. A couple of years ago, I was asked to create a small trophy for the Manager

Price. I designed a pickle. Again, my idea was declined; they found it appalling. Later, the international dance festival in Vienna, ImPulsTanz, approached me asking, too, whether I would design a trophy for them. And again I pitched the pickle. But unlike others, they understood the joke and accepted my design.

HUO *I saw this design at Johann König's art fair.*

EW Exactly, a bar of soap in the shape of a pickle! While washing your hands, one could wash off the world's foulness. Other than that, I have approximately ten to 15 projects that I want to realise but never have. One of them is the Looshaus, which is a very well-known building in Vienna that I tried to rebuild with a big belly. I have always wanted to build a house myself which not only looks like it has gained weight but has grown a belly. Austrian architecture is never detached, the facade is even, with every house being integrated in a row. So I would have loved to create a house facade with a belly, but I have never done it.

HUO *Can you name any projects in the media space which are unrealised?*

EW I wanted to interview Michael Jackson and Arnold Schwarzenegger before his time as governor and turn the result into an artwork. Because I believe there was this period in which both represented exciting sculptures. One of them had turned into an androgynous figure, the other basically embodied the fundamental sculptural understanding. I wanted to contrast them with each other through the interview, discuss the term of the sculptural, and then turn this conversation into art. But, unfortunately, the interview never happened, much to my regret even today.

HUO *Although an interview with Schwarzenegger could still happen.*

EW I fear even Schwarzenegger would not work any more. Back in the day, he was considered hot and influential and meaningful for so many. For the longest time, people had labelled him as the bird-brained body-builder and limited him to his muscular activities. I have always seen him from a different angle.

HUO *Tell me more!*

EW The project's framework would have been an interview but in the form of a conversation about the sculptured. The underlying reason is that I continue to believe that we, in our own bodies, are the very first to experience the sculptural phenomenon through gaining and losing weight; gaining and losing volume. I believe the inside changes in alignment with one's looks. Both Schwarzenegger and Jackson appear to be prime examples for it.

HUO *Another thing that interests me: you said when we met in Vienna in 2017 that I should visit you in the countryside at some point so you could show me your art collection. Can you tell me more about your collection?*

EW Many of the photographs I own stem from Viennese Actionism. Then I have these photographs of Constantin Brâncuși's works, one of them you can see hanging right behind me. I collect art from artists who are my generation or who I grew up with, like Franz West, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Otto Muehl, and Maria Lassnig. But also others from whom I can only afford a drawing, like Picasso. I would love to own one of his oil paintings.

HUO *Some artists would like to have their own museum, some solely want an archive. What are your thoughts on this?*

EW My outlook has always been that I want to sell my work. I want to see my art in good collections and good museums, because I believe that's the only chance for my legacy to continue. If you keep everything to yourself, there's a danger your work will end up forgotten or overlooked.

HUO *So you want it seen in museums around the world?*

EW Yes, but most importantly, I want my work to be part of the collections. Some of my colleagues or former colleagues have their own museums. It is always complicated to generate excitement. An example is the Hermann Nitsch museum here in Mistelbach. It is a great museum. But if they cannot continuously create new exhibitions with the work available to them – and it has many of his works – it might not attract any visitors any more and slowly degenerate.

HUO *Given how much of your work is performance-based, or requires an instruction manual, how do you visualise this work to be organised by museums in the future?*

EW I have a very extensive archive, and I am currently organising a private trust, because this spirit of constant renewal is an essential part of my work. I have never kept the pedestals on which I create performances for the *One Minute Sculptures*, for example, although in retrospect, this may have been a mistake. Also, I like to emphasise the character of renewal while never really explaining it. I really like Duchamp's concept of the shovel, where a person is asked to go to the supermarket to purchase a shovel and then exhibit it. The idea is never really explained. I created an instruction manual and set up contracts with various museums to define the conditions under which they are allowed to perform my art, like a full musical score that can be carried into the future. And if it works, great! If it doesn't, I wouldn't be able to change it anyway.