

"There's Also a Lot of Failing in It": Erwin Wurm Revisits His Iconic "One Minute Sculpture" Series



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Artist Erwin Wurm

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One Minute Sculptures (1997) / © Erwin Wurm

Few artists have tested the limits of sculpture as relentlessly as [Erwin Wurm](#). His fattened-up sports cars and suburban pavilions melting like vanilla ice cream are riotously humorous comments on social aspirations and normality, as well as inspiring formal experiments. He consumes the everyday and spits it back transformed, in a grotesque and unsettling version of itself. Wurm's "One Minute Sculptures" series stretches the concept of sculpture to its breaking point: the artist instructs performers or members of the public to pose with mundane objects — pieces of fruits, plastic buckets, china tea cups, stationary — creating temporary sculptural

situations which are then photographed. Many of these funny-but-uncomfortable images have become legendary. The **Red Hot Chili Peppers** even paid homage to them in their [music video "Can't Stop"](#) in 2002.

Next month, Liverpool's [Open Eye Gallery](#) goes back to a seminal moment in the artist's practice, presenting 18 early "One Minute Sculptures." These pieces are "a near-perfect convergence of performance, sculpture, and photography," said Open Eye Gallery director **Patrick Henry**. "They present a moment of escape from the grown-up world — a momentary revolution, an inversion of the established order."

Speaking from his studio in Vienna, Wurm discussed the origin of the series with **ARTINFO UK**, talking ephemerality, authenticity, and the philosophy of failure.

You've said that the fundamental concept behind the "One Minute Sculptures" was to "abandon the idea of durability and infinity." How did you reach this conclusion?

I think it was a development over several years. First I wanted to become a painter. I went to art school and they didn't put me in the painting class, but in the sculpture class. This was the first strange experience, but on the other hand, it was good because it set a task for me. I started to research the notion of sculpture: what does it mean, what is it, and so on. During this period, time was also a concern. I had questions like: if I'm doing something, is it an action? Can it become a sculpture? When does an action become a sculpture?

I made different works about these ideas and finally I realized that all my pieces from that time had a beginning and an end. Before that, everybody, starting with Michelangelo, believed that the work would stay for eternity. So I thought that was interesting. But I'm not saying that I was the first to do it — in the 1960s everything was happening already. I made the "sweater pieces," for which I was hanging sweaters on the wall with specific instructions to fold the sweaters, to transform them from sweaters into other objects. Some lasted a month, others lasted two weeks and so on. I realized the pieces were becoming shorter and shorter. Then I made this video, "59 Positions," in which I was wearing normal clothes in unusual, strange, stupid, ridiculous, and embarrassing situations and positions — filmed for twenty seconds each. In this piece, the work only existed for twenty seconds. I tried to create a sort of "brand name." I thought "One Minute Sculpture" was a good idea, and then I made this new work with all the different objects. But "one minute" can mean ten seconds, or five minutes, it doesn't matter.

Since you photograph your "One Minute Sculptures," they continue to exist. Could you envisage, like Tino Sehgal, not having any documentation at all? Doing "One Minute Sculptures" that would really last — and could only be seen — during that one minute?

At the beginning these sculptures were really ephemeral, but very quickly I thought that I didn't want them to become *too* ephemeral. This is not the way I want my work to be seen. I was more interested in giving the public a part to play. I made these platforms with instruction drawings. People were invited to step on the platform, follow the instructions, and realize the piece. They could have a Polaroid of themselves doing the piece taken, send it to me with \$100 or €100 and I would send it back signed. It was an interesting and weird game about originality, copy, and authenticity.

You seemed to have a clear desire to democratize art and art practice.

This is true, but on the other hand, it was not very democratic because I was the one who decided which piece is a "One Minute Sculpture" by Erwin Wurm, and which isn't. On the platform, the audience could do anything but only if they followed my instructions would I call it "One Minute Sculpture" and sign the piece. I was the director and the people were the material.

The exhibition at Open Eye Gallery is concentrating on a series of "One Minute Sculptures" made in 1997. How do you remember making these pieces?

I made these "One Minute Sculptures" under very specific conditions: I got an invitation to do a solo show at Bremen Künstlerhaus. I said OK, great, but I would like to come ten days in advance and create something new. The director, Horst Griese, accepted. I had the possibility of using all the materials found in their offices, and the people who were working there. I tried all the positions and situations myself making the video "One Minute Sculptures," and there's also a lot of failing in it. After this, I asked the people to take the positions and I photographed them. The director of the Künstlerhaus is the old, bald guy with the grey hair and all the pens in his nose, mouth, and ears, and the other people are the people from the office.

It was also about reflecting the situation of an artist travelling from place to place, making a work in different institutions, making it site-specific or not. At the beginning, I was not sure about these works at all. I was very suspicious — I'm always very critical with my work. Then other people saw it and all of a sudden people from the Kunstverein Cologne came and said we would like to make a little catalogue with this work. It was sold out in one month. It was unbelievable; I'd never had this before. All of sudden something changed.

Do you ever tire of the everyday, or for you is it an endless source of inspiration?

Frankly, at the beginning the idea came from very specific conditions. Because I had no money at all I decided to use any cheap material that I could have access to. I first made sculptures with wood because there was a furniture factory close to my studio and they threw away pieces of wood I could use. Then I changed studios and there was this other material, and then I changed again and there was this thrift store with all these clothes, and I would also use my own clothes. This was the first thing: I wanted to use material that was absolutely cheap and cost nothing. The other thing was that I wanted to relate these pieces to my time, to the questions of our time, and with the notion of culture.

When you are making a sculpture in clay, you add volume or you take volume away. You do the same thing when you gain weight or when you lose weight. That puts different levels together: the social level, the personal level, the sickness of our time where everybody has to be slim. Nowadays fat people are so-called underdogs, because the rich are the slim ones, and all these weird aspects of society are in this little idea of working with volume: adding volumes or taking volumes away.

You've compared the artist to the philosopher, arguing that both tackle reality but are doomed to failure and obsolescence when the next generation comes around.

It seems to be one of the destinies of an artist's life: that at the end you fail, because the next generation comes and says, "come on old guy, move over and take your bullshit out of the way." You start as this young, informed, aggressive guy and then you are the victim of another young guy — that's the game. And it's the same with the philosophers: great ideas will end one day, they'll be corrected, and become part of history.

"Erwin Wurm: One Minute Sculptures," June 22 – September 2, 2012, [Open Eye Gallery](#), Liverpool.