

ERWIN WURM

A 70TH-BIRTHDAY RETROSPECTIVE

13.9.2024 TO 9.3.2025



ALBERTINA modern

Exhibition Facts

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| Duration | 13 September 2024 – 9 March 2025 |
| Venue | ALBERTINA MODERN |
| Curator | Antonia Hoerschelmann |
| Assistant Curator | Lydia Eder |
| Works | 170 |
| Catalogue | Erwin Wurm. The Retrospective, Ed.: Antonia Hoerschelmann and Klaus Albrecht Schröder, Hirmer Available for EUR 39,90 (English/German) onsite at the Museum Shop as well as via www.albertina.at |
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Erwin Wurm

A 70th-Birthday Retrospective

13 September 2024 – 9 March 2025

Erwin Wurm is one of the most successful and best-known contemporary artists internationally. The exhibition at the ALBERTINA MODERN on the occasion of his 70th birthday is the result of a decades-long mutual bond between the ALBERTINA and this uniquely versatile artist. It is also the first comprehensive retrospective of this multifaceted oeuvre in all artistic media: sculptures, drawings and instructions, videos and photographs invite us to illuminate the paradoxes and absurdities of our world.

Erwin Wurm gives shape to the moment and the sense of the absurd that it reveals. His entire oeuvre revolves around the realisation that we search in vain for a meaning to life, that we try in vain to give human existence a meaning. Albert Camus recognised the absurd in the human quest for meaning in a meaningless world: 'The absurd can jump out at anyone on any street corner.'

One Minute Sculptures

For a long time, Wurm's most famous works were the *One Minute Sculptures*. In an illogical, grotesquely comical combination, a person is instructed by the artist to assume an impossible position that defies all logic and reason, using a banana, lemons, pencils, pieces of furniture or items of clothing, and hold it for one minute - a profoundly senseless act. With these *One Minute Sculptures*, Erwin Wurm has found a completely new form of expression for his profound doubts about our supposedly rational culture. With these performative-situational scenarios, he consciously turns away from classical sculpture, which is designed for permanence in its very statuary. Its classic means is the contrapposto, the balanced relationship between the supporting leg and the free leg. Her favourite theme is the meaningful exchange between man and his environment, as it is reflected in sensible body language and posture. In Erwin Wurm's work, this is replaced by grotesquely comical

connections between people and objects. The result is a bizarre and absurd masterpiece that already contains transience and only lasts for 60 seconds: one minute!

As the artist himself explains, it is always about the concept of the sculptural in relation to the social. It is about scrutinising the structures of our society, which also manifest themselves in the forms of our everyday objects. For example, a pickle can certainly be explained as a self-portrait, or a lavish luxury car such as the *Fat Car* as a symbol of greed, excess and commodity fetishism in our society. On the other hand, the *Narrow House* conceptually reflects the narrowness of bourgeois thought and behaviour and the narrowness of social norms, whether through religion, convention or staged pathos. In addition, this show presents a rural school for the first time, which stands for restrictive and outdated ideas and is another symbol of restrictive and judgemental models of thought. Wurm's works illustrate how much it is about discovery, about constantly rethinking and redesigning the existing and our existing structures.

The exhibition brings together major works from all stages of Erwin Wurm's artistic career. From his early wood and dust sculptures to his most recent works, some of which are being shown for the first time in this exhibition. Alongside these are works with which he achieved international fame, such as the *One Minute Sculptures*, the *Fat Car* and a *Narrow House*.

Exhibition Texts

ERWIN WURM

A 70TH – BIRTHDAY RETROSPECTIVE

Erwin Wurm (b. 1954 Bruck/Mur) is one of today's most successful and best-known international contemporary artists. For his 70th birthday, this presentation unfolds a first-ever comprehensive survey of key works and important stations of his multifaceted oeuvre. Its arc extends from his beginnings in the 1980s to works shown here for the first time or created especially for the occasion. Sculptures, drawings and instructions, videos and photographs invite contemplating the paradoxes and absurdities of our world. In his artistic method, Erwin Wurm examines the concept of the sculptural, introducing it as a measure by which to gauge our contemporary world.

The boundaries between traditional concepts of sculpture, performance, photography or painting are called into question, just as the statics and movement within a work of art are redefined. Wurm overturns habitual perceptions of the reality that surrounds us and, with his artworks, opens up opportunities to raise new perspectives and questions: What happens if I disregard gravity, what if houses start melting away or are squashed by performative interventions? How do bodies and spaces behave when the absurd and paradoxical has room to exist in them? How can you, in the *One Minute Sculptures*, become part of a work of art for a brief moment, and how does that feel? As the artist himself explains, it is always about the concept of the sculptural in relation to the social. For example, a pickle may well be declared to be a self-portrait, or a lavish luxury convertible like the *Fat Car* as a symbol of greed, excess, and commodity fetishism in our society. On the other hand, the *Narrow House* conceptually reflects the narrowness of bourgeois thinking and action and the restrictiveness of social norms, whether through religion, convention, or faux pathos. Relating to this, the show for the first time presents a rural School, which stands for restrictive and now outdated ideas and is another symbol of oppressive and judgmental thought models.

Also in his recent works, Erwin Wurm stays committed to pursuing an innovative take on the sculptural parameters of hull, mass, skin, volume, and time: His new series, *Substitutes*, *Skins*, or *Flat Sculptures*, illustrate how the artist makes a point of rethinking and reshaping the world of existing things, taking us as viewers on a journey of discovery of open territories of thought and art.

CONCEPTUAL BEGINNINGS

Instead of the painting class he had hoped for, Erwin Wurm was put in a sculpture class as an art student. His earliest works, created during this period, already showed him trying to combine both forms of artistic expression and looking for approaches to do so. His first groups of works was created from materials that he could find in the vicinity of his studio: wood, metal, and especially clothing. Wurm liked to cover the sculptural surface, which spans the volume it encloses and forms the sculpture, with an additional colouristic painterly layer like a second skin. An important theme of his first sculptures, some of them quite large, is the human body, which was initially painted in multiple colours, but soon came to be solely defined by the surfaces and textures of the materials used.

DUST SCULPTURES

In his quest to explore the boundaries of sculpture, Erwin Wurm created a group of works named *Dust Sculptures*. The artist fathoms how far volume, mass, weight, size, form, and space can be rethought in novel ways. The Dust Sculptures create an impression of the absence of an object whose outline is only recognizable in the deposited dust. This radical reduction of visible volume becomes the zero point of Wurm's reflections on the concept of sculpture taken to the extreme. Presenting a *Dust sculpture* on a pedestal under a glass bell suggests the disappearance of a precious object. At the same time, it raises questions, like how the dust might have got under the protective glass hood in the first place, or whether it is, in itself, worth protecting. In the course of all these considerations, Wurm also calls into question the function of the artist, his purview of responsibility, and the necessity of his presence. This led him to draw up a certificate that the owner of the artwork can use to create a *Dust Sculpture* according to his specifications. By introducing this form of reproducibility, Wurm for the first time also defies the ephemeral aspect of performative artworks, the notion of their irrecoverable uniqueness.

CLOTHES

The theme of clothing, which already played an important role early in Erwin Wurm's career, has again become central to his recent work. In the 1990s, he created his first clothes sculptures. The sweaters, which the artist mounted on the wall using nails, come complete with illustrated instructions for museums or galleries to be able to later reinstall the works in

his absence. The process somewhat anticipated the One Minute Sculptures formulated not much later.

Wurm sees clothing as a second skin. It serves a protective function for the body, keeping it warm, kind of a protective shield. True to the motto that “Clothes Makes the Man,” clothing in Wurm’s oeuvre also references fashion as a means of self-expression of personality. This is also reflected by his Box People. Already in his early work, the artist dressed up cubic shapes on feet in shirts and suits. From 2008 on, he started revisiting this idea.

MASS AND VOLUME

Sculptural questions of mass and volume have preoccupied Erwin Wurm ever since his beginnings as an artist. Early on, the artist linked this aspect with the theme of clothing, which also plays a recurring role in his work. If, for example, 18 pullovers are slipped over one another layer by layer to create a sculpture, the goal is rapid increase or change of bodily volume. In this case, it is achieved simply by putting on and taking off. Wurm keeps revisiting and re-exploring the classical definition of the notion of sculpture. He seeks to expand it conceptually, to formulate new approaches both in terms of formal aesthetics and content, and to overcome seemingly established notions of sculpture and sculpting.

MIND BUBBLES

At the beginning of every creative process, there is an idea, and with it, a thought. The representation of this mental process—the question, that is, of how the abstract nature of thought can be cast in object form—also play a key role in Erwin Wurm’s art. Immaterial thought materializes in sculptural form in the *Mind Bubbles*, a large thought bubble that sits directly on elongated thin legs. The comiclike figures give physical substance to the abstract construct of the thought. Thoughts are literally put on their feet here, which is why Wurm’s figures can also be read as an artistic expression of the dynamics of the human thinking process

BAGS

Handbags or suitcases walking on long, thin legs are given humanesque characteristics in a comic-style visual language by Erwin Wurm. The play with scale expands the associative

horizon to include, in particular, structures of the socio and political and their impact on the individual. Wurm addresses, as he once said, “the entire nature of the human: the physical, the mental, the psychological, and the political” in his work. His starting points often are observations of the sometimes comic, sometimes tragic absurdity of our everyday lives. In Wurm’s sculptures, the individual is often personified through a prestigious object with cult status, particularly coveted in our consumer society, like a fashion item of clothing or a designer bag. He creates irritating symbioses and paradoxical hybrid creatures that, in the artist’s own words, encourage us to “look at the world from a different perspective.”

SELF-PORTRAIT AS PICKLES

The pickled cucumber appears in Erwin Wurm’s work in all sorts of sizes, materials, and compositions. Like the sausage or the bread roll, it stands for traditional, vernacular Austrian eating habits and snacking culture, affordable for everyone. The artist first used the cucumber when he was invited to design a competition prize. At the time, the design was rejected, until two years later the *ImpulsTanz Wien* dance festival made it the award presented to the best dancer. A simple pickled cucumber being turned into a trophy also calls into question our society’s model of constant pursuit of profit and maximization. In *Self-Portrait as Pickles*, the everyday unique specimens transforms into an art object, a thing of individual value and at the same time stands for the fascination of the variability of form. “Although every cucumber is individually different, it nevertheless is immediately identifiable as a cucumber and can be classified as such ... just like a human being,” Erwin Wurm explains.

PEACE & PLENTY

Already in the 1990s, drawings were central to Erwin Wurm’s oeuvre, mostly in connection with the *One Minute Sculptures* and the instructions for their performance. Works on paper are an essential part of his artistic working process. Whether at home, in the studio, or on the road, Wurm draws everywhere. He works with locally available papers of various qualities and formats, using conventional tools such as pencil, crayon, ballpoint pen, and watercolour. In 2018, a selection from a body of around 650 drawings was presented at the Albertina under the title of *Peace & Plenty*. This title refers to the hotel of the same name in George Town in the Bahamas, where many of the thematically and technically diverse works on paper were created. The drawings are not least reminiscent of a diary in that they mainly depict, aside

from self-portraits, people from the artist's personal circle. In addition, it is well-known personalities from politics as well as from art and cultural history, past and present, that are on his mind. Erwin Wurm shows himself to be a sharp and unsentimental observer of reality with a sometimes provocatively tuned sensorium for human weaknesses and everyday absurdities. Situation comedy and precarious moments, dreams and desires reflect his deep interest in the human with all its shortcomings.

PERFORMATIVE SCULPTURES

By purposely deforming his own sculptural creations, Erwin Wurm breaks with the supposedly beautiful and the pursuit of perfection. Applying physical force—by hitting, denting, or kicking them—he disfigures typical everyday objects. In play here is also the fleeting nature of one's own physical presence: What remains of it is but its visible imprint on the material. Time and again in making his performative sculptures, Wurm also uses auxiliary objects: On a flattened pistol, for example, the impression of a car tire profile is discernible. This also seems to convey a message of content, as the gun is rendered inoperable when apparently run over and crushed by a car.

MELTING HOUSES

Aside from piling up mass to modify form, different aggregate states also play a role in Erwin Wurm's exploration of sculptural possibilities. The artist, for instance, deforms his sculptures by liquefying them. Well-known New York buildings, like Frank Lloyd Wright's Guggenheim Museum and Mies van der Rohe's Seagram Building, melt down into a shapeless mass—and with them their status as icons of a Western influenced architectural history. The deformation of the object introduces the aspect of destruction as a form of artistic expression, which later also manifests itself in a group of works entitled *Performative Sculptures*. In them, sculptural work is understood as a performative act.

ONE MINUTE SCULPTURES

Ever since the beginnings of his work in sculpture, Erwin Wurm has been searching for possibilities to expand its basal concept. In 1991, he provided drawn instruction manual, which made it possible for anyone to substitute for the absent artist in creating a sculptural artwork.

In 1996, in the group exhibition *Do It* in Helsinki, the public was invited to follow drawn instructions and perform sculptures for one minute. One year later, these works got titled *One Minute Sculptures*. Using everyday items, unusual situations are set up that are characterized by irony, humor, amazement, and failure. They explore the boundaries between humans and objects, as well as paradoxes and contradictions. At the same time, the works relate to themes like interchangeability, randomness, transience, invisibility, or disappearance. For a brief time span, performers suddenly find themselves in the position of being part of a work of art, which comes with the unfamiliar experience of also being seen as such. In executing Wurm's artistic idea pursuant to the instructions provided, the protagonists act as part of an anonymized society, as it were. The ephemeral works of art created by instruction, human, and object interacting are captured in photographs. They freeze the resultant moments and, for Wurm, stand as sculptural works in their own right. In international contemporary art, the *One Minute Sculptures*, which Wurm keeps developing further in ever new groups of works, represent a ground-breaking expansion of the very concept of sculpture.

SCHOOL

It is only by bending one's back that one can step into this rural school, created especially for this exhibition and is presented to the public for the first time. It represents ideas, outdated today, of normative pedagogy and of education as restriction and disciplining. The school boards in the interior refer to the broad variety of central socio-political issues and values that have seen decisive changes in attitude internationally in recent decades. Already in 2010, the artist had made the *Narrow House*, conceptually shaped after his parental home, a vivid metaphor for social oppression, for the narrow-mindedness of petty-bourgeois thought and action and the restrictions imposed by social norms, whether through religion, convention, or faux pathos.

In line with the view of clothing as a person's second skin, Erwin Wurm sees the house as a third protective shell. It is a recurring motif in the artist's oeuvre: As a massively inflated *Fat House* or as a melting object in which the recognizably familiar dissolves in the materiality of its mass, it is linked to the desire of calling apparent realities of life into doubt, one of the artist's core themes. As Wurm himself says, our reality is an invention and based on social conditioning. The artwork can unconventionally break through these norms and indicate a

mental way out, just as the constrictive presence of this school as an overpowering educational institution makes the oppression of those entering it physically palpable.

NEUROSES

Cross-connections, both in form and content, are a guiding idea in Erwin Wurm's work. This includes, in particular, the connection between the old and the new, which is evident in the revisiting of tried and tested own ideas, which the artist keeps constantly reworking, rethinking, reconceptualizing, and recontextualizing. On the one hand, this is evidence of artistic development; on the other, it shows that certain themes run as a common thread throughout Wurm's repertoire of motifs and world of ideas. One such central motif is clothing, or more precisely, pullovers. His most recent *Neuroses* series harks back to earlier works like the video *59 Positions*. While, there, it is the human body that is discernible under the absorbing garment, in *Neuroses* it is a wide variety of seating furniture, over which textiles are stretched as an outer layer like a skin. Wurm once again explores the theme of clothing as a second skin here. In the context of the series title with its implication of psychosocial disorders such as anxieties and compulsions, the textile hull can also be interpreted as a protective layer for the human psyche.

DREAMERS

In a group of works entitled *Dreamers*, Erwin Wurm sets out to explore the realm of dreams, complex and unreal and almost intangible as it seems. In an association verging on the absurd, it invokes Sigmund Freud's writings on the (headless) unconscious and the interpretation of dreams. The artist places realistically rendered pillows on human limbs, showing them balanced on an arm or, with some Catholic overtones, on their knees. As strange hybrids of pillow and human body parts, the *Dreamers* make an appearance as fantastic creatures that themselves seem to have sprung from a dream.

SUBSTITUTES

Substitutes is the group title of a new type of sculpture that Erwin Wurm has been working on since 2022, its form made up from a mostly monochrome painted surface. It envelops an empty inside and brings out the sculptural appearance: Hollow like ancient bronze

sculptures, these figures only take shape through their thin metal skin. Their posture makes the mostly headless sculptures appear as de-individualized prototypes of social norms, roles, and hierarchies—Erwin Wurm designs them as surrogates that have presence only in the form of their shell of clothing, which gives them shape but almost no volume. In the case of the sculpture *Repentance (After Donatello)* that references the Renaissance sculptor Donatello's *Penitent Magdalene*, there is no person to be seen; instead, a knitted sweater and white sneakers suggest body shapes that convey the idea of a person. Sculptures such as *Ghost* seem like the echo of the final movement of a body transcending into a weightless state, like the eventual dying away of a fading last sound.

BALZAC

A heap of wildly piled-up clothes and handbags weighs heavily on a human figure, seeming to almost swallow it up. Beneath the masses of fabric, the body is discernible only by its outline and, more than anything, its legs. In his *Balzac* sculpture, Erwin Wurm once again takes a critical look at the issue of compulsive consumerism and uncontrolled buying behavior—illustrated here by the example of the fashion industry. The title of the work refers to Auguste Rodin's *Monument to Balzac* (1891–1897), whose flowing forms remind Wurm of the draped lengths of fabric in his own sculpture. Based on the story that the French sculptor soaked the writer's housecoat in plaster in order to cloak the monument, Wurm also explores the possibility of enlarging body volume through clothing, thereby demonstrating its sculptural potential.

FLAT SCULPTURES

With Erwin Wurm, even painting morphs into sculpture. When he began his studies at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, the artist, who actually wanted to be a painter, ended up in the sculpture class. Nevertheless, Wurm continued to explore the medium of painting, whether it was by painting his early wood or metal sculptures or by exploring the sculptural and material quality of painting in his colour dumplings made of pure paint. Already then, the issue for him was pushing the boundaries, questioning or even dissolving conventional genres. Later, the artist went on to extend the concept of the sculptural to panel painting: His paintings become *Flat Sculptures*. Composed of letters that sometimes are blown up almost beyond readability, words or phrases conquer—or even, it seems, disrupt—the pictorial space in these works. Wurm creates word sculptures, which in their way of using

language and concentrating on the written word show parallels to the work of American conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner. Through the focus on individual words that each form the starting point of a *Flat Sculpture*, their meaning is accentuated, even if the flat-pressed letters make them difficult to read. In this way, both colour and language become sculpture.

SKINS

With the *Skins* group of works, Erwin Wurm has, since 2021, presented new sculptural spatial experiences and conceptual designs. Precise ribbon-like shapes are cut out of partial casts of the human body. They appear fragile, almost like abstract sculptures, and are transformed into sometimes larger-than-life aluminum sculptures. Comparable to spatial drawings or dynamic, expressive brush strokes, the *Skins* are convoluted, occasionally revealing individual body parts such as hands and defining energy pathways down to the shoes. All plaster casts were taken of clothed real people from Wurm's social environment, or occasionally the artist himself. The *Skins* mark a new approach in Wurm's ongoing exploration of what constitutes a sculpture. In fact, his entire oeuvre is characterized by the search for new ways to deconstruct the sculptural, for a new artistic negotiation of two- and threedimensionality, mass, surface, volume, and the idea of clothing as a second skin. In the *Skins*, skin and clothing meld into a single, mostly colourless surface. Extremely reduced, they represent a largely absent body, fragmented but still imaginable in its void ambient space. Depicting a body in maximum absence already was a theme in Wurm's early *Dust Sculptures*: the *Skins* now present themselves as ribbon-like membranes between visible body fragments and the empty space that surrounds them. They walk the line between abstraction and figuration.

Press images

The following images are available free of charge during the exhibition in the [Press section](#). Please note: The images may only be used in connection with reporting on the exhibition.



Erwin Wurm
Hoody I, 2023
Bronze, paint
200 × 65 × 45 cm
© Erwin Wurm, Bildrecht, Vienna 2024
Photo: Markus Gradwohl



Erwin Wurm
Observer (from the series Skins), 2024
Polyurethane, metal stool
225 × 40 × 40 cm
© Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024
Photo: Markus Gradwohl



Erwin Wurm
Mind Bubble Walking, 2024
Aluminium, paint
230 × 160 × 120 cm
© Erwin Wurm, Bildrecht, Vienna 2024
Photo: Markus Gradwohl



Erwin Wurm
Dreamer on Knees, 2024
Aluminium, paint, clothes
100 × 110 × 95 cm
Collection Guido Maria Kretschmer and Frank
Mutters
© Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024
Photo: Markus Gradwohl



Erwin Wurm
Psyche (As You Like It), 2024
Aluminium, paint, clothes
262 × 115 × 68 cm
© Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024
Photo: Markus Gradwohl



Erwin Wurm
Untitled (from the series Substitutes), 2024
Steel, Acryl, concrete
188 × 50 × 56 cm
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Photo: Markus Gradwohl



Erwin Wurm
House Wittgenstein – Melting, 2005
Aluminium, paint
68 × 68 × 60 cm
The ALBERTINA Museum, Vienna – The ESSL Collection
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Erwin Wurm
Fat Convertible, 2005
Mixed media
130 × 480 × 237 cm
© Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024
Photo: Vincent Everarts



Erwin Wurm
Untitled (Box People), 2019
Plywood, metal, leather, textile
192 × 32 × 37 cm
© Erwin Wurm / Bildrecht, Vienna 2024
Photo: Markus Gradwohl