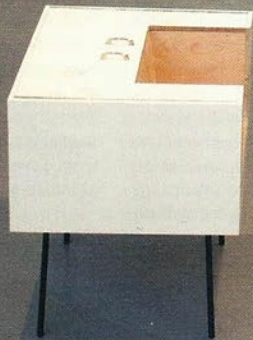


COURTESY THE ARTIST; XAVIER HUFFENS, BRUSSELS; GALERIE THADDAEUS RORAC, SALZBURG AND PARIS; AND EHMANN MAUPIN, NY

Between Fun and **Erwin Wurm** Desperation

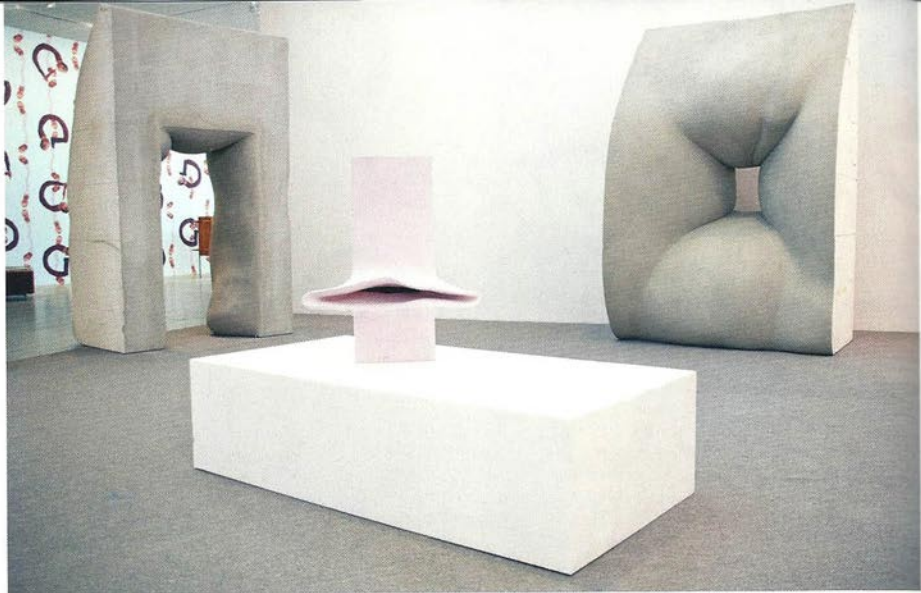
A Conversation with

**Erwin
Wurm**





Performative drinking sculpture, 2010. Installation view with Pollock cabinet, Kippenberger credenza, Edvard Munch kitchen cabinets, and Willem de Kooning dresser.



BY CAROLEE THEA

Installation view with (left to right) *The bob*, 2011, polystyrene and paint; *Home—gulp*, 2011, acrylic and paint; and *The bob*, 2011, polystyrene and paint.

Since the 1980s, Austrian artist Erwin Wurm has worked to expand traditional notions of sculpture. Through his “one-minute sculptures,” which document conceptual performances in films and photographs, he invites viewers to realize that actions are more important than objects. Inspired by popular culture and an idiosyncratic exploration of space, form, and volume, Wurm employs furniture, houses, cars, buckets, and other quotidian objects of modern culture. Demonstrating a signature tongue-in-cheek humor, he mixes melancholy, irony, absurdity, and ephemerality. As Wurm himself points out, his work revolves around the question, “Is this an action or is this a sculpture—and when does one turn into the other?”

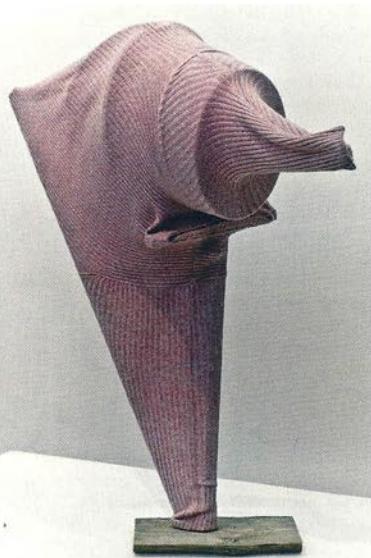
The “one-minute sculptures” from the 1980s marked the beginning of Wurm’s use of the body as inspiration. Today, his anthropomorphic and often obese or emaciated works, including *Fat House* and *The Convertible*, continue the trend. He claims that the fat works suggest a notion of *over-consumption*, but, for me, they embody the grotesque, which aims to bewilder and disorient, to jolt us out of accustomed ways of perceiving the world by offering a radically different, disturbing, and alienating perspective. Viewing Wurm’s sculptures, I am reminded of the 20th-century Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin’s defense of rude and crude carnival grotesques in Rabelais. Discussing the proto-Modernist novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Bakhtin explains how exaggerated realism (greed, gluttony, and hedonism)

constitutes an alternative to the impersonal, conformist, superficial, unequal, and numbing realities of commercialism or, more abstractly, a resistance to a society of spectacle and nothingness. In Wurm’s work, we see just such an interaction across the social, the artistic, and the physical. His sculptures—cartoonish and absurdist—hint at the slapstick comedy of Laurel and Hardy. And viewers are invited to look, play, cavort, stare, and interact—often to a deliberately uncomfortable degree.

Last year’s return of Art Basel to Miami Beach for the 10th year coincided with a major rally on Wall Street, as concerted efforts by banks around the globe led to hopes that Europe would avoid a debt crisis. Inside the convention

Beat and treat (anger sculptures), 2011. Bronze and patina, 7.1 x 14.9 x 9.1 in.





Left: *City model*, 2011. Wool, wood, and Styrofoam, 45.25 x 20.5 x 48.4 in. Above: *Architecture*, 2011. Fabric and wood, 33.5 x 23.6 x 43.7 in.

alcoholics; I also included a few who did performance work that featured drinking, like Tom Marioni and Gilbert and George. I was very close to the Austrian writer Werner Schwab, who died of alcoholism at the age of 35. He was a terribly unhappy person, disoriented by the "sense of society," and drinking helped soften his anger.

CT: *Isn't this a strange way to play with alcoholism, by enticing others into complicity?*

EW: This work was also inspired by my take on the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek, who says there's not much freedom left in the Western/capitalist/liberal world, where things like smoking, sex, drinking, and eating fatty meat are scorned. If you're under enormous moral pressure to abstain, it takes away the freedom of a so-called good life. Žižek, very cynically, said that it's not important to die healthy, it's important to live well.

CT: *Who or what were your early influences?*

EW: I grew up after the end of World War II within a haunted social background and trained with the generation of Beuys and Adorno. At school, in 1976–77, I was a

painter, but at the Academy of Arts, I was ushered into the sculpture department, even though I wanted to be in the painting department. Looking at Greek and Roman sculptures—those idealized human bodies, some wearing thin veils—made me think about skin, mass, volume, and surface. It was at this formative time that I studied with Bazook Brock, an important German theorist connected to Fluxus, and that became a major influence in my work.

CT: *Sculptures like Fat Convertible, Fat House (2003), Fat House Moller/Adolf Loos (2003), Mies van der Rohe Melting (2005), and Art Basel Fucks Documenta (2006) all demonstrate a curious preoccupation with buildings. Le Corbusier once remarked that the purpose of architecture is "to move us." You realize that concept in your work, where the power lies in how deeply your sculptural objects make us feel. A dwelling, for you, is between outside and inside worlds, a state that compels contemplative lingering. One might also say that your constructions generate an echo of de Chirico.*

EW: I believe that our feelings about such personal architectural sites are mixed, that we are often drawn to what both attracts and repels—the artist understands this intuitively. If, in the (inner and outer) space surrounding these objects, we experience our own ambivalence about certain issues more intensely, it is because, in theme and structure, my work holds these contradictory elements in tension.

The large, obese house works in the Bass show are related to my original *Fat House*, which I did 10 years ago. A small silver house was the model. For this exhibition, I cut the obese house apart and began working with its bulbous forms. When you put the pieces back together, the result moves in the direction of architecture and the human body.

CT: *You enlist architecture and object as direct social and artistic fodder. Your fat sculptures resonate directly with the body while alluding metaphorically to gluttonous consumerism and overweight financial markets.*

EW: Well yes, these structures are synonyms for social structures.

CT: *I saw Narrow House at the Venice Biennale. Is this work different in intent?*

EW: *Narrow House* is a replica of my family's house. I kept the original length but narrowed the width to one-sixth. One could enter squeezed rooms and see squeezed furniture. It's about claustrophobia, and it relates to the 1950s and '60s, when I was growing up in a rigid, fearful, and angry Austrian society. Inside, there are narrow chairs and tables, narrow bookshelves lined with narrow books, a narrow sofa, and narrow rooms covered with a distinctly 1970s-style wallpaper. The house is disturbingly tight, and I ask visitors to walk through it.

CT: *Can you explain what the large knitted wall piece is about?*

EW: That wall piece blurs the boundary between human form and museum building. You could say that I am "clothing" the museum for warmth and security. Another series of smaller sweater sculptures was included in the show, too. The sweater forms

are stretched and altered by crude wooden braces. I believe that these altered works transform the visitor's view of the sweater forms into the present moment, omitting any history or future, which are outside of the experience and perhaps illusory. I also made a new series of "hoodie" works that push the human form and showcase how balance can be found within gallery spaces. These forms wear hoodies or raincoats. They were plastered inside, not as defined forms, but as *deformed* ones that we cast in bronze. They're called *House*. The hoodie doubles as the skin of a human being—something that has become a kind of uniform for dissident people who make riots.

CT: *Are the works also about the protesters?*

EW: Well yes, but not just the protester—they are about the *rioter*. In England, the rioters wanted to break into shops and steal things.

CT: *They were exhibiting their anger at discrepancies in the social structure.*

EW: Their dress suggests they're more interested in becoming invisible, in not being recognized.

CT: *Considering that the understructure of these sculptures is rough and abstract and the outside is polished, I can't help but think of Steve Jobs's comment about Apple products: "The inside should be as elegant as the outside." These works are the reverse, and as such, they have compelling implications.*

EW: Well, their wooden armatures relate to my very early work when I used discarded wood. It is a kind of architecture that holds the human form. It's a house with an interior that is done very roughly.

CT: *Is it fun to make them?*

EW: It's always between fun and desperation.

House I, 2011. Bronze and patina, 20.5 x 42.9 x 35.4 in.

Carolee Thea is a writer living in New York.

