

“One Minute Sculpture” at Twenty: Erwin Wurm’s *Ethics Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*

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Erwin Wurm, “Spaceship to Venus” (2016) (all image courtesy the artist and Lehmann Maupin, New York and Hong Kong. All photos by Eva Wuerdinger unless noted otherwise)

In the twenty years Erwin Wurm has been making his “one minute sculptures,” the sculptures’ Conceptual recipe has remained consistent. Then as now, viewers, prompted by simple written instructions, realize the sculptures by briefly enacting awkward, often humorous or humiliating, poses with repurposed everyday objects such as a desk, a bunch of pens, a bucket, or fruit. What

has changed over time is the sculptures' cultural, political, and artistic context. Where Wurm once documented the realized sculptures with a signed Polaroid, today's participants can now self-document and disseminate the work with technological speed that makes Polaroids seem at once prescient and quaint. In that time, too, Wurm's one minute practice, so well-suited to the classroom and social media, has been mimicked and adopted in contexts well beyond what could have been predicted at its outset.



Wurm's latest series of one minute sculptures, incorporating mid-century modern furniture and presented alongside five new cast bronze sculptures at Lehmann Maupin, evidences that, even as he plays with variations on familiar themes, his work remains relevant and fresh. The exhibit lifts its wryly ponderous title, *Ethics demonstrated in geometrical order*, from an eponymous treatise by the Enlightenment philosopher Baruch Spinoza. Like the titles of so many previous one minute sculptures ("Theory of Dignity," "Sigmund Freud Modern," "Estimating the Mass of Wood") its mock-serious tone represents Wurm's preferred angle of approach — cagy and off-kilter — to weighty aesthetic and philosophic questions.

Erwin Wurm, "Organization of Love" (2016)

The show's titular one minute sculpture, an Aalto Paimio lounge chair with a head-hole cut out of its lower back, encapsulates the ways in which Wurm's dark philosophical humor speaks to many different zeitgeists and moods. For the sculpture, participants are instructed to stick their heads through the hole, which necessitates kneeling down with your torso over the seat and your bottom up in the air. The realized sculpture evokes things such as a pillory, a guillotine, a proctologist's examination table, and other apparatuses that place the human body in compromised or vulnerable positions.



Erwin Wurm, "Ethics demonstrated in a geometrical way" (2016-2017)

In the current United States political climate, such a sculpture feels like a leftist parable about the dangers of compliance and submission, a reading reinforced by Wurm's somewhat dubious Spinozan insistence that participants are relinquishing their free will when they follow his instructions. But in other times and places, the same sculpture would likely conjure different associations: ten years ago, the more immediate association would probably have been the photographs of U.S. soldiers' human rights abuses in Abu Ghraib prison; in Revolutionary France, the work would perhaps have stoked anti-monarchical sentiment; in medieval Britain, it would likely have conjured the threat of physical public shaming.

Whatever associations a particular one minute sculpture evokes, the work always possesses a sharp, almost sadomasochistic, ethical component. Like a perverse yoga instructor, Wurm takes pleasure in challenging viewers to contort their bodies into ever more awkward positions. These sculptural contortions are embodied case studies in the politics of shame, humiliation, and related forms of psychological discomfort. For all of the exhibition title's tongue-in-cheek glee, there is also a sense in which "Ethics demonstrated in geometrical order" is a precise and dispassionate description of Wurm's entire one minute practice.



Installation view of "Ethics demonstrated in geometrical order" (2017), Lehmann Maupin, New York (photo by Elisabeth Bernstein)

Humor, we're often reminded, is contextual in nature; jokes are not intrinsically funny but dependant upon subtle external understandings to achieve their effects. While that's unmistakably true, Wurm's mischievous sculptures illustrate why certain jokes manage to endure past their initial occasion: their wit and profundity, while not timeless, are nonetheless well-suited to a variety of contexts. Part of why Wurm's prankish one minute sculptures never quite get old is that we humans, the butts of his jokes, make a habit of walking right into them—and enjoying it. Gallows humor at its best, these clever sculptures represent a provocative and engaging way our species has chosen to laugh at itself these past two decades.

Ethics demonstrated in geometrical order *continues at Lehmann Maupin (536 West 22nd Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through May 26.*