

YSP



ERWIN WURM  
TEACHERS' NOTES

## About this resource

This resource is for teachers to support exploration of the exhibition [Erwin Wurm: Trap of the Truth](#) in the Underground Gallery and Gallery Gardens. (Wurm is pronounced 'Vurm'.) It contains information about the artist and exhibition, enquiry questions and ideas for creative activities, which can be used at YSP or in the classroom. Teachers can adapt as appropriate to their groups needs and key stage. Further ideas and playful suggestions can be found in our [Talking Together](#) card and [Drawing Together](#) card.

## About the artist

Erwin Wurm (b.1954) is one of Austria's leading artists and makes sculpture, performance, photography, drawing and video. His work challenges the rules of sculpture, exploring its potential and testing the limits of what it can be. Erwin Wurm asks what sculpture means today in the twenty-first century. His work is both playful and political and disrupts perceptions of the familiar. He reinvents everyday objects by giving them human characteristics and asks us to question the value and importance we place upon them.

**“At some point I came to realise that everything surrounding me can be material for an artistic work, absolutely everything. To begin with, because I had no money and worked relatively quickly, I used scraps of wood and cans. Then I used old clothing, which did not cost anything, before ultimately realising that I could actually use anything around me. That was the decisive step, as then anything was possible.”**

Wurm came to prominence in the 1990s with his *One Minute Sculptures* – an ongoing series of works where the artist gives written or drawn instructions for participants to pose with ordinary objects such as buckets, fruit or chairs for a limited time. These absurd and comical interactions are documented through photography or video and the participant then becomes the artwork.



Erwin Wurm. Photo © Jonty Wilde



Young people in the gallery making *One Minute Sculptures*. Photo © Paolina Varbichkova

## About the exhibition

*Trap of the Truth* features more than 100 works, including 55 sculptures indoors, 19 sculptures in the landscape, paintings, photographs, videos and drawings created over 30 years of the artist's career. The exhibition title *Trap of the Truth* refers to the thinking of influential 17th-century French philosopher René Descartes, who set out to interrogate the subjectivity of truth. This questioning of reality is immortalised in the phrase "I think, therefore I am".

Wurm's interest in philosophy informs much of his artistic practice, which questions ideas around consumerism, striving for status, humanity's impact on the planet and the meaning of life. Wurm's work explores the connection between daily life and sculpture and how physical sensations or psychological states might be transformed into sculptural qualities.

## Before your visit

Before visiting YSP, prepare your pupils/students by discussing their expectations:

- Can you think of somewhere where you might have seen art before?
- Have you ever been to an art gallery, library or museum before?
- What do you think you will see?
- What can you do in an art gallery? What might you not be able to do?
- How will you need to behave as a group and as an individual?  
(This is a good opportunity to refer to the [YSP Code](#).)
- What should you take with you?
- How might sculpture look differently in an indoor gallery compared to outdoors in the landscape?
- Research the work of Erwin Wurm and write down your initial thoughts about his work.
- Do you like Erwin Wurm's work and why?
- What do you find interesting about Erwin Wurm's work?
- What do you think the artist is trying to say?

Prepare your class by watching Erwin Wurm talking about his exhibition on YSP's [YouTube channel](#).



Erwin Wurm, *The German Couch*, 2021. Photo © Jonty Wilde

## How to read an artwork

Interpreting contemporary art can bring opportunities and challenges. Here is a selection of structured questions to help you get the conversation started with your class. They are listed in a tiered approach to enable progression and development of ideas.

### Sculptural Looking

- What is your first reaction to the sculpture? What do you notice?
- What colours and shapes can you see?
- Look at the surface of the sculpture. Look closely, what textures can you see?
- What material is the sculpture made from?
- Consider the scale of the sculpture. Think about its size in relation to your own body. How would you feel if the sculpture was bigger or smaller?
- Look at the title of the sculpture? How does this aid / change your understanding of the work?

### Making Connections

- What does the sculpture remind you of?
- Why might the artist have chosen this material to make the work?
- How might the scale have affected their choice of materials?
- Why might the work have been sited in this location?
- If you had to describe this sculpture to someone who couldn't see it, what would you say?
- How does the artwork make you feel/see/think?

### Developing Discussion

- What do you think the artist is trying to say?
- When was the artwork made? What do you know about the social and political issues of this time period and how might they affect the meaning of the artwork?
- Do you think the artwork will be viewed and understood in the same way now as it was when it was first made? Why?
- Look at the other artworks nearby. Think about why they may have been placed together. What connections can you make? What differences can you think of?
- Do you feel that sculpture changes the spaces it inhabits? Or that the location changes the sculpture?
- What would you like to ask the artist?
- Why do you think artists make art?
- How might art change the world?

The following pages focus on particular artworks for you to discuss with your class.



Erwin Wurm, *Truck II*, 2011 & *Renault 25*, 1991. Photo © Jonty Wilde

## One Minute Sculptures



Erwin Wurm, *Ship of Fools*, 2017. Photo © Jonty Wilde



Erwin Wurm, *The Idiot II*, 2010. © Erwin Wurm

In the 1990s, Wurm became well-known for his *One Minute Sculptures*. These works involve a participant following instructions to pose with everyday household objects, such as buckets, chairs or fruit. The participant poses for one minute and is photographed, resulting in the participant becoming the artwork.

*Ship of Fools* (2017) (above) extends this idea by encouraging the viewer to interact by putting their heads, hands, bottoms, or feet through apertures in the caravan. The results are often funny, playful and sometimes embarrassing. *Ship of Fools* (2017) was inspired by an ancient metaphor, the Ship of State, told by the Greek philosopher Plato. The metaphor suggests that a democracy is unlikely to be stable if everyone feels entitled to be the leader and likens the governance of a nation to a ship under sail.

Watch a short video on YSP's YouTube channel about Wurm's [One Minute Sculptures](#) with your class.

**“Many of my works are based on the principle of time... Stretching time functions as a delay: slowing down an act until it comes to a halt and claims the status of a sculpture. That was an interesting turning point and pretty much the starting point for the question of how long something can be an action, and when something becomes sculpture? When does the sculptural in an action take control, and becomes so strong that it has to be read as a sculpture?”**

### Enquiry Questions

- Define what a sculpture is. Define what performance is.
- Discuss the relationship between sculpture and performance.
- When might a performance become a sculpture?
- Discuss the idea of your body being or becoming a sculpture.
- What positions or shapes would you move your body into?
- What objects would you pose with if you were to make your own *One Minute Sculpture*? Why?
- Why do you think the artist uses everyday objects?
- Can any object become an artwork?
- What activities take you one minute to do? Why do you think the artist chose a time frame for this work?
- How might it be possible to make art a part of everyday life?

### Activities

- Ask your class to write or draw a simple instruction for creating a *One Minute Sculpture*.
- Ask your students to exchange instructions with someone else and then perform them.
- Photograph the results and display in class or add to sketchbooks.

## Performative Sculptures



Installation view of Erwin Wurm: *Trap of the Truth*. Photo © Jonty Wilde

*Performative Sculptures* (2011-2021) are a series of sculptures of everyday objects and furniture which appear to have been squashed, walked on or driven over. They were created by Wurm walking, sitting or pressing into the surface of wet clay, then cast in resin, bronze or aluminium. They document the interaction between the material and the artist's body.

**“I endeavoured to be physically involved with every sculpture, and it occurred to me that you can interpret “physically involved” in any number of ways. You can use your hands or climb up on something, hit something. The physical aspect is important: the fact that I am interfering with an object that is being made now and forcing it into a shape of my own. I destroy or deform an object and as a result something new emerges – the performative sculpture.”**

### Enquiry questions

- How do these sculptures make you feel?
- Consider the material these sculptures are made from. Do the sculptures look soft or hard? Why?
- What marks can you see on the sculptures?
- Do you think objects can hold memories?
- What are the similarities and differences between Wurm's *One Minute Sculptures* and the *Performative Sculptures*?
- Think about the relationship between performance and sculpture in the making of the *Performative Sculptures*. If you were to combine performance and sculpture, what would you make or do?

### Activities

- What actions do you think Erwin Wurm used to make the marks in the sculptures? Re-enact these actions with your own body.
- Make impressions in a lump of clay with parts of your body. What shapes and patterns can you create?
- Experiment with pressing everyday objects into a piece of clay. What impressions can you make?
- Roll the clay out into a flat slab using a rolling pin. Create a picture or a series of patterns by carving and pressing into the clay. Press a piece of paper over the damp clay to create a print.

## The Attacks Series



Erwin Wurm, *Wittgenstein's Barn*, 2022 & *Henry David Thoreau's Cabin*, 2022. Photo © Jonty Wilde

*The Attacks* series consist of bronze and aluminium buildings and cars that have been squashed by oversized sausages and bananas. Wurm relates the phallic nature of the forms of these foods to masculinity and political power dynamics. The works reference philosophers, psychologists and thinkers from the mid-19th to the mid-20th century, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx and Ludwig Wittgenstein. The homes and workplaces of great thinkers are often memorialised, for example Henry David Thoreau's infamous cabin at Waldon pond in Massachusetts (where today a facsimile functions as a tourist attraction). Wurm both honours and undermines these private spaces by replicating them and deforming them in a comical and also disturbing way.

### Enquiry questions

- If you were to make a sculpture of a well known building, which building would you choose? Why?
- Why might the homes and workplaces of famous people be important to others? Why do people visit them?
- Is your home important to you? Why?
- Why might people feel connected to buildings and places?

### Activities

- Make a model of a building using clay or plasticine. It could be your home, your school, or somewhere more well known.
- Write or tell a story about something that has happened in this building.
- Make a model of an item of food that means something to you. Use this model or swap yours with a classmate and press it on top of or into your building. Think about where it will sit and what it will do to the structure of the building. What will you call your sculpture?

## The Figure & Clothing

Many of Wurm's sculptures depict the human figure or parts of it. *Big Hypnosis* (2008) and *Big Kastenmann* (2012) both have a pair of legs, but their bodies have been replaced with unusual objects. A large thought bubble sits atop the legs in *Big Hypnosis*, suggesting how we can become weighed down with the burden of our thoughts. *Big Kastenmann* translates as 'big box man'. The body has been replaced by a large box wearing a grey suit jacket, partially painted with pink paint. Wurm asks us to think about the consumer culture we live in and how it affects our behaviour.

Wurm is very interested in clothing and deconstructs the functionality of fashion to transform it into a sculptural object. This element of his practice originated in the late 1980's when he began using old clothes to make sculpture. He stretched garments over pedestals and plinths, altering their shape and form, transforming them into sculpture.



Erwin Wurm, *Big Hypnosis*, 2008.  
Photo © Jonty Wilde



Erwin Wurm, *18 Pullovers*, 1992. Photo © Jonty Wilde

Wurm regards clothing as a second skin which both protects us and portrays how we want to be perceived by the world. He is interested in how clothes can change our shape or volume depending on what we choose to wear and the number of layers.

**"I am also interested in clothing as an old sculptural theme on which I've worked for many years now, the double skin the enveloping or filling of a volume with a skin or shell."**

Wurm relates clothing to traditional Greek and Roman sculptures cast in bronze and other alloys, where the inner mass is missing, but the outer shell depicts the human form.

## Enquiry Questions

- Looking at *Big Hypnosis*, what thoughts do you think are floating around in the figures' thought bubble?
- Consider the material used to make *Big Hypnosis* is. Does it look light or heavy? Why do you think Erwin Wurm chose to make this sculpture out of aluminium?
- What clothes do you like to wear?
- Why do some people wear uniforms or special clothing?
- How might our clothing reflect our identity?

## Activities

- Collect some old clothes and stretch them over different shaped objects. What kind of forms you can make?
- Think of other ways you can transform clothes into sculptures. Experiment by twisting, stretching, tying, piling,

*Balzac* (2023) is 3.2m tall and is made of aluminium. It depicts a pile of clothes heaped over a human figure and references Auguste Rodin's 1898 sculpture *Monument to Balzac*. Honoré de Balzac was a 19th century French novelist and playwright noted for his realistic representation of society.



Erwin Wurm, *Balzac*, 2023.  
Photo © Jonty Wilde



Auguste Rodin, *Monument to Balzac*, 1898. Photo © Wikipedia



## The Bags Series

Wurm began his *Bags* series in 2017 and these works explore the particular consumer culture around designer handbags. *Step Big* (2023) takes the form of a designer handbag, the likes of which are associated with prestige and wealth. The bag sits atop long elegant legs that appear to be strutting through the park like a super model walking down a runway. *Dance* (2021) and *Trip* (2021) depict a briefcase and a suitcase supported by comically thin legs which suggest movement and human characteristics.



Erwin Wurm, *Dance*, 2021 & *Trip*, 2021. Photo © Jonty Wilde

### Enquiry Questions

- Why do you think Erwin Wurm has given these sculptures legs?
- What do you think Erwin Wurm is trying to say?
- What objects do you own that mean something to you?
- Why do some objects mean more to people than others?
- Do you think fashion is important? Why?

### Activities

- Draw an everyday object and give it human characteristics. What will you add? Arms, legs, eyes, hair?
- Think of a story for your anthropomorphic object. Does it have a name? Where does it live? What does it do and where might it travel to?

## Food and Identity

Wurm also makes sculptures based on traditional Austrian foods, which reference his nation's historic and cultural identity. The gherkin or pickled cucumber features prominently, as do sausages, which reference the wiener hot dog which takes its name from Austria's capital, Vienna. The image below shows three anthropomorphic bronze sausages from Wurm's *Abstract Sculptures* series. Wurm gives them playful human characteristics, which make them appear as though they are dancing, fighting or communicating in some way.

### Enquiry questions

- If Wurm's sausage sculptures could speak, what do you think they would be saying to each other?
- What are your traditional foods of the place you come from? Do you have any family favourites?



Erwin Wurm, *Untitled*, 2018, *Giant Big*, *Me Ideal*, 2014, *Untitled*, 2018. Photo © Jonty Wilde

- If you were to build a sculpture of one of these traditional food items, what would it be and why?
- Are there any traditions or stories linked to these foods?
- What is the relationship between food and identity?

### Activities

- Build a sculpture of your favourite food item and give it human characteristics.
- Display it alongside other sculptures from your class. How will you arrange them? What conversations might they be having?

## Related artworks at YSP



Kalliopi Lemos, *Bag of Aspirations*, 2019.  
Photo © Jonty Wilde

### Kalliopi Lemos: *Bag of Aspirations* (2019) / Camellia House

*Bag of Aspirations* is an enlarged version of an iconic designer handbag. It is made from steel, yet skilfully reflects the folds and creases of worn leather. The work asks us to reflect on the aspirations of consumerism and the desire to own objects of high status. Lemos uses items that are traditionally seen as feminine to consider how women are defined and constrained by society, not only in terms of their appearance, but also their hopes and expectations.

Wurm and Lemos both make work inspired by everyday objects. Their sculptures encourage us to reflect on our daily lives and the world around us. Compare and contrast Wurm's *Trip*, *Dance and Step (Big)* with *Bag of Aspirations*.

What do you notice about how the artists have presented these everyday objects? What materials are they made from? If these sculptures could tell a story, what would it be?



Erwin Wurm, *Step Big*, 2023.  
Photo © Jonty Wilde



Tom Friedman, *Hazmat Love*, 2016. Photo © Jonty Wilde

### Tom Friedman: *Hazmat Love* (2016) / Lower Lake

*Hazmat Love* depicts two figures wearing hazmat suits who might be embracing, wrestling or dancing. The artist, Tom Friedman, uses everyday materials to make playful sculptures, drawings, installations and animations. *Hazmat Love* was first made using oven roasting trays and then cast in stainless steel and polished.

Compare this work to Erwin Wurm's sculptures *Big Disobedience*, *Avatar* or *Big Kastenmann*. What are the similarities and what are the differences? Think about how the figures have been represented. Who might they be? What are the artists trying to tell us?



Erwin Wurm, *Big Disobedience*, 2016. Photo © Jonty Wilde



Erwin Wurm, *Big Kastenmann*, 2012.  
Photo © Jonty Wilde


“You can try and find the sculptural quality of everything. Whether anything comes of it, is another matter. Is there a limit to sculpturality, and if so, where does it lie?”

## Explore Further


Play and experiment with the activities in YSP’s Project Space in the Underground Gallery and make your own *One Minute Sculptures*:




Young people in the Project Space making *One Minute Sculptures*. Photo © Paolina Varbichkova

 To find out more about YSP, explore the resources on our [YouTube channel](#) with your class. Here you will find short videos about the Park which highlight the unique relationship between sculpture and the Yorkshire landscape. There is also a library of videos and artist talks from previous exhibitions which you may find useful.

[Here is a video](#) of Clare Lilley, YSP’s Director, talking to Erwin Wurm about his work. (Please note there is a swear word at 1:30min).

 Explore YSP’s world-class sculpture collection and hear from artists and curators on our digital guide, available to download and use via the [Bloomberg Connects app](#).

 YSP’s IGTV channel on Instagram ([@yspsculpture](#)) contains artist interviews. They reveal fascinating insights into their work, life and reasons for becoming an artist.

We would love to see your class’s creations. Please share using **#YSPSchools**

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All quotations by Erwin Wurm:

P.1 Erwin Wurm, *Performative Sculptures* (Vienna: VfmK Verlag für modern Kunst GmbH, 2017) pg189

P.3 Erwin Wurm, *Wear Me Out* (Antwerp: MiddelheimMuseum, 2011) pg118

P.4 Erwin Wurm, *Performative Sculptures*, pg185

P.6 Erwin Wurm, *Wear Me Out*, pg115

P.9 Erwin Wurm in interview with Tobias Haberl, “Gott sei Dank gibt es noch die dunkle Seite” in: *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, no. 46, 18 Nov.,2016, pg25



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