

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

Peter Fischli David Weiss

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Frey, Patrick. "Friendship is Unstable Equilibrium," *Parkett*. September 1988, pp. 33–39.

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THE ASPEN TIMES

Wade Guyton, Peter Fischli and David Weiss's massive new show is overflowing at the Aspen Art Museum

Andrew Travers

June 24, 2017

Thank goodness that the Aspen Art Museum's new show will be up for five full months. It's going to take a while to find and see everything in it.

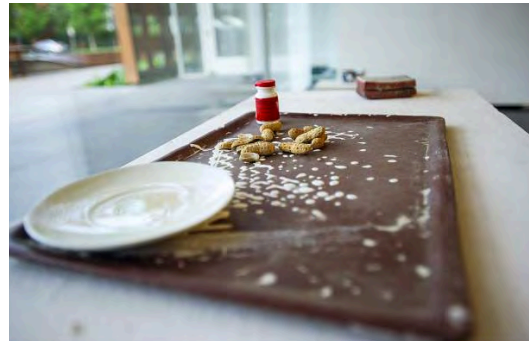
This massive, pervasive, collaborative exhibition of works by Wade Guyton, Peter Fischli and David Weiss fills all five galleries in the museum, spills out onto the "commons" on Spring Street and onto the rooftop. It's taken over the hallways and a basement lobby area.

"We didn't have enough space; we co-opted spaces outside the gallery," Guyton said during a walkthrough of the show on Wednesday. "We were occupying the whole building and pushing beyond the walls and outside and into unused spaces."

The artists — Guyton collaborating with Fischli, following the death of his longtime creative partner Weiss — have even sculpted new holding boxes for exhibition catalogs and taken over the catalogs themselves (the extra-large format glossy, designed by Guyton and Fischli, folds out into a poster of their works that you can take home as a free souvenir; the other side provides a guide to this intricate adventure of a show). Fischli said he liked the idea of visitors fumbling with the cumbersome brochures as they wander the show.

"Everybody that takes it or is walking around, even when it's folded, becomes part of a performance," the Swiss contemporary art legend said with a laugh. "It was something that amused us a lot."

To complicate matters, these trickster artists have created sculptures of walls and placed them throughout the museum, which form new nooks and crannies that are filled with yet more art.



Peter Fischli and David Weiss' *Untitled*. polyurethane and acrylic works at the Aspen Art Museum.

"We realized that if they look like normal museum walls it's much more interesting or also irritating or also questionable," Fischli explained mischievously. "To do something that is highly questionable has always been part of my thinking about artworks."

The new white walls split apart galleries and public spaces in strange new ways. On the second floor, for example, while walking along Fischli/Weiss' "Visible World," a slim, glowing light table showcasing 3,000 scenic photographs, you may hear the sounds of a Drake or Adele song coming from behind a wall. That would be "Radio," a new collaborative audio work played on a small transistor radio that the artists made after a road trip from Aspen to Los Angeles.

Walk into the street level gallery and you may think you've made a wrong turn into an industrial back room of the museum — pedestals here appear to be piled with leftover paint mixing cans, tape, cigarette butts and artist tools. But that's the point. Fischli/Weiss sculpted these utensils and ordinary objects from polyurethane and hand-painted them to look like tossed-off studio detritus. Guyton keeps messing with you in an adjacent gallery, where he has stacked five 7-foot-tall paintings on top of one another and leaned them against a wall, as if they're still waiting to be hung.

The show also will change over the months to come. On the open-air rooftop, Guyton has hung an untitled painting of an "X" on a wall sculpture. Exposed to the elements — rain, sun and surely snow by mid-November — it will deteriorate and may be destroyed.



Aspen Art Museum guests look at Peter Fischli and David Weiss' "Visible World" light table with transparencies at the show opening on Wednesday.



Guests looking at Peter Fischli and David Weiss' "Concrete Landscape" at the Aspen Art Museum.

"As we were bringing walls out of the building to the outdoors, it seemed like one of the walls should bring a painting along with it," Guyton said.

Fischli has also made a new "concrete landscape" for the roof — a messy rectangle of concrete dried in Aspen early this month. Buried inside are unspecified items that he suggested may bloom or change the shape of the piece in the coming months.

Down in the basement, the area normally lined with Shigeru Ban's cardboard benches has been taken over by a series of long, black paintings by Guyton. In the corner of one basement gallery, a Fischli/Weiss turntable is spinning with a beaker sliding around on top of it and a flashlight illuminating its movements (a steampunk mechanical whimsy reminiscent of the iconic Fischli/Weiss film "The Way Things Go," which the museum screened recently).

And in the two main basement galleries, Guyton has three paintings of flames leaning against a wall sculpture and Fischli/Weiss have the slide projection piece "Flowers and Mushrooms" on a far wall. Between them, the Fischli/Weiss puppets "Rat and Bear (Sleeping)" lay on the floor, one looking at the fire and the other at the flowers.



Peter Fischli and David Weiss' "Son et Lumiere [Sound and Light]," 1990, flashlight, turntable, plastic cup, and adhesive tape at the Aspen Art Museum...



Peter Fischli and David Weiss' "Flowers and Mushrooms" digital slide projection at the Aspen Art Museum.

The puppets are breathing creepily. Actually, "Rat and Bear" have motors inside them that mimic the act of breathing. When the museum staff unpacked them, the motors were running extra fast and Fischli joked that Rat and Bear were having trouble breathing in the thin Aspen air.

Spend some time with the show and you end up seeing things differently. When everything in your environment is artwork and nothing is as it seems, your mind bends a bit. Step into the bathroom and you wonder if the water you're washing your hands with is just water or another strange concoction by Guyton, Fischli and Weiss. Order a coffee in the cafe and you suspect you're part of an immersive performance art piece you didn't see in the catalog. It's a powerful experience to have your perspective so jarred by art. It's weird. But it's also wonderful. And it's here through Thanksgiving weekend.

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THE NEW YORKER

CULTURE DESK

THE SNOWMAN AS MODERN ART

By Bob Eckstein June 1, 2017



Although some observers want to interpret Peter Fischli and David Weiss's "Snowman," now on display at the Art Institute of Chicago, as a comment on global warming, this is not the case.

ILLUSTRATION BY BOB ECKSTEIN

Anyone who has been to art school knows the groundbreaking work of the Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss, whose titillating Rube Goldberg-esque videos often wake students from their lecture-room slumber. Recently, Fischli, dressed in all black, stood on the chilly roof of the Art Institute of Chicago along with two museum employees and a snowman. Everyone was smiling—thanks to Fischli, who has been changing the snowman's facial expression daily.

"Snowman" is the museum's newest installation, and it has travelled a long way; it was first displayed at a power plant in Germany, in 1990. After the Chicago exhibit ends, in October, the snowman's journey continues to San Francisco, and then to MOMA, in New York City. It's another delightful example of Fischli and Weiss taking everyday objects and creating something arresting and whimsical. I flew to Chicago to see the installation because I happen to be a snowman expert, the author of "[The History of the Snowman](#)." Snowmen are among humanity's oldest forms of folk art, and some of the greatest artists sculpted with snow, including Michelangelo. More recently, the British artist Gary Hume has followed in the footsteps of Fischli and Weiss by [presenting the snowman as art](#).

Eckstein, Bob. "The Snowman as Modern Art," *The New Yorker*. June 1, 2017.

Framing the snowman as modern art brings the snowman back to its deservedly lofty status, after about a century of degradation in alcohol ads (which I refer to as the “Dean Martin Years”) and in the unfortunate “Frosty the Snowman” movie. Those bland, anodyne cultural moments obscured the snowman’s colorful history of sex and violence, including scandalous happenings like the Miracle of 1511, in Brussels, where snowmen and snowwomen were shaped into politically charged and pornographic scenes, and the Schenectady Massacre of 1690, in which many colonists were killed when nothing but a pair of snowmen were left to guard the gates of Fort Schenectady.

Fischli’s own history with making snowmen is admittedly limited to those encased in life-support refrigerators. He came up with the idea for “Snowman” in conversations with his partner, Weiss (who passed away five years ago), in 1987, and the idea was executed two years later. Fischli explained how the snowman-in-a-box concept works: “A copper snowman is used as a base, and filled with cooler liquid, and the box is filled with humidity and builds out after four or five days.” Basically, the condensed water ices up and makes a snowman.



ILLUSTRATION BY BOB ECKSTEIN

Fischli is quick to point out that although some observers want to present his work as a poster snowman for global warming, this is not the case. “It was a commissioned piece,” he said. “They were looking for a piece for in front of a power plant. We decided it had to be something that was dependent on the power of the power plant. The snowman may be a metaphor for our climate crisis, but it’s running on electricity, so it’s a contradiction, because it’s also contributing to global warming . . . but the piece *is* about taking care of something and protecting it . . . and being dependent on something. Someone else has to take care of him. And the contradiction between artificial and nature, because I’m making snow from a machine.”

Later, during a public lecture at the museum, Fischli was asked if the snowman was melting and if the water outside the box hinted at a malfunction. He replied, "When I first brought him out, there was sun on his belly and I felt sadistic, but that was part of the fun. The puddles of condensation I especially liked . . . that there was an electrical wire running through the puddles." We walked over those wires later, at the rooftop reception, where a large gathering hung out with the snowman, sipping champagne and, like the snowman, slowly froze in the cold air.



ILLUSTRATION BY BOB ECKSTEIN

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Art in America

BACKSTORY



Bice Curiger with Fischli/Weiss's sculpture *Animal*, 1986, at Sonnabend Gallery, New York. Photo Trix Wetter.

Peek-a-Boo

by Bice Curiger

TRIX WETTER, the designer of *Parkett*, took this photo in 1986 at Sonnabend Gallery, when it was still downtown on West Broadway. We were on a trip to New York because *Parkett* had an office there; it was a happy coincidence that Peter and David had a show at the same time. We were incredibly proud that our friends were showing at this prestigious gallery. The sculpture, of a stylized animal made of polyurethane, cloth and a thin coat of gypsum, was hollow: when you look into a hole in its bottom you see the animal's schematic face at the other end. It had this very specific Fischli/Weiss humor.

I met them in the mid-'70s, when I was in my 20s. Peter is a bit younger than me, and David was about two years older. David was doing these big gouache drawings—very poetic, beautiful work. At this time there was a very lively music scene in Zurich; Peter designed record covers and really fantastic fliers for an all-woman band called Kleenex (they eventually became quite successful in London and had to change their name to LiLiPUT).

In 1980, I curated a show about the merging art and music scenes in Zurich and included Fischli/Weiss's first collaborative work, the now famous "Sausage Series." I intended to include *Least Resistance* (1981), their first "Rat and Bear" film, but it wasn't finished in time, so we showed

the "Sausage" photos instead. We also organized an evening with all these punk and new wave bands. That same summer there were riots in Zurich, and the press perceived them as connected to my show, which wasn't true. It was quite an interesting moment—a generational shift. It was a bit shocking for people who had conservative ideas about art and culture. Before Fischli/Weiss, artists had to emigrate in order to have an international career. In the 19th century they went to Munich or Paris, and after the war they went to New York. I think Fischli/Weiss are part of the first generation who didn't have to leave.

I've worked with them on many other occasions over the years: I co-curated (with Lynne Cooke) "Doubletake" at London's Hayward Gallery in 1992, and organized their traveling retrospective in 2006-07 with Vicente Todoli. And I included their work in the Venice Biennale in 2011, when I was the director. The Venice sculptures were the last big pieces the two made together before David died in 2012. But they have a different mood; they're much more melancholic, almost like metaphysical objects. ○

— As told to Leigh Anne Miller

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

"Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better," at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, through Apr. 20.

BICE CURIGER is the artistic director of the Fondation Vincent van Gogh Arles and a co-founder of *Parkett*.

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The New York Times

Fischli and Weiss: Anarchy at the Guggenheim

By RANDY KENNEDY FEB. 2, 2016



The Swiss artist Peter Fischli with “Haus,” a riff on functional buildings, outside the Guggenheim, the home of a retrospective of his work with David Weiss. Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

In the art of the 20th century, comedy was tough to come by. Marcel Duchamp and his urinal were the original stand-up act, and Magritte was good for some laughs. But a long, dry stretch followed, through Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, lightened up in the 1960s only by oddball wits like Ray Johnson and Lee Lozano.

The Swiss duo of Peter Fischli and David Weiss, who began at the end of the 20th century, have been the Nichols and May of contemporary art, using humor to pry into some very serious aspects of the human condition, in a deeply admired body of work in film, photography and sculpture that, as Mr. Fischli describes it, “was never afraid of the stupid joke, the joke that’s so bad it’s *embarrassing*.” In 2012, their partnership came to an untimely end with Mr. Weiss’s death from cancer, at 65. But in the last months of his life, he and Mr. Fischli had begun planning an American retrospective. [“How to Work Better,” with its opening on Friday, Feb. 5,](#) at the Guggenheim Museum, is the first New York survey of their highly influential career and an exhibition that keeps the pair’s anarchic vaudeville routine romping across the stage for another round.



Peter Fischli, left, and David Weiss with their "Large Vase," from around 1986.
Jason Klimatsas/Fischli Weiss Archive, Zurich

On a recent snowy, Swiss-like morning, Mr. Fischli, 63, who had traveled from Zurich to oversee the installation, looked admiringly down the Guggenheim's sloping ramps as dozens of carpenters prepared plinths and pedestals and cabinets. It was the first time he had seen his and Mr. Weiss's life work arrayed in such a setting — in much other than basic white-cube galleries — and he said he thought the metaphor of decline suited it perfectly. "There's a phrase in German — *schiefe Ebene* — which you kind of use to mean things going downhill," Mr. Weiss said, taking a pen to spell the words in a reporter's notebook. "And I think about this image of 30 years of art rolling down the hill. And I think, in this case, maybe it's a good thing!"

From the beginning the work of Fischli/Weiss (pronounced Veiss), who paired up amid a stew of leftist politics and punk-rock bands in late 1970s Zurich, was about heroic failure, depicting a relentlessly hopeful industriousness that everyone but the protagonists of their work plainly realizes is doomed. Or meaningless from the word go. And yet it goes on, a failure more deeply human, in the Fischli/Weiss worldview, than conventional success. The work springs from what the two men once called a kind of perverse post-Enlightenment desire, particularly European, "to attempt the encyclopedic and at the same time run it aground."

Their most famous piece — one of the rare art films of the last several decades to jump the rails of the gallery world and gain renown with audiences who have no idea where it came from — is "The Way Things Go" from 1987, a 30-minute, 16-millimeter chronicle of the workings of a stupendous Rube Goldberg device fashioned from the detritus of their studio. It is as fun to watch as an episode of "TV's Bloopers and Practical Jokes." And yet the way it collapses much of the history of 20th-century sculpture and Conceptualism into a delirious fun house has also made it a critics' darling. (Arthur Danto, the philosopher and art historian, called it a "postmodern classic," one that does nothing but seems to "touch on waste, violence, pollution, exhaustion and despair.")

At times, in fact, the film has been so popular it has threatened to stand in for their whole career, especially in the United States, where the last survey of their work was held in 1996, at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, a show that traveled, but not to New York. And so the Guggenheim show, through April 27, will introduce a new generation of viewers to the sweep of their partnership, which Mr. Fischli, in a recent interview at the museum, said grew out of the two men's loping, looping conversations over cigarettes and beer. "Right from the beginning," he said, "it was very clear to us that we shared a mentality."

That mentality chimes strongly now with younger artists, who often turn to humor as the best way to reflect the deeply ambivalent role of the artist in the 21st century. "No question was too extraordinary or too banal" for the pair, Nancy Spector, the Guggenheim's chief curator, writes in the show's catalog. Ms. Spector, who organized the retrospective with Nat Trotman, the museum's curator of performance and media, adds: "Fischli and Weiss's work casts doubt but also invites wonderment, that rare state that only great art can incite."

The friendship that would lead to one of the more successful pairings in postwar art began inauspiciously, almost provisionally. The two formed a band named after a supermarket chain and began making fliers for it. Then, on a whim, they made their first official work, "Sausage Series," a group of photographs created by holing up in Mr. Weiss's apartment and arranging what was at hand — food (cold cuts, pickles, salad greens) and basic household items into little scenes: a fashion show, a traffic accident, a futuristic city, the sinking of the Titanic. "Yes, maybe it all comes out of boredom," Mr. Weiss once deadpanned to an interviewer. "Others might say, perhaps, more from ambition."

There was no real plan to work together again. But Mr. Weiss ended up in Los Angeles, and when Mr. Fischli went for a visit in 1979, they began planning a movie, centered on a pair of shabby animal costumes — a rat and a panda bear — that Mr. Weiss had spotted in a film-industry costume supply store, entry to which the men gained by lying about being movie directors.

The resulting film, "The Least Resistance," with bad sound and a faded Super-8 palette, looks like a home movie made under the influence of a stupendous amount of marijuana. But like all Fischli/Weiss works, it functions slyly on several levels, and it prefigured much of the work to come later, often based on a kind of sprung dialectic. The rat and the bear are opposites: One is repugnant, the other adorable; one so common as to be a plague, the other endangered; one an evolutionary winner, the other poorly suited to survival in the wild. In the film, the pair wander around sunny Los Angeles trying to make it rich in the art world and failing, but in the process giving most of modernism's hapless twosomes — Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet; Beckett's Didi and Gogo; George Herriman's Krazy Kat and Ignatz Mouse — a run for their money.

Ms. Spector described Rat and Bear as a kind of alter-ego template that guided Mr. Fischli and Mr. Weiss through their career. "I think with the dynamic of two people it's often: 'Can we do this crazy thing? Why don't we try it?'" she said. "I always imagined there was a lot of laughter and a lot of talking and scheming together."



A still from Fischli and Weiss's short film "The Least Resistance." Peter Fischli and David Weiss

With Mr. Weiss not present to help guide the Guggenheim show, she said, she designed the catalog in the form of an oral history that actively brings in his voice, from correspondence and interviews, to create the feeling that he remains in the conversation that he and Mr. Fischli maintained for so long. "Peter is someone who clearly works through dialogue and conversation," she added, "and in a sense Nat and I are filling in to play that role here."



From the series "Rock on Top of Another Rock."
Peter Fischli and David Weiss, via
Jason Klimatsas/Fischli Weiss
Archive, Zurich

Mr. Fischli, who appears in one early photograph of the pair sporting a cowboy hat, a cigarette and a smirk, comes off in his 60s as a bemused philosophy professor, with gray hair, stylish black glasses and an easy laugh. While he and Mr. Weiss were each married and had separate

lives (at the time of his death, Mr. Weiss was divorced and he left behind two children) the two probably spent as much time around each other as a married couple would.

Since Mr. Weiss's death, Mr. Fischli said, he has tried as an artist mostly to "do things that don't feel artificial or unnatural," despite the great sense of absence in his life. "It's biography," he said simply, without elaborating, of that absence, "and you can't get away from it."

He has continued to work on pieces that were underway at Mr. Weiss's death. And he has followed through on a plan they conceived together, to place one of their stranger public works, "Haus" — an overgrown model of the plainest modernist office building imaginable, once installed near a train station in Münster, Germany — on Fifth Avenue, alongside the magisterial Guggenheim, during the run of the retrospective. "Haus," from 1987, was the artists' riff on modernism's tepid, rational end, a structure so functional as to be nearly invisible, evoking what they described as "Central European sadness."

To place the model, which seems just too big to be a model and just too small to be an actual building, in front of the Guggenheim, seemed a perfect, life-size pairing of odd fellows that would stop confused pedestrians in their tracks, Mr. Fischli said. (Through May 1, the Public Art Fund will also stage, at Houston and Mott Streets, the first United States presentation of a six-story wall mural, "How to Work Better," a 10-point motivational list the artists once found on a bulletin board in a factory in Thailand, with trite yet effective advice: "Accept Change as Inevitable"; "Say It Simple"; "Smile.")



"How to Work Better" (1991)
by Peter Fischli and David Weiss.

Peter Fischli and David Weiss,
Fischli Weiss Archive

With such works, as with most from their career, Mr. Fischli said, there is always the danger that people see only a joke and don't think much further. Roberta Smith, [describing their work](#) in The New York Times at Mr. Weiss's death, alluded to the risk, writing that "the neutrality and sweetness of their art was in many ways typically Swiss: It tended to approach the macrocosmic quietly, through innocuous accumulations of the microcosmic." But it was a risk the two took repeatedly, along with some other Swiss and German artists of their generation, like Martin Kippenberger, pushing back against the sacerdotal seriousness of older postwar artists, particularly [Joseph Beuys](#).

"We knew people enjoyed some of our work, and at the same time we suspected that they didn't take us seriously," Mr. Fischli said. "But we had a strong sense of what we were doing. And what was interesting for us was something that was loaded with ambiguity. Irony, after all, is interesting only if you don't know if it's meant ironically."



"Peter on His Way Home After His First Day at School" from the "Suddenly This Overview" sculpture series. Peter Fischli and David Weiss, via Jason Klimatsas/Fischli Weiss Archive, Zurich

During installation recently, workers were busy erecting dozens of narrow white plinths, to accommodate another of the pair's most beloved works, "Suddenly This Overview," a series made over 30 years of humble, unfired clay sculptures depicting, in encyclopedic fashion, hundreds of scenes from history and culture, both significant ("The First Potatoes Arrive in Europe") and mundanely silly ("[Mr. and Mrs. Einstein Shortly After the Conception of Their Son, the Genius Albert.](#)")

Mr. Fischli wandered along the plinths as through a kind of minimalist forest, checking the locations of the countless tiny sculptures to make sure they came together in just the right way — in other words, in a way that should be a little wrong.

"There are good neighborhoods and bad neighborhoods that they can get into, you see," he explained. "The bad neighborhoods are where they go and try to create too much meaning. Very sneaky! You always have to be on guard."



Mr. Fischli outside the Guggenheim. "How to Work Better" runs through April 27.
Philip Greenberg for The New York Times

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The New York Times



PHILIP GREENBERG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better Above, one of more than 300 sculptures, photographs, slide projections and videos at the Guggenheim.

Playfully Poking Pieties

In his classic tome “Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture,” the Dutch historian Johan

**KEN
JOHNSON**

**ART
REVIEW**

Huizinga declared that “genuine, pure play is one of the main bases of civilization.” If that’s true, then the art-making team of Fischli and Weiss — Peter Fischli (born in 1952) and David Weiss (1946–2012) — have been among the contemporary world’s eminently civilizing influences. Few other artists have been

more infectiously playful than this Swiss duo, as visitors to the Guggenheim Museum will be delighted to find in “Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better.”

Organized by Nancy Spector, the museum’s chief curator, and Nat Trotman, its curator of performance and media, in collaboration with Mr. Fischli, the show presents more than 300 sculptures, photographs, slide projections and videos. This marvelously entertaining exhibition

Continued on Page 26

Playfully Poking Holes in High-Culture Pieties

From Weekend Page 21

demonstrates the power of creative fooling around to invigorate and free hearts and minds.

Fischli and Weiss's ludic spirit emerged fully formed with their first collaboration, in Zurich in 1979, in a series of photographs of doll-scale tableaux — a car accident, a fashion show, a rug store — made mostly from bologna, knackwurst, salami and other processed meats.

At that point Mr. Fischli and Mr. Weiss didn't consider themselves a team. But the refreshing irreverence toward calcified pieties of high art and culture that would drive all their subsequent efforts was succinctly embodied in these sweetly comical and deceptively unassuming pictures.

Meeting up again, in Los Angeles in 1980, the artists gave their antiheroic impulses expression in a 45-minute movie starring two anthropomorphic animals, Rat and Bear, played by the artists wearing frowzy, whole-body costumes rented from a Hollywood costume shop. Shot in Super 8, "The Least Resistance" (1980-81) is a hoot, a picaresque tale about a couple of lazy, irritable, scheming, self-deluding lowlifes. They drive around through city and countryside, visit an art gallery, walk in nature and lounge around a pool. Along the way, they squabble over minor differences and pontificate philosophically in gravelly German. At one point, Rat experiences vividly colorful psychedelic hallucinations. Later, he writes on a typewriter, "Beauty is not always true, and truth is not always beautiful, unfortunately."

A second film, "The Right Way"



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILIP GREENBERG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

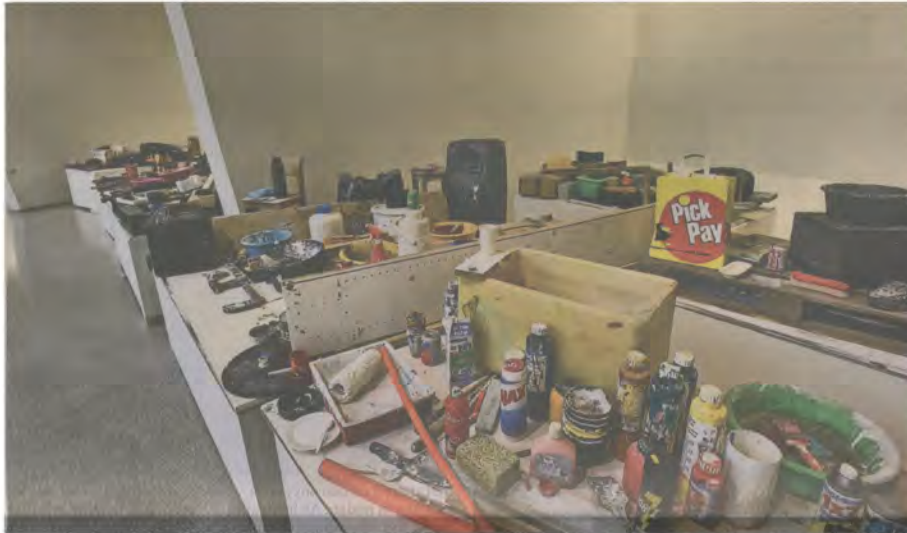


(1983), came two years later in Switzerland. In this movie, Rat and Bear wander through bucolic landscapes, into the depths of a cavern and over a glacier in the Swiss Alps, arguing and holding forth on high-minded topics.

The Fischli and Weiss partnership was further solidified when they were invited by a Zurich gallery to fill in for an artist who had dropped out of a scheduled show. Given six weeks to come up with something, the artists embarked on an absurdly ambitious project: to represent in small, clay sculptures all of world knowledge and history as they understood and imagined it. At deadline, they delivered about 180 works in gray, unfired clay, each a small, more-or-less crude rendering of an idea or a historical or imaginary event. "Repetition and Difference," presents two lumpy, smiling figures in hats who are similar but not exactly, as one is bigger than the other. "Down and Out" has Mickey Mouse with a liquor bottle lying drunk on a sidewalk. "The First Potatoes Arrive in Europe" consists of 10 finely rendered tubers and a bowl.

In ensuing years, Fischli and Weiss added to the series, titled "Suddenly an Overview," eventually producing about 600 pieces. The show presents over 160. Titles convey the series' goofy flavor: "Jesus Walks on Water, the Fishes are Amazed"; "Seven Aliens Marvel and

"Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better" runs through April 20 at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue at 89th Street, (212) 423-3500, guggenheim.org.



Above, a wide view of the show "Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better" at the Guggenheim. From left, "Car" (1986-87) and "Untitled" (1994-2013).

detail, they seem to hover between actual reality and virtual reality.

Fischli and Weiss extended their shared preoccupation with modern mundanity into travel photography. While flying around the world, they took thousands of pictures of generically lovely landscapes and, taking a page from Ed Ruscha's "Thirty-Four Parking Lots in Los Angeles" (1967), anonymous scenes in airports. In the Guggenheim exhibition their photographs are presented as mesmerizing slide shows on flat screens.

Complementing the travel photography are half-life-size sculptures of airline stewardesses and boxy cars. Rendered in white plaster, they have a chilly, spectral presence, archetypes of modern anonymity. The artists' grandest realization of this theme now stands on the plaza in front of the Guggenheim. Called "Haus" (1987), it's a lovingly detailed, one-fifth-scale model of an office building with greenish glass windows, concrete walls and metal framing. Verging on Magrittean Surrealism, it's a monument to modern architectural banality.

During the last four years of their partnership, Fischli and Weiss took a Minimalist turn, creating extremely simple sculptures in unfired clay and cast black rubber in the forms of tubes, three-sided corners and slabs. Installed in the museum's gallery just off the ramp near the ground floor, they are surprisingly elegant, and, considering Mr. Weiss's recent death, they cast a touching funeral spell. The mood is enhanced by a wall projection of a camera's view of traveling endlessly through a tubular space — in fact, robotically videotaped views of the Zurich sewer system that the artists acquired from city authorities. Despite its lowly source, the film is hauntingly beautiful, a cosmic journey to the ends of the universe.

Stonehenge"; and "Mick Jagger and Brian Jones Going Home Satisfied After Composing 'I Can't Get No Satisfaction.'"

In 1984, the pair went back to the kitchen, where, as they did with their meat pictures, they gathered knives, forks, spoons, cooking utensils and other implements found in the home and used them to build precariously balanced constructions. Examples in the exhibition play wittily on Cubist sculpture and formalist photography of the early 20th century. These led to Fischli and Weiss's masterpiece, their riveting, justly famous 30-minute film "The Way Things Go" (1987).

The movie presents close-up views of an apparently continuous series of chain reactions of a Rube Goldberg-type machine of indeterminate length consisting of countless ordinary objects. At the start, a suspended, revolving stuffed garbage bag nudges a tire, which rolls into an unstable construction of lumber and hardware, causing it to collapse as the tire rolls on into an-

other assemblage that also falls apart, setting off further causes and effects. Fire, explosives, spilling water, flammable liquids, foaming chemicals and deflating balloons combine with gravity to keep the action going. It's enthralling and curiously suspenseful to see what happens from moment to moment. While the film looks as if it was made in one long take, in fact it is the result of artful editing of many different, separately shot parts, and it took two years to produce.

Around the same time, these artists also began carving and painting realistic sculptures of mundane objects from polyurethane foam. They organized scores of them — including a skull, a small cannon, an oil drum, a life preserver and a pink sow suckling piglets — on a platform of fake wood planks and called it "The Raft" (1982). Installed in the museum's topmost tower gallery, it's surrounded by swimming crocodiles, making it a darkly comic allegory of a world on the brink of — or after — apocalypse.

The artists cast in black rubber objects like a dog's dish, a leather ottoman, several different cabinets, an enormous tree root and "Men's Items" (1986-87), which represents an electric shaver and lotion bottles. Thus, the defamiliarization of the overly familiar.

From the 1990s on, following the lead of Jasper Johns's famous trompe l'oeil painted bronze sculpture "Savarin Can With Brushes" (1960), Fischli and Weiss concentrated on replicating in painted polyurethane foam all the kinds of objects populating their studio: paint buckets, shopping bags, cassette tapes, bottles of all sorts, electric tools, tables, chairs, pedestals and much more. For gallery exhibitions they installed these in such a way that visitors might think an installation was underway, as I thought when I peeked into a show at Sonnabend Gallery in the early '90s. In the present exhibition, these works are arranged into different installations, some of which consist of hundreds of objects on and under tables and pedestals. Fascinating to peruse in

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Art in America

THE INDISCREET CHARM OF FISCHLI AND WEISS

In a New York retrospective, the Swiss artist team alternately indulges and challenges audiences with their videos, photos and sculptures.

by Nancy Princenthal

Peter Fischli
David Weiss:
Outlaws, 1984,
chromogenic print,
11¼ by 9½ inches,
from the series
“Equilibres (A
Quiet Afternoon).”
Jumex Collection,
Mexico City.

All images
courtesy Fischli
Weiss Archive,
Zurich.

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
“Peter Fischli David
Weiss: How to
Work Better,” at
the Guggenheim
Museum, New York,
through Apr. 27.

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Martin: Her Life
and Art* (2015). See
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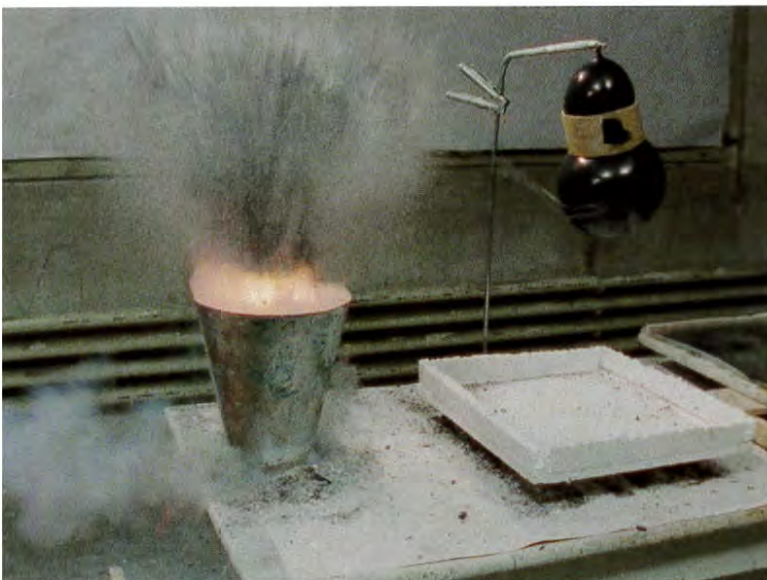
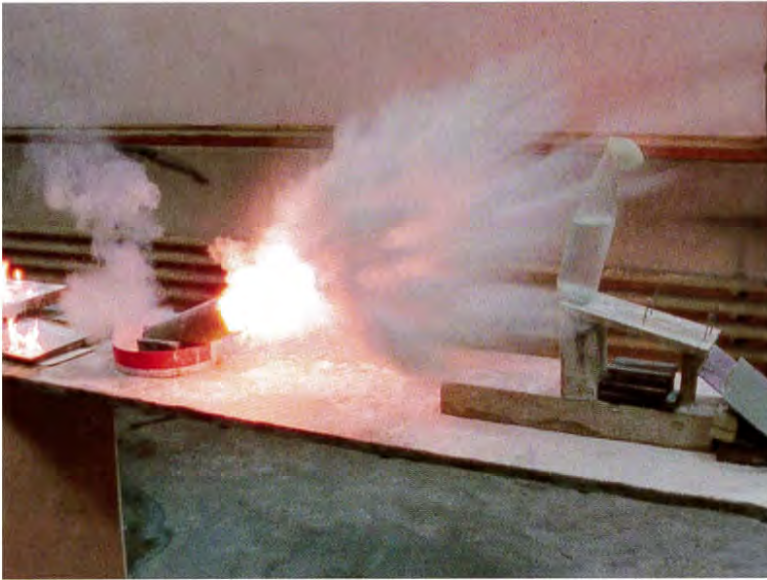
REPETITION AND DIFFERENCE is a small, unfired-clay sculpture of two smiling, cartoonish, bowler-hatted figures, not quite identical and irresistibly charming. It is among 600 similarly appealing sculptures in Peter Fischli and David Weiss’s series “Suddenly This Overview” (1981-ongoing), 150 of which can be seen in the current survey of the Swiss duo’s work at New York’s Guggenheim Museum, organized by curators Nancy Spector and Nat Trotman in association with Fischli. There is also *Popular Vision of Fear*, featuring a clay airplane nosing down into clay waves, and *The First Fish Decides to Go Ashore* (it and its trailing mates are grinning madly). *Cassius Clay after His Fight with Joe Frazier* is a mangled, blocky mess; *Japanese Rock Garden* is neatly combed.

All crude but exceedingly deft, and most extremely funny, they are installed with gregarious profusion on pedestals and walls along the ramp in this generous show, which contains happy surprises for even the most diligent art viewers.

Collaborators for more than three decades, Fischli and Weiss produced work in a now fashionably broad range of disciplines, including film, video, photography, sculpture (using a variety of materials as well as found objects), artists’ books, drawings, installations and public works sited outdoors. The clay sculptures, which Fischli continues to make—Weiss died of cancer in 2012—introduce many aspects of their joint artistic character, distinguished by modesty and humor in the service of exploring big ideas; a prodigious capacity for hard



Princenthal, Nancy. "The Indiscreet Charm of Fischli and Weiss," *Art in America*. April 2016, pp. 66–75.



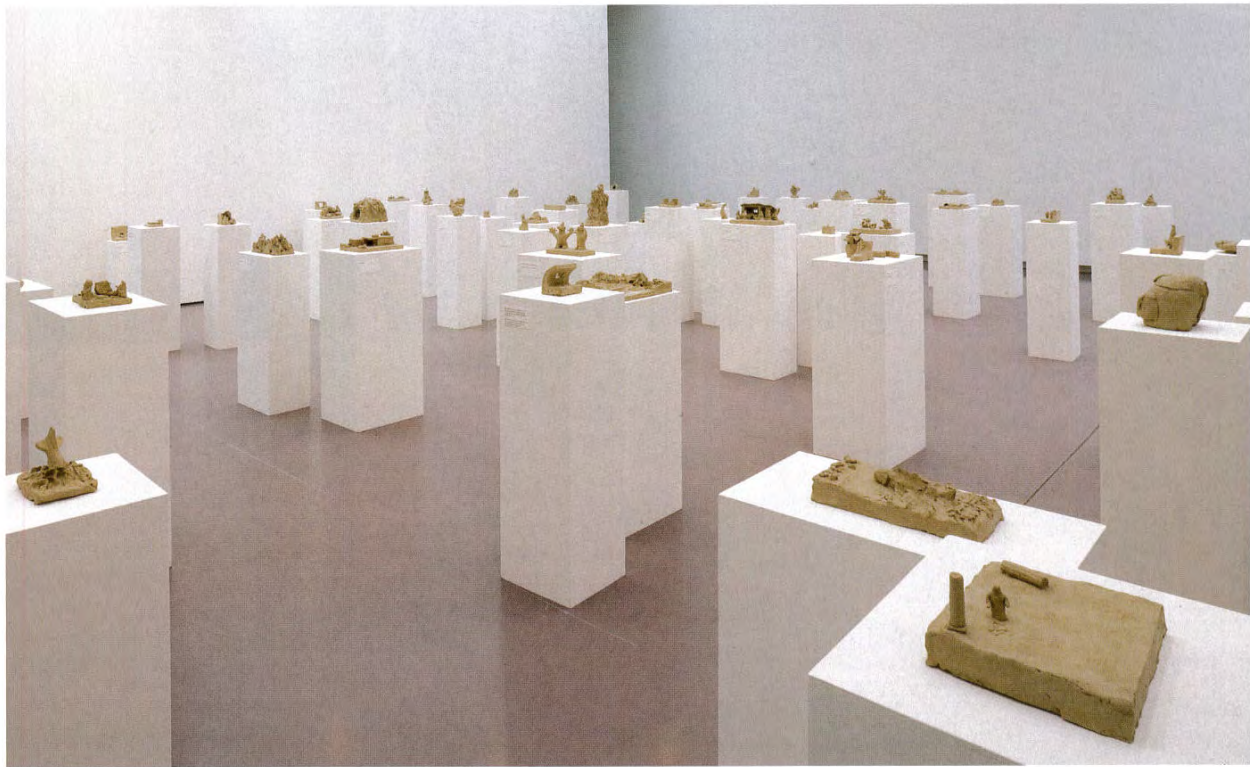
work, often under the guise of goofing off; comfort with the quotidian; and a very sharp sense of how best to bring high and low art into fruitful collision. Their artistic collaboration began with the “Sausage Series” (1979), a fooling-around kind of project in which they arranged household objects and food into tableaux they documented in 10 slightly funky color photographs. Pickles go shopping for carpets made of sliced salami; Alps, fashioned from rumpled pillows and bed sheets, are cast in a sunset-red glow; sausage links on wheels collide as cigarette butts stand around watching.

Soon thereafter, the artists acted out such comically improvisational tales themselves, making two movies in which they appear as characters identified, and costumed with endearing cheesiness, as Rat and Bear. Shot in Los Angeles, *The Least Resistance* (1980-81, 29 minutes) is a patchwork of genres, showing the companionably grumpy pair conversing about art, money and metaphysics; visiting a gallery; and solving a murder (after robbing the corpse). The second film, *The Right Way* (1983, 55 minutes), takes the protagonists to the majestic Swiss countryside, where their joint escapades, squabbles and gruff reconciliations resume. Neither movie benefits from summary, but together they block out the artists’ ongoing concern with banality and sublimity, while also charting a collaborative style of productively argumentative amity.

Though the personas of Rat and Bear suggest slightly crotchety, middle-aged men, neither artist was much past 30 when shooting began. Weiss was born to a Protestant pastor in Zurich in 1946, and attended art school there and in Basel. His travels took him to San Francisco in 1967; he returned to California 12 years later, this time choosing Los Angeles and finding work as a set director for a *Halloween*-style horror film titled *The Boogey Man*. Fischli met Weiss, six years years his senior, in 1977 in his hometown, Zurich (after Fischli returned from Italy, where he, too, studied art). Following their first collaboration, he joined Weiss in L.A. in 1980. They returned to Zurich shortly after completing *The Least Resistance*.

Both men had developed under the prevailing influence of Bauhaus training, which Fischli’s father, an architect and sculptor, had received before them. Of course, other influences were at hand, not least the heritage of Dada, a movement born in Zurich in 1916. Among Fischli and Weiss’s compatriots are Markus Raetz, a sculptor and painter of similarly devilish whimsy, and Jean Tinguely—although, as Arthur Danto notes, Tinguely’s 1960 self-destructing *Homage to New York* went haywire, while in even the most jerry-built of Fischli and Weiss’s work things seem to run like a good Swiss watch.¹ Formative as well was “Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form,” the exhibition, organized by Harald Szeemann, at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1969 that introduced Post-Minimalism and Conceptualism to Switzerland.

In any case, it is fair to say that nothing could be further from Fischli and Weiss’s purposes than the idealism of the Bauhaus, with its belief in the seamless identity of form, functionality and refined taste. “[Swiss art historian and curator] Jean-Christophe Ammann once said, ‘Art begins where good taste ends,’” Weiss noted approvingly in a 2013 interview. To which



View of the installation "Suddenly This Overview," 1981-ongoing, approx. 600 unfired clay sculptures, dimensions variable, at Kunsthaus Zürich, 2007.



Repetition and Difference (from "Suddenly This Overview"), unfired clay, 7 by 6¾ by 10¼ inches. Private collection. Photo Jason Klimatsas.

Opposite, three stills from *The Way Things Go*, 1987, 16mm film transferred to video, 30 minutes.

The Least Resistance,
1980–81, Super 8
film transferred to
video, 29 minutes.



Fischli added, “Are you sure? Didn’t he mean ‘Art stops where good taste commences?’”² A fine illustration of their screwball dialectics, the exchange also neatly stakes their turf.

Though Fischli and Weiss remade the domain beyond good taste as their own, its boundaries were established at the height of the Bauhaus’s prestige, when Clement Greenberg denounced a newly ascendant form he called kitsch. Condemning this form of popular art with a barrage of epithets—academic, formulaic, lazy, deceptive—Greenberg concluded that kitsch was no less than a tool of totalitarianism.³ For Susan Sontag, writing in the less gloomy mid-’60s, the aestheticism of kitsch—or, in her uppcased and sexualized term, Camp—like its sentimental relation to the past and its political disengagement, was a quality to be celebrated. Endorsing its ironic embrace of such laughably lowbrow artifacts as Tiffany lamps, *Swan Lake* and King Kong, Sontag claims, “The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious.” And then, as if to apologize for her snootiness, “Camp is a *tender* feeling.”⁴

Unserious but tender: it is a good pair of adjectives for Fischli and Weiss’s work, particularly if both terms are taken with a touch of campy skepticism. They are surely apt for the much beloved *The Way Things Go* (1987). This utterly irresistible, half-hour-long film presents an apparently

seamless chain reaction (there are in fact around 25 unobtrusive cuts), involving household, studio and garage objects exploding, deflating, tumbling, dripping, wobbling and rolling, each effect becoming a cause in turn. Some actions are drawn out—as in the water that slowly fills a bucket until it floats a can on which is balanced a chair that, when tipped, sets off another slow reaction—and others blindingly fast. With its dramatic cliff-hangers and reliably satisfying resolutions, *The Way Things Go* enlists the innocent joy of discovering hidden life in ordinary objects—children know it well—and incidentally helps uncover the playfulness in some of late modernism’s more ponderous art: Smithson’s asphalt rundown, Serra’s prop pieces and Barry Le Va’s shatter scatter are, in this light, variations on the theme of encouraging non-art materials and physical processes to do their own things.

In a book-length essay on *The Way Things Go*, artist and critic Jeremy Millar argues for the relevance to the film’s antics of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of laughter as a subversive force, upending hierarchies. “Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides,”⁵ Bakhtin wrote, suggesting that the risible is not far from the erotic. Along with implying that both qualities



Haus, 1987, aluminum, safety glass and paint, approx. 11½ by 19 by 13½ feet, installed outside the Guggenheim Museum, New York. Courtesy Maja Hoffmann/LUMA Foundation, Zurich. Photo David Heald.

have important roles in Fischli and Weiss's video, Millar suggests that the artists share this sense of the ribald with Duchamp.⁶ His *Large Glass*, with its crypto-sexual chocolate grinder and mysterious mechanical figures, exemplifies, too, a love of household implements that Fischli and Weiss also share, as witnessed by their relish for things that go without having to be plugged in.

THE WAY THINGS GO was not Fischli and Weiss's first experiment with staging precariousness. A series of photographs called "Equilibres (A Quiet Afternoon)," 1984-86, documents the fleeting balancing acts of domestic items—utensils, bottles, vegetables, tires—that have been tied, wedged and pinned into unsteady assemblages. Pairing visual and material thrift with extravagant absurdity, the "Equilibres" translate fugitive moments into enduring images. And as with much of Fischli and Weiss's work, they ramify by accumulation.

Similarly cumulative, the "Grey Sculptures" (1984-86, 2006-08) are painted polyurethane works that range from nightmarishly large to dreamily small: on the one hand, a giant grayish-green bean, a conduit-size macaroni tube and a monstrous egg; on the other, a shrunken factory. All are featureless, as is also true of the many nondescript plaster pieces

in the series "Cars" and "Hostesses" (both 1988-89). The cars are too big for toys, too small for realism, and the hostesses are a stunted army of poker-faced attendants. Life-size but no less uncanny is a group of black "Rubber Sculptures" (1986-90, 2005-06) made by casting existing objects. Some casts have near-Minimalist forms, as in the looming plinths created from a large cabinet and a closet, or the more intimate geometry of a silverware divider. By contrast, the casts of a couple of plant and tree roots result in sculptures that simulate unchecked expressionistic abandon.

The artists' final collaborative work, "Walls, Corners, Tubes" (2009-12), comprises both cast rubber and molded unfired clay; here the resulting plinths, planks and cylinders seem less narrative than conceptual, and bring Rachel Whiteread and early Bruce Nauman to mind. Scale, strikingly indeterminate in these works, is also at center stage in the impeccably style-free *Haus* (1987), an aluminum-and-glass office building at the unaccountably disorienting dimensions of one-fifth actual size. Positioned outside the entrance to the Guggenheim, it enters into active—and, Fischli emphasizes, deliberate⁷—dialogue with the iconic Frank Lloyd Wright building, *Haus's* intransigent formal muteness speaking banality to power. Passive aggression is seldom this beguiling.

Following spread, view of the exhibition "Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better," showing (on wall) *Kanalvideo*, 1992, video, and "Walls, Corners, Tubes," 2009-12, rubber and unfired clay. Photo David Heald.



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Shown in the same gallery as “Walls, Corners, Tubes” is *Kanalvideo* (1992), made from footage shot in a Zurich sewer. While echoing the brutally simple geometry of the sculptures, it also suggests a solar eclipse approached by satellite at dizzying speed. Taking a more explicitly God’s-eye view is “Visible World” (1986–2012), a 2,400-image collection of photographs undertaken, the artists say, to survey—without help from the Internet—the planet’s scenic spots. Having also appeared in artists’ books and as transparencies displayed on light boxes, the colorful, professional-looking and generically appealing images of international sites both exalted and mundane are sampled here in three video slide shows, with slow dissolves from one image to the next. The series “Airports” (1987–2012), presented in the same manner, ably conveys the globally identical, reliably narcotic experience of being in an airport. But perhaps the artists’ most pleasantly numbing photographic project is the untitled 96-hour video installation made for the 1995 Venice Biennale. Divided among 12 monitors, it presents footage of Swiss industry, farming, recreation and landscape.

Referring to this installation, Weiss said—much as he had of “Suddenly This Overview”—“we like to flood our viewers with impressions, with information.” To which Fischli added, “in most of our pieces, time is a very important aspect: the time you spend doing something.”⁸ And in reference to a photographic series of rather hyperbolically gorgeous flowers (not shown at the Guggenheim), Fischli further explained that the nature of their seduction involves a hint of coercion: “It does matter that firstly we ourselves, as the authors of these works, feel captured,” he said. “This certainly happens with the viewer as well. For a moment, at the beginning, he’s a victim.”⁹

By suggesting that he and Weiss were after something between captivation and kidnapping, Fischli alerts us to the complications that season their work’s many pleasures. In the exhibition catalogue, Nancy Spector puts the onus on viewers, writing, “Fischli and Weiss offer us, their audience, the chance to misuse time.”¹⁰ The invitation, which encourages exploration of the relationship between industry and indolence, puts the artists in good company. In the catalogue for the 2003 group exhibition titled “Work Ethic,” Helen Molesworth writes, “one unifying principle of the extraordinarily heterogeneous field of post-World War II avant-garde art was a concern with the problematic of artistic labor.”¹¹ Indeed the title of the Guggenheim survey is “How to Work Better”; it derives from a public billboard piece of 1991 (first shown in Zurich and appearing through May 1 on Houston Street in downtown Manhattan) that borrows its text from a list of instructions the artists found pinned up in a Thai pottery factory. Its 10 precepts include, “DO ONE THING AT A TIME,” “DISTINGUISH SENSE FROM NONSENSE” (this, Fischli says, is the hardest one to abide by¹²), “BE CALM” and “SMILE.”

By most measures, Fischli and Weiss’s own work ethic has been formidable. While the archive is a popular trope—On Kawara, Joachim Schmid and Gerhard Richter are only a few of the many artists who have assembled found photographs—Fischli and Weiss are unusual in having produced the contents of their collections from scratch.

Ultimately, they exercise us too, encouraging exploration of the merits of firsthand viewing (theirs) in a world where little remains untouched by the camera’s eye.

THE INSTALLATION AT the Guggenheim is arranged neither chronologically nor by medium; instead, its more than 300 pieces are deployed with the nonlinear, cumulative logic of the duo’s work. The exhibition begins, in the lobby, with slightly under-human-size stuffed-cloth rat and bear figures lying asleep on their backs, as if exhausted by putting the show together. Nearly imperceptibly, their stomachs rise and fall; the effect is unreasonably moving.

In the topmost ring of the rotunda, we see what look like several roped-off bays containing beat-up display pedestals, drywall and construction tools, in increasingly attenuated arrays; they are in fact trompe l’oeil sculptures. Behind one metal rope is an upholstered chair, and beside it an overturned pedestal sheltering child-size boots and a goofy figure resembling one of the bowler-hatted men in *Repetition and Difference*. A pair of adult-size penny loafers, well-worn and paint-spattered, appears in the final bay. These convincingly illusionistic pieces—from a body of work (1991–ongoing) that shows the artists putting Weiss’s Hollywood prop-making skills to good use—are made of carved and painted polyurethane. Weiss said, of another series of similarly hyperrealistic works, “For me the main focus with the objects is that you ‘see something’ that you also know is not there. Of course, it is there, but the chair is not a chair, the table is not a table.”¹³ Even without ascribing such ghostliness to the polyurethane sculptures, these bookended works—Rat and Bear asleep, empty shoes—combine to create a muffled sense of elegy.

Fischli and Weiss’s work as a whole argues strongly against such emotionally tidy readings. But a kind of two-part coda in the museum’s last, darkened tower gallery undermines the mood only a little. “Question Projections” (2000–03) consists of projected queries, some big and some small, that drift multilingually across the wall: “Should I pay more attention to my feelings?” “Did something go wrong shortly after the big bang?” “Should I get drunk?” “Has the last bus gone?” The final installation is the painted-polyurethane *The Raft* (1982). A vision drawn from Gericault by way of Disneyland, it’s jammed with incompatible things: a sow on her side suckling a litter of piglets, a pair of red ladies’ pumps, an engine, a life preserver, a gun. On the floor around the planks that make up the raft are low dark blobs that, on further consideration, become the tops of hippos and toothy crocodiles, just breaking the water’s surface. The sharks are circling, these final rooms seem to say. The questions remain unanswered; the work—in Fischli’s own account of *The Raft*’s placement at the exhibition’s conclusion—is drifting away.¹⁴

Collaborations, like archives, represent ideas and experiences arising between and not within single entities. Fischli and Weiss’s relationship was not romantic (each was married to a woman), but they flirted with the idea of flirtation from the beginning. (*The Least Resistance* and *The Right Way* are nothing if not buddy movies.) That the flame, as it were, never



The Raft, 1982, painted polyurethane, dimensions variable. Photo David Heald.

goes out in *The Way Things Go*—the metaphorical torch is carried from object to object and, implicitly, hand to hand—is another expression of the spirit of collaboration. When two artists work together, they form a wobbly circuit around two centers. And in art that develops as a conversation, we viewers often find ourselves addressed in a particularly direct, colloquial way. Perhaps the closest parallel would be the work of Komar and Melamid, but it is also true of many collaborative artists who are also life partners: Christo and Jeanne Claude, Allora and Calzadilla, and Gilbert and George come to mind. The partnership of Fischli and Weiss was distinguished (and probably greatly helped) by their humor; by the emphasis their sometimes herculean (Sisyphean?) undertakings place on the challenge of working, and of working together; and perhaps above all by their charm. A sometimes hard-to-define kind of attraction—it is one of six flavors of quark, in physics—charm is a very tricky thing to sustain. Fischli and Weiss have done so with what seems like magical ease. ○

1. Arthur Danto, "The Artist as Prime Mover: Thoughts on Peter Fischli and David Weiss' *The Way Things Go*," in Robert Fleck, Beate Söntgen and Arthur Danto, *Peter Fischli David Weiss*, London and New York, Phaidon, 2005, pp. 100–01.

2. Beate Söntgen, "Peter Fischli and David Weiss: In Conversation," in Fleck, Söntgen and Danto, p. 34.

3. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume I: Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, John O'Brian, ed., Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 5–22. Greenberg's account, from 1939, is just slightly less grim than Walter Benjamin's 1936 assessment: mass culture, Benjamin wrote, is Fascism's way of aestheticizing political life, and can only "culminate in one thing: war." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 241.

4. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp,'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York and London, Anchor Books, 1990, pp. 288, 292.

5. Quoted in Jeremy Millar, *Fischli and Weiss: The Way Things Go*, London, Afterall Books, 2007, p. 57.

6. Millar, p. 25.

7. In a public discussion with Hans Ulrich Obrist on Feb. 7, 2016, at the Guggenheim Museum, Fischli said the choice of this piece was key in developing the survey.

8. Quoted in Fleck, Söntgen and Danto, p. 18.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

10. Nancy Spector, "What Shall I Waste My Time On?" in Spector and Nat Trotman, *Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better*, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, and DelMonico Books/Prestel, Munich, London and New York, 2016, p. 328.

11. Helen Molesworth, "Work Ethic," in Helen Molesworth, Darsie Alexander and Miwon Kwon, *Work Ethic*, University Park, Penn State University Press and the Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003, p. 25.

12. In conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist.

13. "Real Time Travel: Rirkrit Tiravanija Talks with Peter Fischli and David Weiss," in Fleck, Söntgen and Danto, p. 139.

14. In conversation with Hans Ulrich Obrist.

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Peter Fischli and David Weiss, Rat and Bear (Sleeping), 2008. Cotton, silk, polyester,
electronic mechanism, dimensions variable. Photo: Christer Glick.

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Peter Fischli and David Weiss

SOLOMON R. GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM,
NEW YORK

Claire Bishop

THE TITLE of Peter Fischli and David Weiss's current retrospective, "How to Work Better," is taken from a ten-point list that the pair spotted in a Thai ceramics factory in 1990. Beginning sensibly enough with "Do one thing at a time" and ending with the banal management directive "Smile," the list has cropped up throughout the Swiss artists' oeuvre, most imposingly as a mural painted on the side of a nondescript office building in Zurich in 1991. Its slightly wonky font currently looms over the corner of Houston and Mott in New York, courtesy of Public Art Fund. At the Guggenheim, however, any incentive to industriousness is immediately undercut by the magnificent *Rat and Bear (Sleeping)*, 2008, in which Fischli and Weiss's alter egos—an oversize rodent and a shabby panda—nap on a pile of gray cloths, their stomachs gently rising and falling as they breathe. This (barely) animatronic sculpture, installed at the base of the ramp, is unabashedly cute; its prominent placement irreverently reminds us of the duo's antiestablishment beginnings in 1970s Zurich, where Weiss (then a hippie) and Fischli (then a punk) met and designed graphics for local bands.

The ensuing collaboration lasted from 1979 until Weiss's untimely death in 2012 and produced a rich and

diverse body of work whose centrality to the story of contemporary art since 1980 is widely acknowledged in Europe. In the United States, Fischli and Weiss have received shamefully little scholarly attention, perhaps because anglophone art historians since at least the 1970s have been suspicious of crowd-pleasing art, generally privileging the rigors of overt criticality, self-reflexivity, and antispexuality. Certainly, the artists' ironic/sincere sense of humor is easier to enjoy than to analyze. But hopefully "How to Work Better," the duo's first major museum exhibition in New York, will persuade my American colleagues to rise to the challenge and look more closely.

Curators Nancy Spector and Nat Trotman have chosen to focus on the pair's sculptural output, which is placed in dialogue with photographic series and the occasional video. The resulting selection is highly monochromatic: polyurethane "Grey Sculptures," 1984–86/2006–2008; black cast "Rubber Sculptures," 1986–88/2005–2006; white plaster "Cars," 1988, and "Hostesses," 1988–89/2012; and unfired clay figures on a forest of white plinths ("Suddenly This Overview," 1981–). At the top of the spiral, this tight installation devolves into a sequence of roped-off, half-empty bays containing paint cans, tools, badly made pedestals, and the occasional chair, as if somebody forgot to clean up before the opening. Of course, every single object in these installations, which the duo began producing in 1991, was meticulously handcrafted in polyurethane—its arduous, pointless illusionism flouting all logic of art after the readymade.

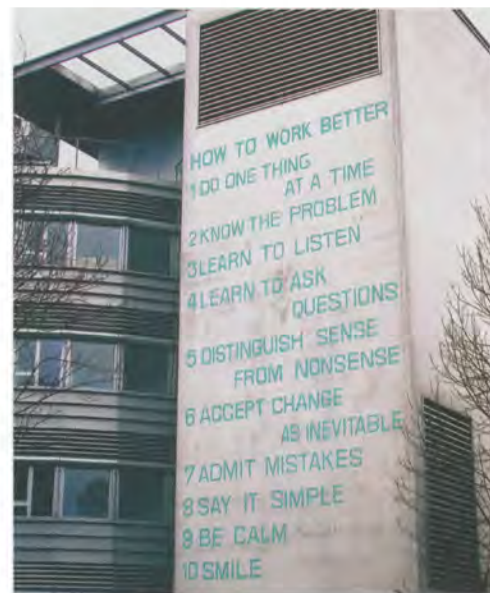
The heart of the exhibition is the artists' antimasterpiece, "Suddenly This Overview." Comprising some six hundred scenes in unfired clay, of which around 160 are on view at the Guggenheim, the work attempts to convey nothing less than a spontaneous history of the world. Quotidian objects (*Bungalow, Peanuts, Swiss Freeway*) are given their Platonic form, as are generic experiences

such as *Waiting for the Elevator*. Undeniably significant events are represented in amusingly humdrum ways, such as a couple in separate beds, titled *Mr. and Mrs. Einstein Shortly After the Conception of Their Son, the Genius Albert*. Numerous figurines present "Popular Opposites"—*Work and Leisure, Clean and Dirty, Theory and Practice*—but the conceptual basis of these scenes is less striking than the variety of their execution, which ranges from precision smoothness to frenzied texture (seen at its best in *Motocross*).

Begun at the dawn of the 1980s, this highly subjective tour of Western European collective consciousness is both an archive and an idiosyncratic minor history, and, as such, anticipated impulses that would predominate in the art of the '90s and 2000s. On one level it's also textbook postmodernism (collapsing high and low, deconstructing binaries, etc.), but that hackneyed label doesn't get close to accounting for the heartbreaking and regressive delight it instills in me. Its emotional impact has much to do with the materiality of unfired clay and the work's status as an unstable collection of fragile objects. When previous versions cracked, the artists remade the scenes; Fischli added four new ones for this installation. Set on narrow plinths, these deft clay snapshots seem especially vulnerable during peak times at the museum.

Part of what makes "Suddenly This Overview" so wonderful is the image it conjures of two artists beaver away in the studio, each interpreting a list of topics in a way that would tickle the other's fancy. The pair's very first collaboration, "Sausage Series," 1979, also gives this impression—it is a group of photographs in which various forms of Germanic processed meat, along with other foodstuffs and household objects, are arranged to create ambitious diorama-like landscapes in the confines of an unremarkable apartment. This sense of relentless indoor tinkering is fully fledged in the elaborate garage setup of the artists' much-loved, much-copied video *The Way*

Below: View of "Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better," 2016. Upper tier: "Suddenly This Overview," 1981–. Photo: David Heald.
Right: Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *How to Work Better*, 1991, painted mural. Installation view, Zurich, 2007. Photo: ryte/Flickr.



Things Go, 1987: a mesmeric chain reaction of objects set into motion via spillages and explosions, its cobbled-together devices constantly on the brink of failure. The video took two years to make and is gloriously self-sufficient; it's also one of the earliest and only works of video art to be commercially accessible to the public (currently \$14.99 on iTunes). These works position Fischli and Weiss in a lineage of artists who thrive in the studio, but instead of making work about not knowing what to make, as Bruce Nauman did so poignantly in 1969, the duo seem unburdened by time or the pressure to produce meaning.

Fischli and Weiss offer no grand critique of the conditions their art apprehends so presciently, and for that we should be grateful.

The Way Things Go is a labor of love whose obsessiveness is immediately recognized by viewers, who are often unable to tear themselves away (hence the unusual decision to install the work twice).

At the end of the exhibition, in the Tower Gallery, is the black-and-white (and possibly too-cute) installation *Questions*, 2000–2003, which flashes hundreds of polyglot queries across the wall. I would have rather seen this space used to present *Visible World*, 1986–2012, in its best-known format of three thousand photographs on a seventy-two-foot-long table, rather than half-buried on three modest plasma screens halfway up the ramp. While the work was first seen as a slide show on late-night television in Germany (during Documenta 10), the present installation is a little too close to a screen saver, losing the sense of information overload that arises from topographic sprawl. Someone once asked Fischli where he'd

downloaded all the images that compose the work; in fact, the artists visited hundreds of tourist destinations across the globe, from Stonehenge to Brasília, as well as many more obscure sites, in order to capture the same postcard-worthy views snapped by millions of visitors every day. The end product is less an ironic compendium of clichés than an appreciation of visual pleasure and the sublime, one that refuses to look down on popular imagery. Like the polyurethane installations, it's also an exercise in apparently redundant effort: Why undertake all this travel to produce yet another photograph of the pyramids? As the question put to Fischli indicates, *Visible World* was post-Internet before the Internet. It's a crucial work, anticipating not just Google image search but the whole archives-and-collections tendency that arose in contemporary art in the wake of networked technology.

"How to Work Better" inevitably foregrounds the question of work: the how and what of labor, artistic and otherwise—from the information navigation that now constitutes so much artistic and salaried labor to the materiality of industrial production that continues to prop up the global economy (as in that Thai ceramics factory). Viewers won't find the denunciations of precarity that have appeared in engaged art practices of late (e.g., Gulf Labor's intervention at the Guggenheim last year). Rather, Fischli and Weiss specialize in equivocation and indeterminacy: The fifty-nine-minute video *Atelier/Bus*, 1994, dutifully documents the creation of the objects in a polyurethane installation, intercutting footage of the unbelievably laborious process of carving a simulacrum of a cheap plastic mixing pot with long, boring shots of people traveling to and from work on public transport. Is this, like *Rat and Bear (Sleeping)*, a wry repudiation of the "How to Work Better" ethos, or an endorsement? And is the list itself an inspiring distillation of timeless wisdom or a depressing exemplar of patronizing corporate platitudes? "Accept change as inevitable" intones

the sixth instruction—which can be read positively or negatively. Either way, it's a maxim for surviving in today's neoliberal economy.

Fischli and Weiss offer no grand critique of the conditions their art apprehends so presciently, and for that we should be grateful. Although their output is deeply rooted in middle-class, *mitteleuropäisch* life, with its modest means and relentless normcore, it also opens the door to other experiences: the opportunity for unexpected, unalienated pleasures in the least likely places. *Kanalvideo*, 1992, for example, shows an interminable blurry passage through circular tunnels that manages to prompt thoughts of the afterlife despite being filmed in Zurich's sewers. As John Kelsey points out in his catalogue essay, the artists operate "at the pedestrian level of middle-class enchantment . . . using techniques familiar to any tourist or hobbyist." A politics of the ordinary emerges in their work: a model of the artist not as a heroic figure or demystifier of social truths, but as a vehicle for collective recognition, a facilitator of the low-key elations to be discovered in our everyday lives. The best works of Fischli and Weiss remind us that artistic creativity isn't about mighty materials and enormous resources, but a way of thinking with others, unhurriedly, over time.

As you walk down the ramp to the exit, you pass *Rat and Bear (Sleeping)* once again. After the death of Weiss, this sculpture—already a conduit for multiple emotions—has become even more acutely moving: an allegory of seemingly incompatible yet contented lifelong collaboration. It prompts the thought that one corny but sincere addition to the list of workplace advice might be a single word: "Together." □

"Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better" is on view through April 27; travels to the Museo Jumex, Mexico City, June 9–Sept. 11.

CLAIRE BISHOP IS A PROFESSOR IN THE PH.D. PROGRAM IN ART HISTORY AT THE CUNY GRADUATE CENTER, NEW YORK.



From left: Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Untitled*, 1992–93, painted polyurethane, 750 parts. Installation view. Photo: David Heald. Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *The First Blush of Morning*, 1984, C-print, 11 1/4 x 9 1/2". From the series "Equilibres (A Quiet Afternoon)," 1984–86. Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Visible World*, 1986–2012, three-channel video, color, silent, 480 minutes.



MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS

Peter Fischli and David Weiss

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY | 1062 N ORANGE GROVE

1062 N Orange Grove

January 18, 2014–April 12, 2014

It seems surprising that this is Peter Fischli and David Weiss's first major solo exhibition in Los Angeles since 1987, given how central the city was to the Swiss artists' early collaborative work. Weiss moved to the city in 1979 and Fischli soon followed: Together they spent much of the next three years there, featuring L.A. in their first film, *The Point of Least Resistance*, 1981. The city also played home to the artists' earliest experiments with an unusual sculptural medium. Taking a cue from its then-widespread use by Hollywood set designers, in 1982 Fischli and Weiss began carving and painting polyurethane resin into quotidian trompe l'oeil sculptures; it was an approach they returned to often over the next three decades. Liberated from any burden of authenticity or functionality, the resulting objects—what critic Boris Groys has called “replicants”—are free to be banal, philosophical, cosmic, and very funny, somehow all at once.

This presentation of *Untitled*, 1994–2013, makes use of the exhibition itself as a context for an elaborately staged reproduction of an artist's work site. Visitors move through an encyclopedic ensemble of paint-spattered brushes, studio paraphernalia, cigarette butts, and coffee cups, as well as unsettling non sequiturs—a doll's empty bed nestled against four car tires—and hokey one-liners. It's as though whoever was working here has just stepped out for a moment, but of course he hasn't. David Weiss's death in 2012 gives these pieces an unexpected poignancy, evoking the artist's long-standing interest in the unstable, even paradoxical relation between irony and sincerity. The room is as preposterous and silent as a cenotaph and what better roadside attraction than an untenanted tomb: morbidly corny and vacant, inauthentic, and yet despite—or because—of all that, capable of eliciting a powerful, even disturbing range of responses. Everyday objects take on the uncanny aura of grave goods—with viewer as tomb raider. Or is it archaeologist? Either way, the objects practically beg to be handled, if not looted. (Neither is allowed.) In a rare interview with Jörg Heiser in 2006, Fischli and Weiss described the “psychedelic” effect produced by picking them up. According to Fischli, visitors find each disconcertingly light, “a bit like will-o-wisps.” Or, perhaps, phantoms.



Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Untitled* (detail), 1994-2013, hand-carved polyurethane and acrylic paint, 164 parts, dimensions variable.

— Alexander Keefe

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Los Angeles Times

Ingenuity and wisdom come out to play

BY LEAH OLLMAN

Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss collaborated for more than three decades, but have had little exposure in L.A.

Local audiences are likely to know them only by a single, deservedly popular work from 1987, "The Way Things Go." The mesmerizing, 30-minute video unspools like a free-associative poem, a meditation on momentum.

Using common industrial objects — tires, buckets, spools of wire — Fischli and Weiss created a continuous chain of actions and reactions involving balloons deflating, tires rolling, liquids draining, candles melting, balls dropping, fuses burning, wheels spinning, and much more.

Gravity performs itself, steam does its thing, and the stream of physical consciousness flows amusingly, remarkably on. Brilliant and yet profoundly simple, the piece marries Rube Goldberg-style ingenuity with elemental wisdom: This is the way things are, this is how substances behave, this is how things go.

That same convergence of material realism and ground-floor philosophy suffuses the duo's remarkable installation at Matthew Marks. The show occupies



both adjacent gallery locations, but its heart and soul are to be found in the sprawling array of "Polyurethane Objects" filling the Orange Grove space. The title dials down our visual pace by answering the basic question: What, exactly, are we seeing?

Without that answer, we might not even ask, because what lies before us appears self-evident: clustered arrangements of studio debris. The pallets and pedestals,

clamps, drills and sanders, buckets and brushes don't announce themselves as sculpture but as the raw materials for making sculpture.

The installation is, however, actually a full-scale, immersive, trompe l'oeil still-life. Everything, down to the strewn peanut shells and scatter of rainbow M&Ms, is carved from dense, rigid foam and painted. Each object is a replica extraordinarily fashioned to look like

its ordinary model.

Fischli and Weiss poke at the relationship between original and copy here, but without irony or pretense. The work feels refreshingly earnest, born of curiosity, reverence and abundant good humor. There are hints of the domestic — children's boots and toys, a dog dish — and multiple allusions to play, to art as elaborate game.

The artists began this body of work in 1982, and it appears to have had a variety of incarnations. Weiss' death in 2012 lends the current installation a faintly elegiac air, but the predominant tone is that of tender homage — to the everyday, the work of the hand, to making and remaking as a manner of processing experience.

Like Borges' famous story of the map drawn the size of the empire it represented, Fischli and Weiss' work positions us at the intersection of truth and the absurd. Its illusions pull us closer to the real, to the necessity of humility, awe and laughter.

Matthew Marks Gallery, 1062 N. Orange Grove and 7818 Santa Monica Blvd., (323) 654-1830, through April 12. Closed Sunday and Monday. www.matthewmarks.com

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ARTFORUM

PREVIEWS



Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Untitled* (detail), 1994–2013, 164 hand-carved polyurethane objects, paint, dimensions variable.

NEW YORK

“PETER FISCHLI DAVID WEISS: HOW TO WORK BETTER”

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
February 5–April 20
Curated by Nancy Spector and Nat Trotman

Los Angeles, 1981. Rat and Bear walk into a gallery speaking *Schweizerdeutsch*, looking for fame, money, purpose. Stumbling upon a dead body, they empty its pockets and walk off with the corpse. An unexpected opportunity arises, and they run with it. Robbing the dead and snatching bodies? It would be stupid of me to find a summation of more than thirty years' work in this scene from Peter Fischli and the late David Weiss's first film, *The Point of Least Resistance*. But the two artists have always seemed sympathetic to the uncreative thought—deploying it to brilliant effect, using forms others might have pronounced inert or worse: carved trompe l'oeil studio clutter, photos of gardens, a sculpture of a rock atop another rock. Often mistaken for being funny, their poker-faced works and laconic titles—*Equilibres*, *Suddenly This Overview*, *Rock on Top of Another Rock*—could be the answers to the universe or just a passing shrug. The Guggenheim's spiraling ramp seems to have been waiting for the makers of *The Way Things Go*. Finally, this overview.

—Wade Guyton

ARTFORUM

POTOMAC, MD

Peter Fischli and David Weiss

GLENSTONE

This gorgeously curated overview-*cum*-retrospective of the polymorphously parodic work of Peter Fischli and David Weiss further benefits from the compelling amalgam of sophistication and bucolic splendor that is Glenstone—the private museum just outside Washington, DC, that houses the collection of Mitchell and Emily Wei Rales. Carefully grouped into several galleries connected to a central pavilion, the exhibition (curated by Emily Rales in collaboration with Fischli himself) consists solely of pieces from Glenstone’s collection and will remain on view through February 2015. The Swiss duo’s first US survey since the 1990s and the first major institutional exhibition of their work since the passing of Weiss last year, this show provides a welcome opportunity to reconsider through-lines in Fischli & Weiss’s production.

The main pavilion is populated with sixty-three works atop white wooden plinths. These include clay sculptures and rubber casts from the series “Suddenly This Overview,” 1980–2012; “Walls, Corners, Tubes,” 2009–12; and “Rubber Sculptures,” 1986–2005. In these bodies of work, a glut of subjects that range from the momentous (as in *The Temptation of St. Anthony*, 1981–2012) to the mundane (as in *Plumbing Part*, 2009) present themselves, each individually isolated, singularized, and concretized in the form of a basic icon. At the center of this grid of plinths, one finds the sculpture *Big Corner*, 2009—a curatorial choice (to place a “corner” prominently in the middle of the room) that announces the inverted logic at work in Fischli & Weiss’s object world, in which the marginal takes a central role within their indiscriminate catalogue of the real.

Two nearby galleries are each adorned with a white plaster *Car*, both 1988, and in the first of these two spaces, a phalanx of white plaster *Stewardesses*, 1989, act as mute intermediaries between projections of more than four hundred images of airports (*Views of Airports*, 1987–2012). The blank, vacant figures contrast with the legion of color photographs, effecting a deliberate separation between tangible form and two-dimensional image. In the next gallery, a massive light box populated with a staggering grid of small-format color transparencies, *Visible World*, 1986–2001, stretches diagonally from one end of the room to the other. These images have the promotional gloss of stock travel photography, when in fact they were taken by Fischli & Weiss on their own trips to myriad picturesque locales; the aesthetic of professional remoteness is here ruptured by the fact of personal experience. This light box leads to the most striking piece in the show, *The Objects for*

Glenstone, 2011/2013: a set of obsessive re-creations of more than five hundred individual objects from the artists' studio, ranging in scale from a single match in an ashtray to a massive tractor tire. These are cast in polyurethane and faithfully painted in acrylics, acting at once as sculptural models and as color reproductions. Following this delirium of duplications is a gallery wherein fifty of the eighty-two images from the "*Equilibres* (A Quiet Afternoon)" series, 1984–86, are displayed. Among the artists' best-known works, these studio photographs show tenuously balanced everyday items—momentary arrangements that are caught by the camera's shutter, fixed on the brink of collapse.

The desire to identify a unifying thread in Fischli & Weiss's oeuvre has led many to highlight the undeniable element of irony, and though irony is everywhere in these well-known works, it seems to be marshaled less as a simple punch line than as a function, primarily, of remove. Through various methods of replicating and discretizing, Fischli & Weiss explore the gap between things and their representations. They emerge as artists devoted to what I would call a concretism of the absurd, exemplified in the sheer mania that structures works such as *The Objects for Glenstone* as well as the ceramic and rubber sculptures, *Views of Airports*, and *Visible World*, all of which pursue the implausible prospect of rendering a material (read: nonvirtual), parallel model of the world piece by piece, yet without an explicit game plan.

—Colin Lang



Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *The Objects for Glenstone* (detail), 2011/2013, polyurethane and acrylic, dimensions variable.

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BLOUINARTINFO

Peter Fischli on Nature, Tourism, and Working Without David Weiss

by Coline Milliard | 11/03/13



LONDON — Last week saw the unveiling of Fischli/Weiss's monumental sculpture, "Rock on Top of Another Rock," outside the Serpentine Gallery in London's Kensington Gardens. It marked the completion of a process started four years ago, when the Swiss duo was first invited to produce a piece for the Norwegian countryside.

As the name indicates, both the Scandinavian sculpture and the one inaugurated today — commissioned by the Serpentine Gallery in partnership with

Qatar Museums Authority — are made of two boulders, one sitting seemingly precariously atop the other. Despite their size, there is a sense of ephemerality to the assemblages, as if one stone had just landed on the second one. The new sculpture will remain on Kensington Gardens' dewy lawns for 12 months, before being permanently relocated to Qatar's capital city of Doha.

To produce the London version, Fischli/Weiss had to roam the English countryside. "The most difficult thing was to find two rocks," explained Fischli during the press preview this morning. "When you think of a piece like this, you have something in your mind about how the rocks should look, but the rocks in the world, they don't care about your thoughts. They are like they are." The pair eventually settled for two Welsh rocks, but David Weiss didn't live long enough to see the project come to an end. He died of cancer last year, aged 66.

Partners in crime for more 30 years, Peter Fischli and David Weiss developed a unique cast of conceptual art, characterized by a searing sense of humor, poetry, and a fascination for the mundane. The duo first worked together on a series of little photographed scenes starring cuts of cold meat and gherkin stubs ("Sausage Series," 1979). For "Equilibres" (1984-7), they staged still-lives of hazardously balanced objects: a bit of courgette on a carrot stuck into a grater ("Quiet Afternoon") or five stilettos nestled into one another to make a circle ("The Three Sisters").

These led almost naturally to the duo's best-known piece, "The Way Things Go" (1987), a dazzling 30-minute film in which objects and pieces of equipment are set in what seems to be an unstoppable chain reaction. The combination of utter simplicity and technical complexity also underpins "Rock on Top of Another Rock," which was described this morning by Fischli as "a minimum gesture for a maximum effect."

He talked to ARTINFO UK about the origins of the project.

Does the idea for “Rock on Top of Another Rock” go back to your 1984 “Equilibres” series, or is it something that developed much more recently?

I think the way ideas come is never a one-line thing. An idea is at the cross of many, many different things. It's obvious that [“Equilibres”] is one of the roots, but we were despairing when we were asked to do this piece in Norway. We had seen the photographs of that beautiful landscape . . . our relationship to nature is still a romantic one, we like nature to be wild, empty, because we are in civilization, so we want to have this opposite of our normal day. We went to Norway, and were sure we wanted to tell them: “It's a bad idea to make art on a place like this. Just leave it, it's so nice, art is not needed.” When we arrived there, we realized that Norway is not Switzerland, even if we were to do something, there is still so much empty space — and [the piece] is so small, it's so nothing against the huge space. Still we thought that it would be stupid to bring something. Why not do something with materials which were already there? And the only things that were there were rocks. With the “Equilibres” series, it's just things that were lying around in the studio, or at home. You are not going far to look for something. I just take this, this, and this and pile them up.

Kensington Gardens is full of sculptures. Were you trying to deconstruct this idea of the monument?

Yes. One of my worries was whether [the piece] was too big, or too small. And on Saturday I realized that it has the size of all other sculptures in the park. So that relationship, just in volume and size, is the same. In Norway, when you go and you see the piece in the countryside, maybe you think that's something nature has done. It's not really clear who is the author. But here, to transform this into a “sculptural claim,” it needed the platform. So it's a sculpture, but in the end, the artistic freedom to make it how it looks is very, very small. The rocks, you just take the ones you have, and the composition is how it has to stand. We normally think that the artist is doing whatever he wants. But we had to accept the rocks as found: how they are shaped and the rules of statics are what makes the artwork.

Here in England, we can't help but think of Stonehenge.

Making a mark is the first thing humans do to say: “I was here.” When you walk in the countryside and there is no path, you have to mark your path. You put two rocks there, so you find your way back, or the next person finds their way to the next valley or whatever. On the other hand, there's the trivial aspect of a tourist attraction.

Which Stonehenge also represents.

Tourism is this moment when deep cultural values and trash culture come together, when high and low collide. So the piece has this archaic thing of Stonehenge, but on the other hand, it's also just like a kind of spectacle. You can go in front of it, take a photo, and be like: wow!

How do you think “Rock on Top of Another Rock” will function once in Doha?

My father is Swiss, my mother is Italian, and we Swiss people think that the mountain is our thing, and rocks come from our country. When I was a kid, we went to the sea in Italy, and there was only sand. And my mother told me: look, this is where the rocks end. I like this idea: sand is the deconstructed stone.

You've conceived this project with David Weiss, this is a Fischli/Weiss project. From now on, will you continue working as Fischli/Weiss?

This is a question that I still have to answer. For me it was very clear that I wanted to finish all these projects. We didn't have something like a company. Art is not ... it's not something that you can decide with a strategy. I will go step-by-step.

ART LIES

A Contemporary Art Journal



NEW YORK

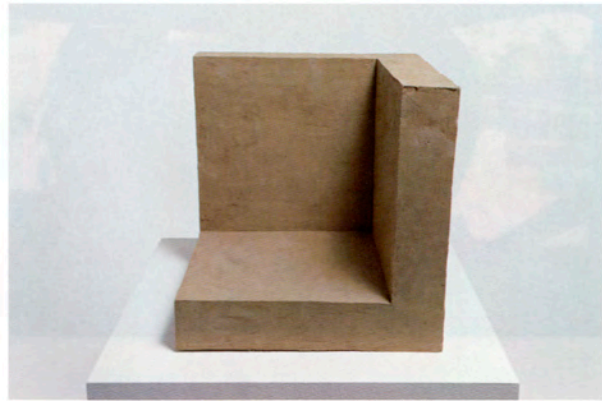
Fischli & Weiss
Matthew Marks Gallery

Now entering their fourth decade of collaboration, Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss have consistently delivered a mix of the serious and the silly. Their subversive installations of the eighties and nineties—hand-made objects that looked like mass-produced domestic toss-outs or trash—were mysterious and disorienting. The artists ushered in a new domain of conceptualism steeped in semiotics, which they embodied in immaculate craft that simultaneously undid itself, like a self-refuting ouroboros consuming its own tail.

If Fischli & Weiss were once the go-to guys for irreverent genre-bending art, moving easily between sculpture, installation, photography and film, they've been somewhat off the radar in more recent years. Yet, in the wake of more aggressive pranksters like Maurizio Cattelan, more dazzling magicians like Roxy Paine, or less-droll phenomenologists like Olafur Eliasson, the duo nonetheless continues to forge a unique path, due in large part to a practice grounded solidly in the studio.

At Matthew Marks, Fischli & Weiss' strongest traits—their rigor and silliness—are amply displayed. *Sun, Moon and Stars* is installed handsomely in the gallery's cavernous West 22nd Street space. Comprised of nearly 800 full-page advertisements pulled from magazines (presented in side-by-side pairs across 38 glass-topped display tables), the installation reads like a library of contemporary Western consumerism.

The image pairs were chosen for relationships of content and form. An ad for Polo kids wear is paired with one for the Euro Teddy 2007 conference, accentuating the knit caps and scarves worn by the child models and teddy bears. Another pairing likens a lace haute-couture gown to a spray of Krug champagne. Elsewhere, tables are dedicated to a theme, like the



L. Peter Fischli / David Weiss, *Untitled (Sleeping Puppets)*, 2008–09; two rag puppets, two breathing machines; 13 x 100 x 48 inches

R. *Big Corner*, 2009; reinforced clay; 13¼ x 13 x 13⅞ inches; © Peter Fischli / David Weiss, images courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York

one where cosmetics, chocolate and yogurt drip from the mouths of pretty models, or a group that relies on black images with a horror bent. If the project's methodology feels a bit facile, a stroll among the tables generates a stimulating analysis of visual culture and its mercantile applications.

In the gallery's West 24th Street space, another profusion of objects/signs—the exhibition *Clay and Rubber*—draws together sculptural works created by the duo over the past twenty-five years. Simply displayed on white pedestals, these include a dog dish, a piece of pipe, bricks, stair steps and a dresser drawer, among other aggressively quotidian "subjects." The real dialogue isn't about (or between) the objects and what they are but how they are made, either hand-formed in dun-colored, unfired clay or carefully cast in black rubber, thus slipping back and forth between the thing and its representation.

Lastly, in the small West 22nd Street annex, two toy animals in nubby fabric lie on their backs, heads resting on a pile of blankets. These characters are Rat and Bear, recurring stand-ins for the artists and their collaboration since at least the late seventies. Under dimmed lights they doze soundly, their round bellies rising and falling softly, accompanied by the faint sound of snoring. The animatronics are barely perceptible, even from a few feet away. There is something poignant, even a little sad in the extreme subtlety of the mechanical effects. The work doesn't clamor for attention, which in today's market feels slightly like resignation. Or perhaps it's simply the grace of two mature artists who, at this moment in art, would rather be napping.

John Ewing is a freelance writer and editor and the copy editor of *Art Lies*.

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ARTFORUM



Fischli & Weiss

PALAZZO LITTA, MILAN

Daniel Birnbaum

IN HIS ESSAY on the uncanny, Freud tells the story of a young couple who move into a house in which there is a wooden table with carvings of crocodiles. "Toward evening," he writes, "an intolerable and very specific smell begins to pervade the house; they stumble over something in the dark; they seem to see a vague form gliding over the stairs—in short, we are given to understand that the presence of the table causes ghostly crocodiles to haunt the place." Something similar happened this past winter at the Palazzo Litta in Milan, a stunning Baroque building in which the Fondazione Nicola Trussardi installed an extended and radically transformed version of the retrospective of the work of Peter Fischli and David Weiss previously on display in London and Zurich (and opening at the Deichtorhallen in Hamburg this month). When I entered the space, several crocodiles were emerging out of an elaborately patterned stone floor. Only a few inches of their bodies were visible, and yet, as in Freud's story, one tended to believe that the beasts continued beyond that which was immediately evident. A number of large hippos were likewise gradually coming

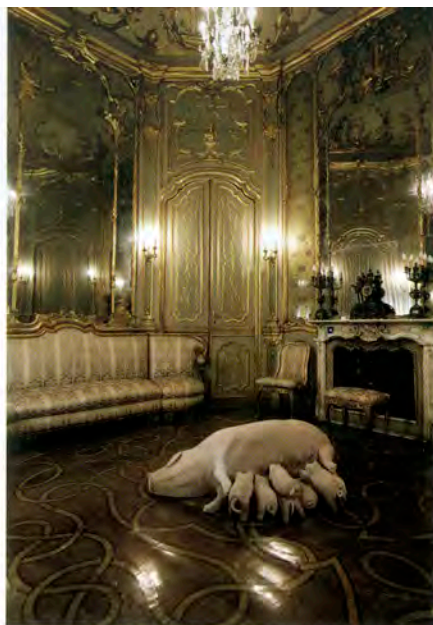
into view. Was the whole palazzo about to come alive?

A fraction of a hippopotamus is also depicted on the cover of *Visible World* (2000), the artists' book of thousands of photographs that comprise their work of the same name. When speaking of this image, Weiss has said that although part of the hippo's head is all that peeks out from the water, "the rest of this large beautiful animal is invisible, below the surface." In fact, the emphasis on the surface of things throughout Fischli & Weiss's work inevitably hints at what is hidden beneath the uppermost layer. The rest of the book, for example, contains several thousand really unexciting photographs—of cities, buildings, landscapes, and bodies of water all over the world. The images excel in their lack of individuality, and yet something larger seems implied. Even here, however, regardless of how much pleasure we may find in immediate appearances, a lingering doubt remains: Do we really know that there is more?

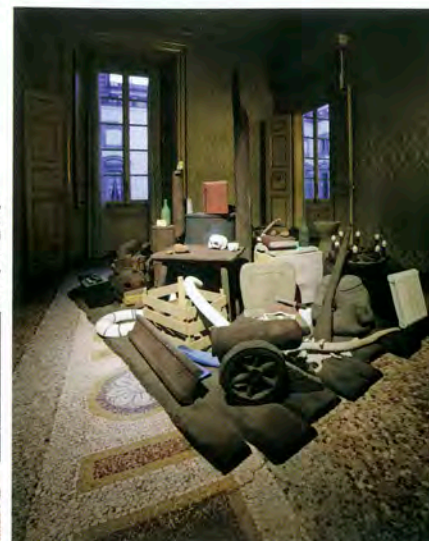
"*Altri fiori e altre domande*" (Other Flowers and Other Questions) was organized for the Fondazione Trussardi in collaboration with Tate Modern and the Kunsthau Zürich under the curatorial stewardship of Bice Curiger, Massimiliano Gioni, and Vicente Todolí. In addition to the classics of Fischli & Weiss's oeuvre, the exhibition featured several new works (including clay sculptures of a jar, an ax, and a giant shoe) and little-known earlier pieces such as the multipart sculpture *Objects from the Raft*, 1982, the artists' first polyurethane work, which consists of a large number of carved and painted objects—a skull, a bottle, a piece of cheese, a small cannon, and many other items, not least the crocodiles and hippopotamuses mentioned above. Especially in the setting of the Palazzo Litta's imposing architecture, the show revealed a new dimension to the explorations of the zero degree of artlessness that make up so much of Fischli & Weiss's work—

which is, as the artists have said, intended to actively avoid *Bedeutungskitsch*, the heavy pretentiousness of much recent artistic production and the discourse surrounding it.

In one room, the costumes of Rat and Bear, the anti-heroes of the artists' first films of the early 1980s, hovered mysteriously in two large translucent black Perspex showcases. In *The Least Resistance*, 1981, these two naive figures, played by Fischli & Weiss, decide to make it in the art world, and the installation showed them to have succeeded to the extent of becoming museum pieces themselves. In the same gallery, Rat and Bear could be seen wandering through the Swiss countryside in *The Right Way*, 1983, while in an adjacent room the slide projection *Questions*, 1981/2002–2003, was on view—one of those rare works that prove that relevant art can indeed be humorous, not just for a split second but repeatedly, even after many viewings. (I remember hearing loud laughs in the dark when the piece was on view in Venice in 2003 and soon realizing that it was the artists themselves who still found it hilarious.) Among the hundreds of questions in this work, some of which have also been presented in a small black book, *Will Happiness Find Me?* (2003), are everyday questions such as "Where are my keys?"; weird questions such as "What happened 4.56 billion years ago?" and "Why do I live in an animal body?"; and questions that make you wonder, perhaps with some unease, what might be going on in the head of the person asking them, such as "Is it true that traces of aliens have been found in yogurt?" and "Is life a strange system of caves?" The mysterious individual behind such queries as "Is Mr. Insanity at the door?" and "Should I switch over to the invisible world?" is apparently not quite normal. In an interview with art historian Beate Söntgen in a monograph on the artists published by Phaidon in 2005, Fischli & Weiss elaborated on the nature and origin of the queries:



Opposite page, from left: Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Objects from the Raft, 1982*, carved and painted polyurethane. Installation view, 2008. Photo: Marco De Scalzi. Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Shoe, 2007*, clay. Installation view, 2008. Photo: Marco De Scalzi. This page: Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Objects from the Raft, 1982*, carved and painted polyurethane. Installation views, 2008. Photos: Marco De Scalzi.



Weiss: We did in fact imagine a presence at the center of this multitude of questions, and we made speculations about the person. Most likely it was a man who lets everything run through his head before falling asleep—thus the projection of questions in the dark, and the fact that the book is black.

Fischli: We're not responsible for the questions ourselves. It's this secret person.

The Palazzo Litta used to belong to the national railway company (Italy is a weird nation), which led me to wonder whether a slightly unbalanced "secret person" who was perhaps once responsible for timetables or repairing locomotives might also have been responsible for this exhibition. There were many strange objects in surprising places, like the giant shoe mentioned above, which was displayed in a fireplace, and a sow suckling piglets on the luxurious floor of a splendid room decorated with mirrors and golden ornaments. In the most lavish of environments, among fancy old furniture and Baroque adornment, there were tools and everyday things that looked like litter to me. A normal white cat enjoying some milk was projected onto a wall of a sumptuous room worthy of, at least, a lion.

The boundaries of the exhibition have always been blurred in Fischli & Weiss's work: What is staged, and where does reality start? But the layers of nuance involved in an ordinary-looking object sculpted in polyurethane and painted to look just like the real thing become even more puzzling when such work is removed from the white "neutrality" of the typical contemporary art space and transplanted into the radically different context of a Baroque palazzo. Much has been written about Fischli & Weiss's relationship to the Duchampian readymade, but there seems to be no real agreement about whether these works should be considered simulated readymades that exist as such in the gallery, or whether they in fact simply

replicate the ordinary objects themselves—and this quandary became significantly more pointed in such an unconventional venue. The architecture did not really intrude on the art, as one might have expected, but instead pushed the work, making it come into its own, so that it seemed even more itself: The totally convincing fake readymades, if that is what they are, here looked extravagantly ordinary. Indeed, the "secret person" in this palace who collected these prosaic objects and pictures that happen to be works by Fischli & Weiss really must have had an exquisite taste for the utterly unexciting. Was this an inverted *Wunderkammer*—a cabinet of banalities for those of us who cannot stop marveling at the inscrutability of the ordinary? Even so, there was the occasional surprise, such as the crocodiles emerging from below. That's when the "secret person" probably began to wonder, "Is it all in my head?"

A comment made by Rirkrit Tiravanija in an interview with the artists in *Artforum* in 1996 goes some way in condensing the lesson that Fischli & Weiss can teach us. He said, "So it's like the 'big questions' and the 'small questions' are collapsed into one plane. 'Small questions' asked at the right moment can become bigger than the 'big questions.'" Put differently, there is something metonymic about Fischli & Weiss's work. And they certainly prefer adding more and more examples to synthesizing things into a formula. You're always guided from one thing to the next, from one interesting item to another equally fascinating object. Jorge Luis Borges writes that all of those things that are next to one another we call the universe, and it is this relation of adjacency that Fischli & Weiss

explore. If they have an ontology, it is one that insists on the necessity of spelling out the qualities of each individual thing in the world. The early work *Suddenly This Overview*, 1981/2006, displayed in Milan on white plinths in a large space with opulent chandeliers, is an assemblage of dozens of such individual things, all sculpted in clay. Visitors walked from piece to piece laughing out loud at the (separately titled) components such as *Mr. and Mrs. Einstein Shortly After the Conception of Their Son*, *the Genius Albert and Mick Jagger and Brian Jones Going Home Satisfied After Composing "I Can't Get No Satisfaction."* Critics have suggested that the work is an attempt to give a reply to the simple question "What is there?" The most accurate and convincing answer is obviously "Everything." In language,

the question can be answered concisely; clay is less efficient and so necessitates an infinite task. To take the examples in this piece—well, there are guitars, cars, soccer games, bread, old weapons, Dr. Hofmann (inventor of LSD), and, of course, Mr. and Mrs. Einstein. Wait a second, there is more—an airliner crashing into the sea, a cooking pot, a freeway, Saint Anthony being tempted in his cave, and, and, and... Seen this way, Fischli & Weiss have made good progress in documenting everything. They have also been almost everywhere, photographing and filming all the things they saw, wasting their own time and that of the viewer who will never manage to see it all. But as this unusual and brilliantly installed show proves, wasting one's time in their presence is one of the highest intellectual pleasures. □

DANIEL BIRNBAUM IS A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR OF *ARTFORUM*.

The layers of nuance involved in an ordinary-looking object sculpted in polyurethane and painted to look just like the real thing become even more puzzling when such work is transplanted into a Baroque palazzo.

EXIT

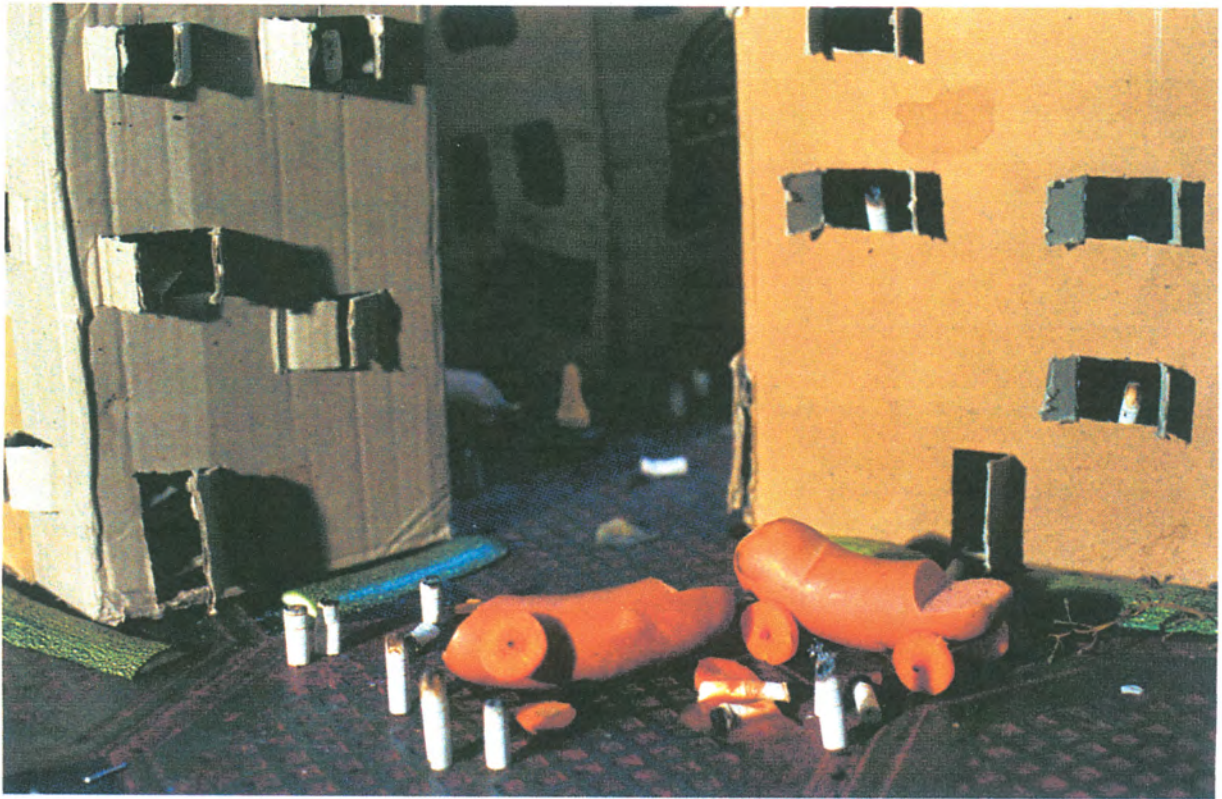
Home Alone...

Raiding the icebox, chain smoking, killing time; when home alone, thoughts turn dark, dreams curdle, fantasies sour. Boredom and frustration attend domestic confinement: although play seems to offer a way out, visions of escape too often derailed.

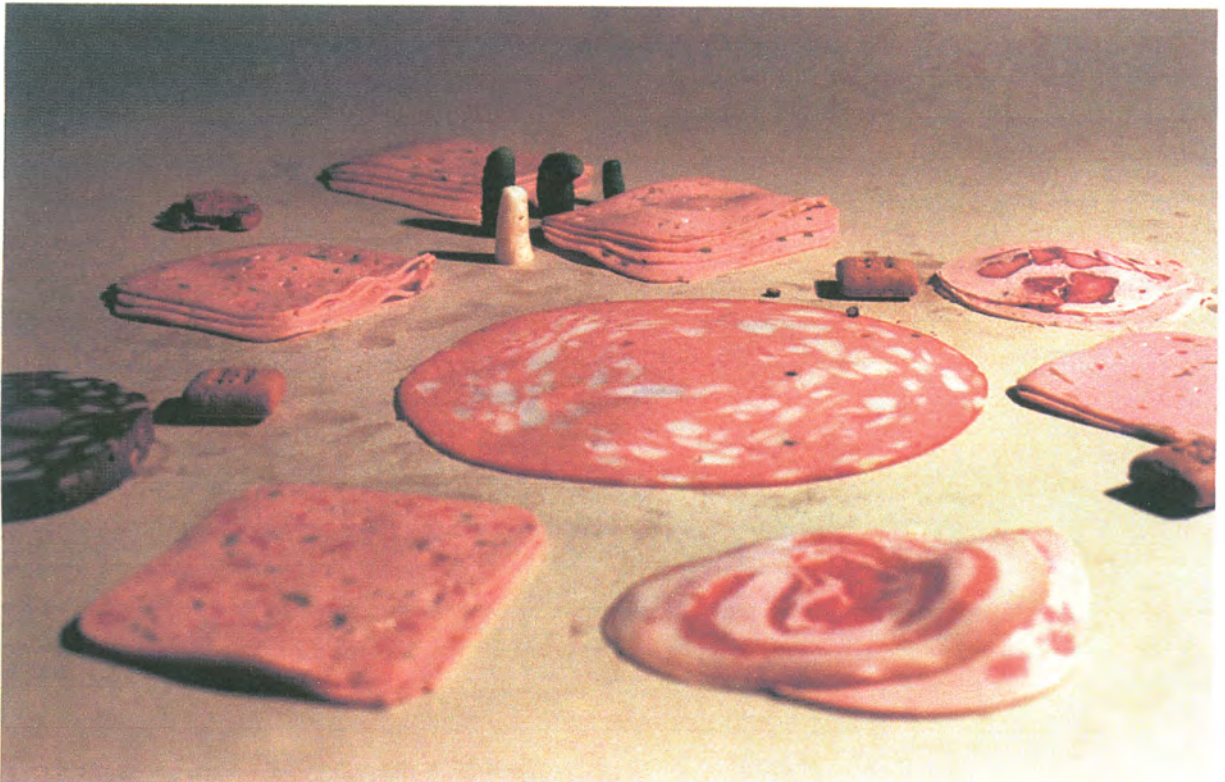
Assuming monstrous shapes, bedclothes morph into mountainous peaks behind which a glowering sun hovers; across a barren landscape made from a dreary brown carpet, a single-lane highway beckons. Far more unsettling than the car crash, however, are the spooky witnesses, a phalanx of cigarette butts solemnly surrounding the scene of disaster. Nearby, fire breaks out in one of the tacky high-rises, threatening to spread to its near neighbours. (...) Even those places which offer potential pleasure – whether the lure of shopping or the glamour of fashion – are riddled with malaise; the motley salami and sausage rugs are arrayed for sale across a grimy floor; the crowded catwalk is perched on a bilious-pink bathroom shelf backed by a spotted mirror.

The first collaboration in Fischli/Weiss's extensive oeuvre, the *Wurstserie* (*Sausage Photographs* 1979) presages much that has followed. Impish inquiry, disarming understatement, dexterous improvisation and make-shift materials again and again serve as the means by which big questions are writ small, as the miniature becomes the vehicle for the metaphysical. Our initial delight, triggered here by their resourceful playfulness when trapped indoors in a shabby apartment, is, as so often in their work, soon undermined. For a mordant wit infiltrates even the most beguiling of their seemingly inane pranks, captured in these modestly scaled documentary-styled prints. (...)

Lynne Cooke



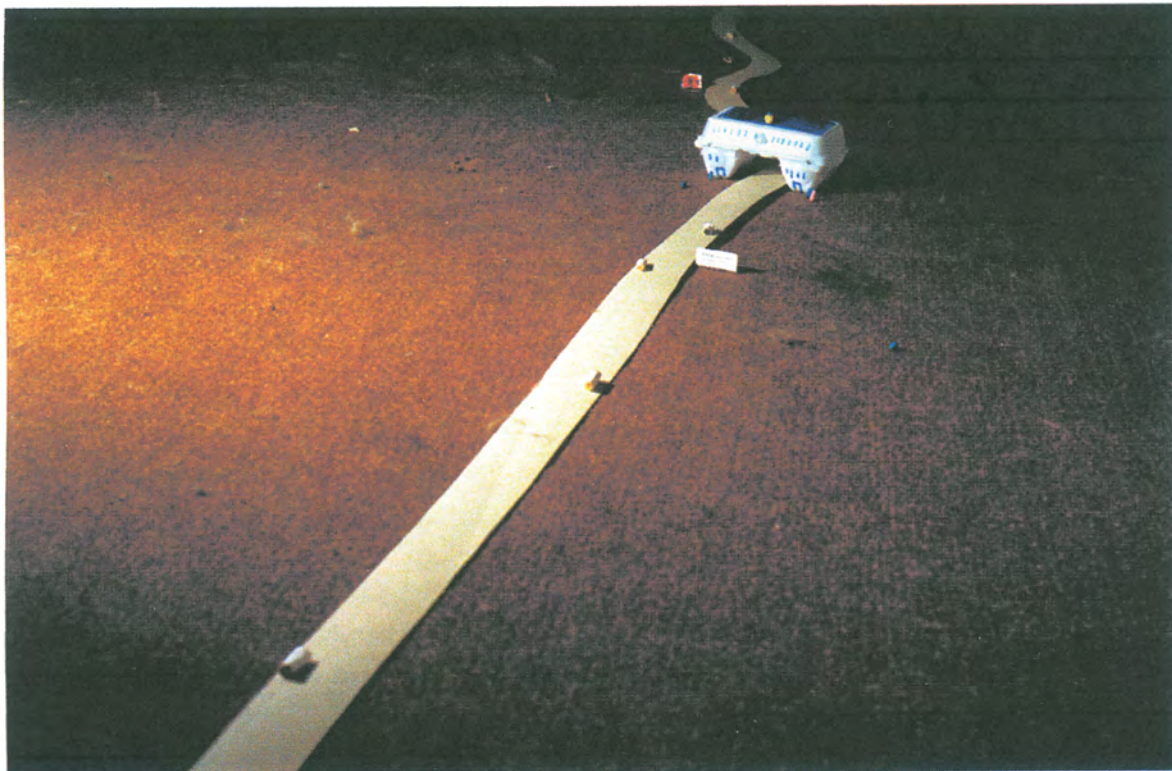
Peter Fischli/David Weiss. *Untitled (Wurstserie)*, 1979. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



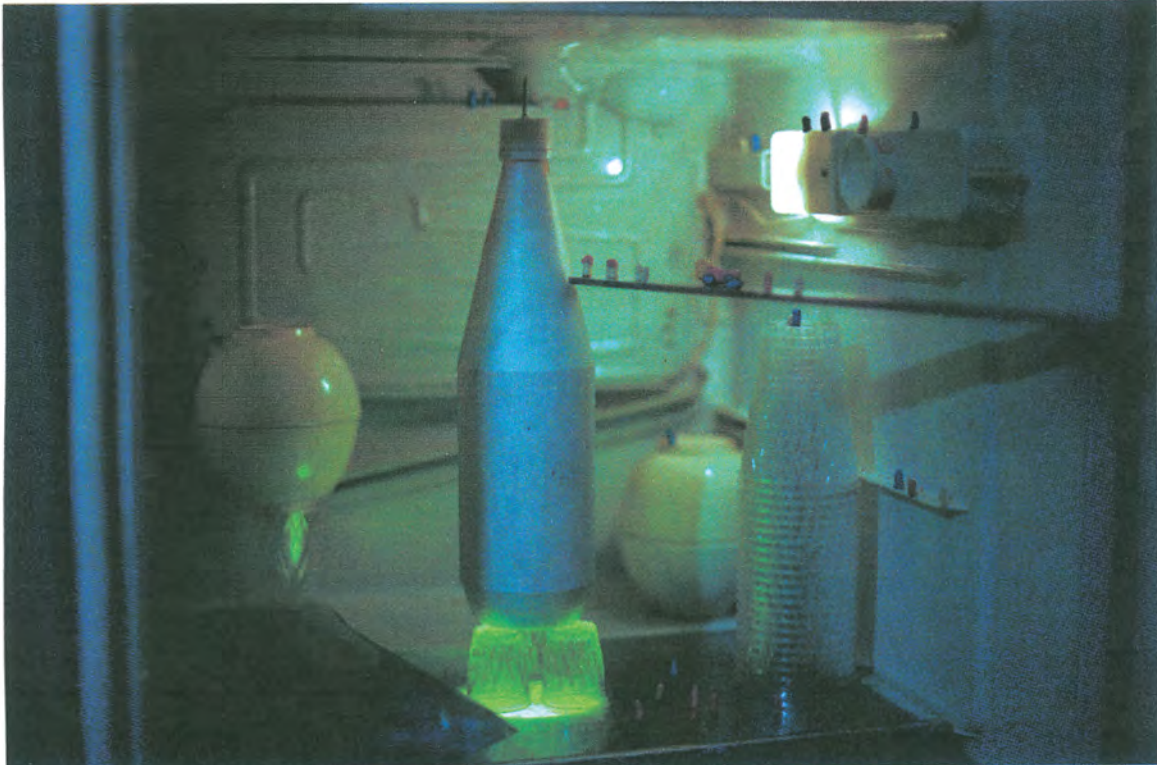
Peter Fischli/David Weiss. *Untitled (Wurstserie)*, 1979. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



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Peter Fischli/David Weiss. *Untitled (Wurstserie)*, 1979. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.



Peter Fischli/David Weiss. *The Right Way*, 1983. Courtesy of Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.

MODERN PAINTERS

PETER FISCHLI AND DAVID WEISS

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

Ever since Bruce Nauman's mid-1960s videos celebrating messing around in the studio, studio play has developed into a thriving genre. Enter Peter Fischli and David Weiss, who similarly used the miscellany of their studio in "Equilibres," a series of 82 photographs taken between 1984 and 1987. Composed almost entirely of everyday objects in various states of improbable balance, the works cleverly animate and make good use of the random stuff that pack rats pile up.

Also on view was the debut screening in the US of the film *Making Things Go* (1987), a behind-the-scenes look at the nonsensical kinetic tinkering that went into the creation of the Swiss duo's masterpiece, *The Way Things Go*. In the latter of the two films (which was not on view), an extended chain reaction occurs between staged objects, resulting from a single absurdist gesture. *Making Things Go* is another carefully orchestrated domino effect done with low-budget resourcefulness. Witness, for example, the artists' painstaking engineering of a makeshift vehicle from tin cans and wooden dowels, all so they could nudge it merely an inch or two in order to bump a tire down a slanted two-by-four. In the still photographs and both films, Fischli and Weiss animate the mundane and charge the familiar with estranging potential, showing how objects are not only acrobatic circus performers, but also more serious actors



FISCHLI AND WEISS, *ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE*, 1984-86. C-PRINT, 11 7/8 X 15 7/8 IN. COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY, NEW YORK. © PETER FISCHLI/DAVID WEISS.

in a drama of tranquillity, hesitation, outburst, and stasis. Once presented with photographs of a cucumber in a chance encounter with a patent leather pump, or a wine bottle cantilevered off a severely arched handsaw, you'll never look at the stuff lying around your house innocently again.

—EVA DIAZ

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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ARTNEWS

Reviews

'Flowers & Questions'

Tate Modern, London

Collaboration brings out the best in Peter Fischli and David Weiss. Working together, they crank up the creativity. It's the same as with comedy writers: work proceeds conversationally, leapfrog fashion. Strong on ideas and resourceful in execution, Fischli & Weiss are indisputably the best thing in Swiss art since Alberto Giacometti.

Their first major U.K. retrospective was both exploratory and encyclopedic. There was *Kanalvideo* (1992), in which a probe whizzes through the sewers of

Zurich, disturbing the odd rat, while in the same gallery a tabletop maze and a hollow animal sculpture stood by, waiting to be put to congruous imaginative use. In another room, what appeared to be the artists' studio proved to be a polyurethane replica perfect in every detail, from grubby packing cases to stale peanuts. Tate Modern director Vicente Todoli, working with the museum's assistant curator Juliet Bingham and Bice Curiger from the Kunsthau Zürich, selected more than 20 bodies of work from nearly 30 years of collaboration.

All that the pair contrive becomes illustrative of their wonderful world. In an early set of color photographs, sausages take on urban roles as cars and fashion models. A large number of detailed little sculptures in plain gray unfired clay illustrate fairy tales, religious scenes, and plays on words. Elsewhere there were tree roots cast in black rubber and an



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Fischli & Weiss, *Outlaws* from "Equilibres/Quiet Afternoon," 1984, color photograph, 15½" x 11½"; *Fashion Show* from "Sausage Photographs," 1979, color photograph, 9½" x 14½"; still from *The Way Things Go*, 1986–87, 16-millimeter film, 30 mins.

idyllic photographic installation in which airport scenes compete with shots of mushrooms and flowers.

Going global, Fischli & Weiss produced a prolonged, silent slide show involving *National Geographic*-type views shown on three screens. Compiled between 1987 and 2000, *Visible World* feasts the passive eye on endless travel opportunities.

Such dilly-dalliance, so prolonged and so prodigal, would prove tiresome were it not that the artists themselves have a low

boredom threshold coupled with a prodigious capacity for executing ideas to the full. Besides the fake studio and the tiny feats in clay, the show included the duo's film *The Way Things Go* (1986–87), in which domino catastrophe theory is tested in a studio setting. It's one thing after another: a car tire is set rolling, triggering a chemical spill followed by a small fire that releases a balloon, which in turn rockets itself toward a water obstacle, and so on, for as long as it takes to wear down the audience into a state of appalled hilarity at the endless repercussions.

What survives of this extended debacle is the record on film, as well as a pair of needle-tipped knives



mounted on a roller skate, accorded the status of prime exhibit. These were employed in the movie for puncturing one of the many balloons that delivered an explosive push. Typical of the artists, the contraption echoes the devices of Joseph Beuys, so novel and solemnly received in his time.

Fischli & Weiss treat the world as their playground, whether they are dressing up as Rat and Bear in their 1981 film *The Least Resistance*, aircraft spotting, kitsch collecting, or make-believing. They transgress with aplomb, regarding all their various materials and mediums as equally useful. Their informality confers a very peculiar distinction on everything that takes their fancy, from Zurich outward.

—William Feaver

This exhibition will be on view at the Kunsthau Zurich from June 8 through September 9, and at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg from November 11 through February 3, 2008.

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Flash Art



FISCHLI AND WEISS

BETWEEN SPECTACULAR AND ORDINARY

Claire Bishop and Mark Godfrey

In July we traveled to Zurich to talk to Fischli and Weiss about their forthcoming retrospectives at the Zurich Kunsthau, Tate Modern and Hamburg Deichtorhallen. We looked at polyurethane sculptures in the 'dirty studio' and photographs in the 'clean studio,' the conversation ranging from Zidane's headbutt to Peter's latest reading (Alpine hiking manuals). We never made it up the Matterhorn.

RETROSPECTIVE

Claire Bishop: Can you tell us about your plans for the forthcoming retrospectives?

Peter Fischli: The title of the show will be "Flowers and Questions" and it will also have a small subtitle, "A Retrospective." This title already makes you see this is not a conventional retrospective; we, as the

artists, are ordering it ourselves. It's not arranged by chronology — we mix things a little bit.

Mark Godfrey: What was your main problem with doing a chronological arrangement?

David Weiss: We don't think chronologically, and we don't see our work developing in a linear way. Some works in the show will be old, and it helps to place them next to new works.

PF: By doing this, works that have become stiff are made liquid again. This is the idea we are working with.

CB: What has it been like to look back at your old work in preparing the show?

DW: One thing that's happened is that we found old films and negatives from the

Equilibrium series. We realized in looking over them that we didn't print some of the very nice ones; it's nice, after twenty years, to see that some of the constructions that we had discarded are pretty good.

PF: In some ways, we have always worked like this, though. We don't alter our back catalogue, but bring out hidden sides of old projects when we return to them. When we began *Visible World* we started with the idea of photographing airports and famous monuments and places. We would also take other shots on our travels and ten years later we looked at these old photographs and realized that the first selection was not the whole story.

EARLY WORKS

MG: Let's go back to your first works. One

thing that strikes us is the differences between your late '70s works and other practices of the time. The "Wurst" series marks a real departure from the drier, more mundane approach to photography typical of artists like Smithson and Huebler; was your series made as a conscious departure from conceptual photography?

PF: Of course we were aware of Conceptual art; I saw "When Attitudes Become Form" when I was 16, and this was one of many doors that opened for me. But we didn't make the "Wurst" series because we were thinking about conceptual photography: it began through our attraction to trivial things that we came across outside the art world. We also wanted to work with narrative.

DW: In that series, the medium was less important than the mentality; the series is close to Polke, even if it is photographic.

CB: Suddenly This Overview seems a typically postmodernist work: did you think that these 180 unfired clay tableaux demonstrated that all subjects and all materials were now possible for artists?

DW: Well, as a material, clay didn't have a very high image.

PF: Like sausages in a way — clay was a forbidden material, not associated with high art, but more with craft. People used clay in their free time to be a bit creative.

DW: It had a pathetic image. But it was also a material which we found was good to work fast with, and to tell a story with.

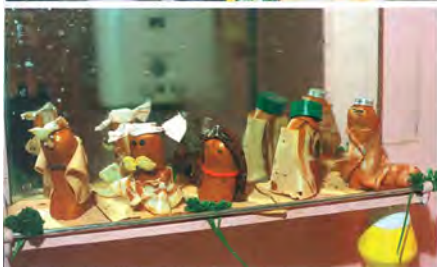
PF: We had this idea of making something you could call a private lexicon of the things you have in your mind, things you learned in school, things you know from mass media, things you know somebody told you. You have all these themes like sport and fairytales and science or whatever. We wanted to bring all these different things together, not making a selection, but creating a big mess of different themes at the same time. And clay was just the material we could use to make everything out of: clay is earth, after all. And we wanted to jump about not only through themes but through different styles: between the ones that are carefully made, and the so-called wild ones. Some are very sketchy.

BEAUTY/KITSCH

MG: These two series — Wurst and Suddenly This Overview — are quite humorous. In many other places, you seem to make works of very traditionally beautiful or even kitschy subjects. I'm thinking of some of the photographs in Visible World. Can you talk about your strategies of using beautiful images?

From top: Outlaws from Quiet Afternoon, 1984. Color photograph. Suddenly This Overview (detail), 1981-82. Unfired clay. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. Opposite: Images, Views (Visible World), 1987-99. Video, 8 hours, and slide show.





PF: We were aware of critical images of the tourist industry when we began this series. A photograph of tourists getting out of a bus in front of the Pyramids, for instance. But this kind of critical photograph is easy to make, and just as much of a cliché as a beautiful photograph of the Pyramids.

DW: And the 'critical' image doesn't explain the fascination of the Pyramids in any case. There is a reason why the Pyramids are famous. When you go there, no matter how many photographs you've seen of them before, you realize that the Pyramids are unique, and that you don't understand them. There is a reason why these sites are powerful; there's a reason why the waves in the sea are emotionally attractive, and we wanted to explore these images, knowing that they were in some ways forbidden fruits.

PF: It was as if you just couldn't use these kinds of images anymore. But we were very attracted to these things, and wanted to ask how you could bring them back into art. There's a question in our little book [*Will Happiness Find Me?*] which sums up this situation: "Can I restore my innocence?"

DW: We weren't just regaining innocence, but arguing that nature doesn't only belong to nationalists, the right wing, farmers, etc. As Swiss artists it was pretty taboo for us to photograph the Matterhorn or to make a film of beautiful landscape.

PF: The Matterhorn belonged to advertising agencies; it was used for selling chocolate.

DW: But we photographed it because we liked it. At the time, we felt good about it.

PF: When you look carefully at *Visible World*, you see it's not just so-called nice images. You also have very ordinary moments on the trip to this beautiful beach. I think in a way it's a matter of balancing the ordinary and the extraordinary.

CB: As well as making images of spectacular landscapes, you've sometimes shown your work in spectacular places. I'm thinking of your showing *Kitty in Times Square* — a work that's extremely close to the cute, the kitsch. What was the thinking behind showing it there?

PF: To start with, *Kitty* was not made as a discussion about kitsch. There was just something super-nice about this cat that we were attracted to. But as for Times Square: we were on holiday in separate places when the invite to put a work on the giant screen in Times Square came. But independently, we both had the same idea: why don't we show the video with the cat. To do something that's more spectacular than what's going on in Times Square would be impossible. We wanted to do something very simple and quiet: it was a logical step for us.

MG: So there's a balance in your work between the spectacular and the ordinary. In other ways your work is caught between two poles — the criticality of '70s art and the embrace of beauty. Peter, in an earlier conversation, you said that the work was schizophrenic, but that this was the only possible way to make work now. Can you say more about this?

DW: I think schizophrenic is too hard an expression. But we do try to look at things from different angles at the same time. I'd see it more in terms of irony: saying something and meaning something else.

MG: But your work doesn't have the cynicism of much ironic art...

PF: You're talking about irony in terms of its everyday use. When you talk about irony philosophically, it means much more. If irony is clear as irony, it's not irony. Irony is about unclarity — talking on different levels at once.

DW: For instance, you can present a sausage and make people look at it as a carpet; or show them a clay sculpture of two people lying on a bed and then say in a title that this scene shows the aftermath of Einstein's conception.

PF: Or the photographs in *Visible World*. When we made *Visible World*, and also the videos we showed in Venice, we were thinking of Kippenberger's reply to Beuys' "Every man is an artist." Kippenberger said "Every artist is also a human being." We were behaving at the same time as artists and as regular tourists. I remember being on a boat in Venice and videoing the Grand Canal alongside all these other people doing exactly the same thing. Operating on two planes at once is part of our practice.

CB: One of the things that struck me about these videos that you showed in the Venice Biennale and then in the Serpentine Gallery was a lack of editing. They seemed to be about showing as much as possible. As a viewer you would never be able to sit and watch everything that was presented in the gallery. How did you work with this footage?

DW: We did a lot of editing and made our footage shorter. Each video was made on a trip and we took out material that was too long.

CB: So the decisions about editing were to do with cutting down length, or only keeping in what was interesting?

DW: Everything we filmed, we'd found interesting. We didn't ever leave the camera, go away, and come back. We stayed behind the camera for as long as it was fun or interesting for us. We filmed seventeen minutes of cows because they were so nice. But we took ten minutes out because it's too long. There's no classical editing though: there's still seven minutes just of cows.



TRAVEL/SITE

MG: Many of the works we've been talking about were made all over the world. You've traveled to make work and shown it in many different countries. But one thing you've not done is to make 'site-specific' work. I'm thinking of artists who accept an invite to show in a place and then engage specifically with the history and culture of that place.

DW: We wouldn't go to Cairo and show a work about Cairo, because we don't understand how this city functions.

PF: I'm not criticizing all site-specific projects, but we do mistrust the idea of traveling to a place to make a work about it. To understand the complexity of a place, you need to know it closely; we don't feel really able to do this.

DW: We look at the visible world. We like to know what we are doing. When we carve the polyurethane objects, they are mostly from our studio or from everyday life. We understand them and we can transform them. We can bring them to Japan or to England, but we know what's going on.

MG: Each time you show the rooms of these objects, you change the installation to incorporate objects, like milk cartons that come from the country in which you are showing. This in a way is like a microscopic kind of site-specificity.

PF: In most cases we do this. We take objects from a place, like the broom cupboard in MMK Frankfurt, and copy them in polyurethane. Then we mix them up with copies of the tools made to use them and with sculptures that we've made long before.

CB: So the work doesn't have a core as such. It's like a bleed between two slides.

PF: The illusion works because there are also unexpected things in the rooms. If there weren't, the rooms would be like bad movie sets. But in every room there are things that you wouldn't imagine to be there.

QUESTIONS

CB: Is everything drifting apart?

PF: Yes. *Suddenly This Overview* describes this mood very nicely.

MG: Is everything a hopeless shitty mess?

DW: Certainly not.

PF: Certainly not, but you have to do something.

CB: And is resistance useless?

DW: No, sometimes it helps.

PF: This is a question that I would say targets the *Flowers*. When you are astonished by the beauty of these flowers, in a way you try to build up a resistance against it and come up with these critical ideas about what beauty is and isn't.

MG: Should I be ashamed about having no opinion about most things?

DW: No, because most things are anyway more than you understand or can really control. Like most of the *Questions* that you cannot answer. Our aim wasn't to think about the questions themselves too much, but about someone coming up with all those questions.

MG: Who was that someone? Both of you?

PF: A little bit both... It's maybe like the figure of the artist that will be in the first

Busi (Kitty), 2001. Video, 6 mins. Times Square, New York. Opposite: from top: Film stills from Patrick Frey's documentary *Making Things Go*, 1985/2006, showing the artists rehearsals for the first version of their later film *The Way Things Go*. Courtesy Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich; Untitled (Tate), 2000. Carved and painted polyurethane; Fashion Show from *Sausage Photographs*, 1979. Color photograph; *Flowers*, 1998. Color photograph; *The Right Way*, 1983. 16mm film, 55 mins; *Suddenly This Overview*, 1981-82. Exhibition at Galerie Stähli, Zurich. Unfired clay. Courtesy Matthew Marks Gallery, New York. All images © the artists.

room in the Tate exhibition, called *In The Studio*. It's like a little sculpture that's wearing a tie and somebody has done a stupid joke and put a cigarette in his mouth. You have this figure but it's not really clear what he is... A genius, an idiot, a clown, a bourgeois...

MG: And that's your image of the artist, between genius and clown?

DW: It's possible to describe it like this. It's also an image about the clichés of the artist. We believe there's something right about clichés, so there is always this corner but you have to find out for yourself eventually. ■

Claire Bishop is a London-based art historian and critic who teaches at the University of Warwick; Mark Godfrey is an art critic and lecturer in History and Theory of Art at the Slade School, London.

Peter Fischli was born in 1952 in Zurich and David Weiss was born in 1946 in the same city. They live and work in Zurich.

Their retrospective "Flowers and Questions" runs at Tate Modern, London, until January 14th, 2007.

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frieze



THE ODD COUPLE

Peter Fischli and David Weiss talk to
Jörg Heiser about three decades of making art;
slapstick and semiotics, sausages and bears,
sunsets, polyurethane, culture and cats ...

Heiser, Jörg. "The Odd Couple," *Frieze*. October 2006, pp. 196–205.

Three gherkin stumps are looking at a pile of carpets, while a dealer advises them. (Actually, they're not carpets but slices of Mortadella and Lyon sausage, and the dealer is a piece of radish.) Is this a snapshot taken by a drunk looking at the remains of a smorgasbord at four in the morning? No, it's Peter Fischli and David Weiss in 1979, staging and photographing miniature incidents for *Wurstserie* (Sausage Series). Just what kind of artistic partnership is this? Who comes up with this kind of mind-expanding silliness? A 30-minute film from 1981 provides something of an answer: it's a rat and a bear. Shot on 8mm blown up to 16mm, *Der Geringste Widerstand* (The Least Resistance) features the two Swiss artists dressed in furry brown rat and panda bear costume roaming around a Los Angeles reminiscent of a third-rate buddy-cop flick. Meeting on a bridge over a busy motorway, they discuss the latest developments in the art world: 'Any work?' 'No, but some money.' 'Interesting, how does that happen?' 'Some sources say it's the result of bad vibes between the painter and the viewer. Let's really go to town and cash in for all we're worth, even though we don't have a clue.' In the ensuing whodunit rat and bear come across, among other things, a corpse in gallery, a sculpture-as-weapon and a mansion swimming-pool with forensic evidence of recent poolside lounging – smoking guns of catalogues and magazine spreads featuring Picasso, Mondrian and Hockney. Here their quest for art success finds an early answer, as a ghostly voice hovering above the water flutes: 'I am the cultivated life, elegance, you know me well ... but also sleeping late and staying in bed ... I am beauty, the never-ending garden party. I am champagne from a lady's shoe ... I'm the least resistance.' And so, to cut a long story short, this autumn Fischli/Weiss have a retrospective at Tate Modern.

'We want to take things out of their niche and transport them somewhere else, but without denying their origins.'

Peter Fischli

Jörg Heiser You began working together in 1979. When did it become clear that this would be a permanent arrangement?

Peter Fischli We have never made an explicit statement on this. *De facto*, of course, it is the case, but the joint projects themselves are what actually justify it for us, not merely the desire to work together.

JH Beginning by making staged sausage photography, followed by a film featuring yourselves in furry rat and bear costumes, I guess you quickly gained a reputation as a comedy double act? It's an old motif in slapstick and cartoons: the odd couple. By using the pseudonym R. Mutt, Marcel Duchamp, was alluding to the newspaper cartoon 'Mutt & Jeff' from the 1910s – a tall, thin guy and a small, chubby one, both totally crazy. Are Fischli/Weiss the Tom & Jerry of art?

PF These two types exist not only in comedy but also in novels, in Flaubert and Dostoevsky – the trope of the odd couple. But even as far as the 'comedy double act' idea is concerned, we weren't much worried about it being interpreted like that.

JH For her exhibition in 2003 at the Kunsthalle in Zurich, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster wanted you to appear in the rat and bear costumes again. Not in a film but as a performance.

David Weiss Yes, she wanted the rat and the bear as philosophers who conduct dialogues – not necessarily funny ones. Although the situation is funny, if the animals say something intelligent.

PF It was a spontaneous suggestion. But one is not obliged to comply with such proposals to the letter. We did the opposite: instead of appearing as clowns, we hung the costumes in dark Perspex vitrines and celebrated them as fetishes.

JH Deliberately confounding the expectations of a 'comedy double act'...

PF We do take steps to show things in their true light. Which is also what makes it interesting: we don't want to be rid of it altogether, but we don't want to leave it as it is either. That's true of many of our works: we want to take things out of the niche where they belong and transport them somewhere else, but without denying their origins. It is about taking but also about giving back.

JH So there is a strategy with regard to possible expectations?

DW But not from outside, not as a concept. It just gets corrected, for example by simply mothballing the rat and the bear.

PF And by doing nothing more than that.

JH At the time were the rat and bear pieces mainly perceived as just amusing incidental entertainment?

PF Yes, of course.

JH So your attitude towards conventional discussions about art was to use not outrage or taboo but something subliminal, beneath the radar of 'seriousness'.

PF In Los Angeles, where we were living at the time, one was of course confronted with Disneyland and the entire movie industry, and we discovered this costume hire place, and things like that were still not being used much in art then.

JH Did you know Paul McCarthy's work?

PF No. We were more familiar with people like John Baldessari or Ed Ruscha.

JH In any case, the difference between you and McCarthy and his references to Disney, is that he emphasises the dark side whereas your works always include a barrier of normality, or decency. Where does that come from?

PF I'll stick my neck out – this is very speculative – but I would say that for McCarthy there's an entirely different justification for doing it, because American mass culture – and much of Pop art – represses all that to quite a degree. In European culture it's a different story, through psychoanalysis and Viennese Actionism. For us it had already been dealt with. And it's not as if we avoided these issues. But we thought our task was a different one.

DW It was simply more in keeping with our temperament for the rat and the bear to be discussing some major issues which they can never do justice to. Instead of cutting these animals open and having paint and blood coming out ...

JH So the emphasis is not on showing that popular cultures repress sex and violence but on showing that they give rise to viable cultural techniques.

PF Correct.

Suddenly this Overview

'Plötzlich diese Übersicht' ('Suddenly this Overview'), the rat mutters at one point in *The Least Resistance*, continuing with 'die Wahrheit kommt sogleich ans Licht, wenn man sich den Kopf zerbricht' ('The truth comes to light if you rack your brains'). Fischli/Weiss took the quip to heart. In 1981 they made a series of 200 small, unfired clay objects, daringly reuniting the then still divorced discourses of Modernist sculpture and Christmas crèche pottery. They are slightly rough-cut renderings, with literal titles of events that have changed the world: *Mick Jagger and Brian Jones going home satisfied after writing 'Satisfaction'*, or *The Last Dinosaur standing lonely in a deserted landscape or a cuddly pet with a bulbous nose and dim eyes holding on to a lamppost (Mausi's Pissed)*.

With 'Sichtbare Welt' (Visible World, 1987–2001) the respect for and willingness to employ the cultural techniques of the amateur took the form of a gargantuan accumulation of 3,000 images – displayed on 15 light-boxes or as an eight-hour video slide-show on three monitors – that bring together anything a tourist might consider interesting: desert sunsets, pyramids, houses, traffic junctions. Almost everything, from all over the world. These images are not arranged by motif – as in Gerhard Richter's 'Atlas' (1962–ongoing), for instance – but simply represent a chronological account of the trips the artists have made.

JH In the 1980s, discussion on art, in the German-speaking world at least, was dominated by catch phrases such as 'intensity' and 'neo-Expressionism'. Against this backdrop did you experience not being understood? And did this make you more determined, like Duchamp, when his *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) was judged not serious enough by the Cubists and he went on to make the ready-mades in the following years? Was this why you decided, right, now for some funny little pottery sculptures.

PF In 1981, when we showed the clay figures in Zurich, although many people liked them, we still didn't feel that we were taken entirely seriously. For many people it was nice jokes and anecdotes, nothing more. Many people reduced it to the narrative level. But we knew what we were doing, and that appealed to us. On the one hand, you do something against the others, and on the other, you do something for yourself. It always works a little both ways.

DW That was in keeping with us and our temperament. We didn't want to fall into the pathos trap of our artist friends – we did find that strange. Because all these people were our friends, we knew them all. Although we weren't completely conscious of this – now we're talking about it 20 years later, but at the time it was just the way it was.

JH A similar thing happened with Martin Kippenberger. Many people thought he was just this nutcase ...



Rat and Bear
(detail)
1981/2004
Cotton and Perspex
Dimensions variable



Im Teppichladen
(At the Carpet Shop)
From
'Sausage Series'
1979
Photograph
24x35 cm



*Der Geringste
Widerstand*
(The Least
Resistance)
1981
Film still



Clockwise from top left:

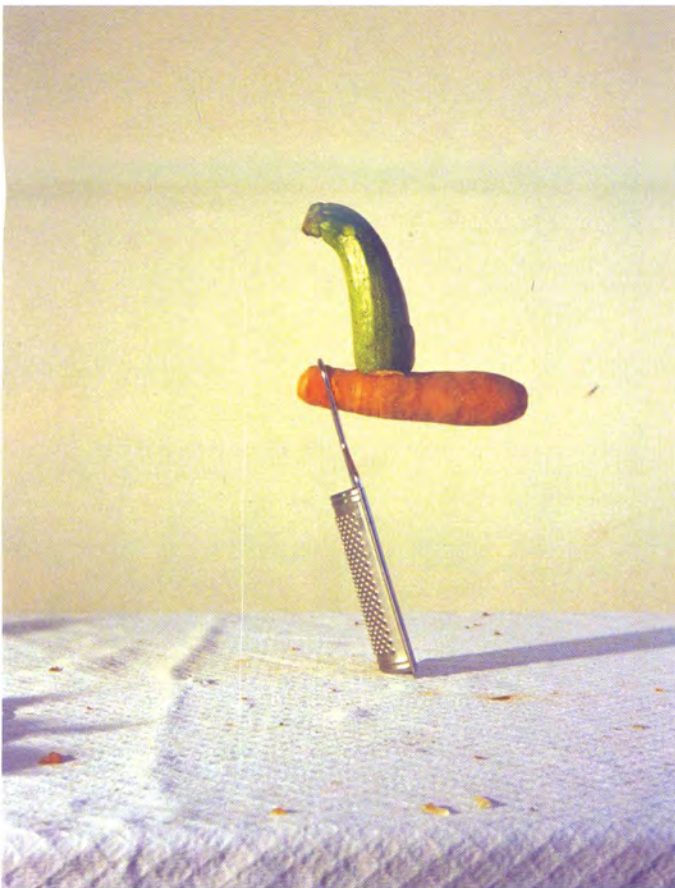
Geburt und Tod
(Birth and Death)

Beliebte Gegensätze: Tier und Mensch (Popular Opposites: Man and Beast)

Beliebte Gegensätze: Theorie und Praxis (Popular Opposites: Theory and Practice)

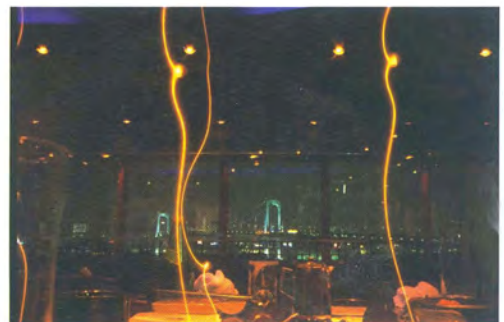
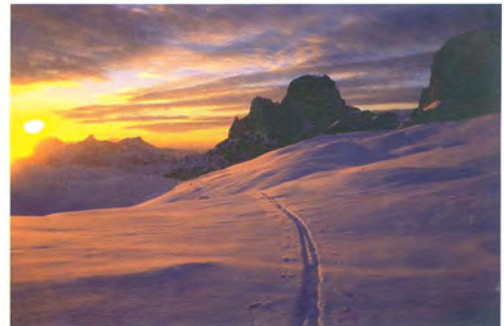
Der gestiefelte Kater
(The Cat in Seven League Boots)

From the series
'Plötzlich diese Übersicht' (Suddenly This Overview)
1981
Unfired clay
Dimensions variable



Stiller Nachmittag
(Quiet Afternoon)
From the series
'Stiller Nachmittag'
1984-5
Photograph
41×31 cm

Photographs from
'Sichtbare Welt'
(Visible World)
1987-2001
15 light tables and
3000 photographs
83 cm×28 m×69 cm



PF And it was a bit like that with 'Suddenly This Overview': many people felt that these stories spoke to them, but ...

DW ... can it be trusted?...

PF ... does it have meaning? People denied us that, I felt at the time.

JH Adopting the hobby approach – was that where it started?

DW No, it was the simplicity. Taking photographs is easy. To start with, you just press the button and then see what comes out. Clay is an incredibly soft, congenial, patient material. It is the first step. It poses no obstacles. It doesn't complain.

PF In the late 1970s and early '80s, working with clay as your material was taboo, relegated to the category of handicraft, domestic creativity. It had a bad image, at least in high culture; it was considered unserious. So it was like adopting an amateur technique. Like our photographs for 'Visible World': there is the parallel with normal tourists, who go to the same places and also take photos.

JH At the time this sympathy for 'normal' activities was far from the norm. Among latter-day hippies, early punks and bohemian artists, nothing was more despised than the petit bourgeois and their narrow-minded habits.

PF That makes them attractive to us, doesn't it? It wasn't the central point, but of course it is a kick. When we made videos on *vaporettos* in Venice, we were with thousands of tourists who were doing the same thing. It's just that at that particular moment, one is doing it oneself as an artist. There sure are some nice sides to what we do that we are aware of.

Time Stretched

In 1995, 96 hours of video Fischli/Weiss had shot on countless car journeys in and around Zurich were displayed – with a dozen monitors showing eight hours each – in the Swiss pavilion at the Venice Biennale. The style is more reminiscent of the Discovery channel than Warhol: a road tunnel, suburbs, a cow in a field; a duck, dog, cat; a cheese maker, dentist, canal workers and lumberjacks at work; a tank; a Techno party. As it seems already impossible, for the artists to have digested all of this footage, how should the viewers, that lonely crowd, deal with them? What remains of 'beauty' or 'concept' amongst this seeming indifference? Are you supposed to take it all in, to pick sequences like finger food from a buffet? The untitled piece added up to not so much a visual portrait of Switzerland as an inquiry into how much time, and life, we actually want to spend looking.

JH Might the 96-hour Venice video also be about this idea of 'interpassivity', as opposed to interactivity, about delegating the passive enjoyment of looking at stuff to video devices?

DW As well as actually looking at all the footage, which was naturally far more extensive, we were also always behind the camera during shooting.

PF We give things value by paying attention to them, when we are filming and when we are selecting. The same thing then happens with the viewers. They choose from the many monitors what they are interested in and pay attention to certain things for a certain duration. They have to ask themselves the same question as we do: what shall I waste my time on? And by giving them this time I enhance the value of these things.

JH A more culturally pessimistic interpretation would be that people who constantly record everything on video when they are travelling keep experience at a distance so that when they get home they can prove 'I was there'. Why do you tend to assume that this – and I like this about you – is a legitimate and positive cultural technique and not the nemesis of Western world?

PF Maybe this is best explained using the example of 'Visible World'. The same thing happens there: you travel to a place, to the pyramids, or a beautiful beach, or the Matterhorn, whatever, and then you take these photos. There is the trashy element of there already being so very many photos of these places, but at the same time these places display a great splendour – people photograph them for a reason. And in spite of the criticism, we do not want to shut ourselves off from the splendour and beauty of these places. The little book of questions (*Will Happiness Find Me?*, 2002) contains this question: can I restore my innocence? You go to the beautiful beach, palm trees, sunset, you take a photo; on the one hand you think it's great, but in the back of your mind you know these pictures are very corny. But the pathos is there. And we want to occupy a position somehow in the middle, slightly torn between the two.

DW The discovery of the beaches of the South Seas or the mountains

as a picture is a cultural achievement that often came from somewhere else. The mountains of Switzerland were discovered by the British and made accessible and climbed. For the people who lived here, on the other hand, it was merely tough and strenuous – no flat meadows, only steep, inclined meadows.

PF One aspect of 'Visible World', or the Venice videos, is the reclaiming of these things, because otherwise one abandons them to mass culture, to advertising, or one says it's just these stupid tourists.

DW In our culture we feel like we have the task to behave as individuals, and so we don't want to share these experiences ...

JH ... the Lonely Planet.

DW Lonely Planet. Precisely.

PF But that's an illusion.

DW Yes, it's an illusion.

JH These works featuring an abundance of visuals, including the 'Blumen' series (Flowers, 1998), with its double exposures of flowers, were made before the existence of Google Image Search. Would you have done it differently if it had existed at the time?

DW The point is finding it and doing it yourself. Making time and being there. And not just buying images. Image databases already existed, but we didn't want that.

JH Could it be that in the duration of the activity one maybe 'forgets' what may have started out as an ironic stance, and in so doing achieves something like a second-order experience of beauty?

DW Quite clearly. But at some point even that experience is over, because one gets the feeling of having worked that through.

JH Thierry de Duve describes the shift in art from a Kantian aesthetic judgement of 'This is beautiful' to Duchamp's 'This is art' as expressed in the selection of a ready-made. The question of 'beauty' becomes secondary: whether the urinal (*Fountain*, 1917) is interpreted as containing the outline of a Madonna or a Buddha, which has been done, is then beside the point. In the case of Donald Judd it is 'When someone says it's art, it's art'. In your case, a bit like Warhol's series 'Flowers' (1964), taken from a Kodak advert, the two appear absurdly coupled: 'This is art, it's beautiful.'

PF All these different steps are carried inside oneself. They are filters that are superimposed. The beautiful thing about the flower pictures is that they represent an unsolved problem. They are beautiful, but this issue of filters – that we are incapable of a totally innocent gaze – resonates in them. No doubt about it, we like these flower pictures. And that is also a moment of surprise, that one is actually seduced by these things. Nonetheless making double exposures is in itself a kind of aesthetic breach of taboo, as if one thinks that a flower alone is not enough ... The presumptuousness of using a double exposure to make the flower a little bit more beautiful than creation has revealed it to us, that's a little malicious towards the flower.

DW It is quite harsh ... but in another way it's just something to work on. For a year we decide to photograph it, evaluate it, think about it, live with it. We also had the idea of putting the viewer into an intoxicated state or a kind of feverish excess of aesthetic perception, where one is no longer quite sure whether or not one is seeing double.

JH That works against the idea of it being just ironic and funny and nothing more.

DW That kind of thing gets exhausted incredibly quickly. If one fails to establish a sense of irony and seriousness at the same time.

'We had the idea of putting the viewer into an intoxicated state or a kind of feverish excess of aesthetic perception.'

David Weiss

The Invisible

'Fotografias' (Photographs 2004–5) consists of 108 small black and white photographs, all showing painted fairground genre scenes that the artists tracked down on numerous research trips. Sea anemones, clowns, wolves and Jimi Hendrix rise from cheesy fantasy like monsters from a swamp. *Eine unerledigte Arbeit* (An Unsettled Work, 2004) achieves a similar effect, albeit from a very different angle: projected images, two at a time, slowly dissolve into each other. Like a hilariously literal illustration of a dream-sequence routine in a film, puppet faces are superimposed over a dimly lit bedroom, or a cat's eyes over a vertical sunset.

JH 'Fotografias' is something of an anthropological finding, documenting an often overlooked cultural treasure, the fairground painting. Why were you drawn to these?

DW The function of these pictures in the fairground is to promise people that they can expose themselves a little to these dangers, being slightly beside themselves, losing control, be it in the ghost train, the dodgems or the roller-coaster. These are actually images for selling, seductive images. They have to offer something one doesn't otherwise have in everyday life.

JH Like 'Fotografias', *An Unsettled Work* gives the impression of rendering the invisible visible. Was that the original idea?

DW No, originally it was just scraping the barrel of our archive, pictures that had not previously been used. One might describe it as the repressed of the 'Visible World'.

JH Repressed by you?

DW Yes, it didn't fit into this concept. Pictures were not chosen when we were selecting material for the piece, but that were chosen when we were taking the photographs: if you have your camera with you and you're in the suburbs taking pictures of houses and you see a nice house that has been painted in a funny way, then the decision over whether or not you can use it doesn't come until later.

PF When we were in Paris photographing the Eiffel Tower and Notre-Dame for 'Visible World' (1987–2001), we went into the catacombs and took photos of all the skulls. Like David said, that was the bottom of the barrel, the dark content, and a few years later we took them and turned them into *An Unsettled Work*. And then when we were making *An Unsettled Work*, gathering material, we found these fairground paintings and saw that they could be a subject in their own right – 'Fotografias'. One piece led to the other.

'These are images for selling, seductive images. They have to offer something one doesn't have in everyday life.'

David Weiss

La méthode Fischli/Weiss

JH There seem to be four steps inherent in your approach. The first step is to collect, amass, using coincidence and memory rather than a systematic approach. The second step is to introduce a particular order, a hierarchy – especially if that means ignoring or inverting an existing one. The third step concerns time: stretching and compressing it – from 80 hours to the blink of an eye. The fourth step, I'd say, is to twist and turn and sometimes subvert the methods I just mentioned, with a penchant for the deadpan, for slapstick. Would you agree with that description?

PF Yes, that is right. But we might give these four steps different names: the first two steps of archiving and ordering are more like provisional storage. We do these things and then they're there, and when they've been in the studio long enough then maybe later we will begin to evaluate them, to establish a hierarchy. And as far as the final step is concerned, it's about getting all of this into an artistic form. And that does involve reinterpretations. In the case of the 'Fotografias' it was a relatively simple reversal; these pictures are normally very large and very colourful, and we removed their colour and their size, made them very small, black and white. It's not slapstick, perhaps, but it does involve tricks, artistic methods.

JH By 'slapstick' I mean calculatedly amusing collisions, muddles: doing something crazy in a very sober way, or something very sober in a very crazy way. The idea of working against an initial impulse with a sense of enjoying the absurd.

DW Well, with the airports there's nothing to tell you where they are, for example. That's the simplest one, a cheap trick. It leaves the viewer slightly at a loss, so it's just some place or other. And the same happens with the 'Fotografias', when you take what are actually very different images and relate them via the format and the black and white.

JH Do you work together on every step?

PF When we're photographing flowers or paintings, each of us goes off on his own and then we meet up after two or three days and look together at each other's results.

JH Is it a competition – who can get the best pictures?

PF It's competitive in a positive sense. Each of us brings back hunting trophies and we show them to each other.

Small Questions, Big Questions

JH From the 'question pots' (*Kleiner Fragentopf*, *Grosser Fragentopf*, Big Question Pot, Little Question Pot, 1984), on the insides of which weighty and not so weighty questions are asked, through to *Kleine Fragen*, *Große Fragen* (Small Questions, Big Questions, 2003), comprising slide projections of questions, there seems to be a therapeutic idea at work – questioning yourselves, anxiously. New Age, self-help. I imagine someone trying to find their feet in this cultural milieu.

DW In very vague terms we did imagine someone asking himself slightly paranoid questions that revolve very much around himself. That is part of the legacy of psychoanalysis: broody self-questioning. Questioning first appeared in *Rat & Bear*, who made these drawings for themselves, *Ordnung und Reinlichkeit* (Order and Cleanliness, 1981). And then came the pair of opposites 'small questions and big questions': for example, small question – 'Has the last bus gone?' – as compared to big question – 'Where is the galaxy going?' The answer to the former question may, of course, be far more important than the latter, which one can take more time over.

JH It's like Woody Allen or Larry David rendering therapeutic self-questioning absurd by shifting the scale.

DW Precisely. But it is also a matter of going through life with the question of what is important and what is unimportant. We are constantly making judgements on this. And when things go slightly awry, it is sometimes amusing, sometimes sobering.

PF Boris Groys has a theory that there are two different types of question. One is: 'What is the diameter of the Earth?' and you immediately begin thinking, 'Oh yes, we learned that in school'. The second question is: 'Why is the Earth not a cube?' and you immediately begin wondering about the person who asked the question. Many of our questions go more in the latter direction.

DW For example, the 'question pots' contain the question 'Was I a good child?' That is a question of the introspective type.

PF And in the little book, it's handwritten notes – faked, of course – a look into the profane notes of a strange person. We're not especially interested in getting answers to these questions. We're more interested in creating an appropriate place to store them, be it in a pot – you only have to take one step back and you can no longer see them – or as a slide projection: they appear slowly and quickly fade away again.

JH Nocturnal visions, someone who can't get to sleep.

PF Right. And correspondingly, these questions are not carved in stone.

Physical Comedy

The series of staged photographs 'Stiller Nachmittag' (Quiet Afternoon, 1984–5), also known as the 'Equilibrium' series, employs everyday objects in the most absurd, gravity-defying constellations rivaling Chinese circus acts: for example, an empty wine bottle sits on top of an apple that sits on top of an eggcup, while a plate balances on the cork of the bottle, held in place by a counter-balance of a fish slice and a ladle, the latter holding an onion in a net (*Natürliche Grazie*, Natural Grace).

Der Lauf der Dinge (The Way Things Go, 1987) takes the issue of tinkering with gravity one step further, setting it in motion. The result is a 30-minute sequence of enduring triumph: car tyres, candles, plastic bottles, fire crackers, suspicious liquids, planks and balloons are all lined up like dominoes (only occasionally bamboozled by way of a well-hidden cut). The sheer amount of Sisyphean work that must have gone into this is astounding, as is the ease with which the result sets itself at the head of a comical tradition of wacky, complex machineries fulfilling simple tasks in a convoluted, yet suspenseful way (though Fischli/Weiss remove even the simple task – the domino effect just ends in fog). It's a tradition that leads from the cartoons the American engineer Rube Goldberg thought up in the early 20th century (his British counterpart was W. Heath Robinson, with his cartoons of wacky machines run by balding, bespectacled types in overalls), through Gyro Gearloose, to Kermit demonstrating the 'What Happens Next machine' to his eager *Sesame Street* audience.

JH In the 'Equilibrium' series and in *The Way Things Go*, slapstick features not only in methodical terms but also directly – the physical comedy of objects. How did the one lead to the other?

DW First there were the 'Equilibriums'. We were sitting in a bar somewhere and playing around with the things on the table,



'Fotografias'
(Photographs)
2004-5
(detail)
C-type prints
10x15 cm each



*Ordnung und
Reinlichkeit
(Order and
Cleanliness)*
(detail)
1981
Book

DIE BEIDEN AUTOREN



Der Lauf der Dinge
(The Way Things Go)
1987
Film stills

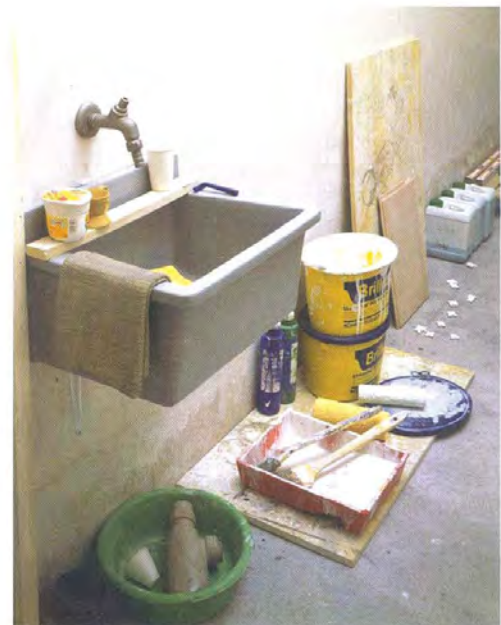


Das Floss (The Raft)
1982
Polyurethane, paint
Installation view

Raum unter der Treppe
(Room Under the Stairs)
1993
Polyurethane, paint
Installation view



The Right Way
1983
Film still



and we thought to ourselves, this energy of never-ending collapse – because our construction stood for a moment and then collapsed before we built it up again – should be harnessed and channelled in a particular direction. That was also the original idea for *The Way Things Go*, in the Tate Modern exhibition; when you see the 'Making of', it becomes clear that the creative process was not funny at all. I've always found that astonishing anyway – the way people always laugh when the next thing falls over. Because for us it was more like a circus act, trained objects. And the ones that didn't do it were badly trained or badly positioned. It required considerable patience.

PF Strangely, for us, while we were making the piece, it was funnier when it failed, when it didn't work. When it worked, that was more about satisfaction. And that the film created the impression that the things move on their own, without human help, that they become spirited, living beings.

JH These stories of failure and collapse and then not failing after all – that's also the heroic theme of slapstick: the hero who accidentally breaks something, but in so doing brings about a stroke of good fortune and knocks over the villain etc. In *The Way Things Go* you laugh because something that cannot really work actually does work. It's a kind of triumph.

PF And there's an element of comedy in your identifying this heroic theme in the pathetic falling-over of objects. I see it too, and I think you're right, but if that is the case, then it has an element of comedy in itself.

DW A professor in Germany once asked us whether we were thinking about the French Revolution when we were making that film.

JH Why?

DW Because of the upheavals that lead to further upheavals. And in China a student asked me if we were thinking of reincarnation and the transmigration of souls...

JH The title *The Way Things Go* suggests the historical, a concatenation of fateful events.

PF I don't really like it, that title.

JH Why?

PF Well, it's somehow ...

JH ... a bit Wim Wenders?

PF Yes, and it's not my favourite title, because it's too close to what we see – 'Suddenly this Overview' is a better title, for a series of small clay sculptures.

JH 'Suddenly this Overview' refutes itself, whereas *The Way Things Go* reaffirms.

PF Yes, it's a little bit unsophisticated.

Replicas

Fischli/Weiss' replicas have an inbuilt level of absurdity – why would anyone go to the lengths of producing minute imitations of ordinary objects rather than simply using the originals as ready-mades? Carved from polyurethane and painted to look almost exactly like real buckets, hammers, pieces of plywood, telephones or chairs, these pieces are absolutely not presenting the forgery of something particularly valuable – say a design object or antique. Instead they seem to be the monstrous evidence of artists 'wasting their time'.

JH *Das Floß* (The Raft, 1982) was the first work in which you used carved polyurethane. How did that come about?

PF 'Suddenly This Overview' made us realize that, besides anecdotal sculptures, we are also interested in objects: we'd already made models of a rifle, bread, a rucksack. We saw the potential, but with clay we couldn't get beyond a certain size. This is where polyurethane suggested itself as a material – the kind used by movie set decorators because it is very easy to work with. Easy to cut and paint, very fast. First we made a huge pig with little piglets, and a car engine. They then landed on the raft.

JH These are objects that are hard to render ...

DW We took a relatively free approach when carving, not as naturalistic as today.

PF It was about the world of garages and cars and workshops, and on the other hand the farm; or to be more precise, about how these two worlds flow into one another. And the raft is a situation where the person loading this raft must make certain decisions. It's a context that creates a hierarchy.

DW It's also about indecision: what to take, what to leave behind.

JH But the more recent replicas imitate a working situation in the context of the exhibition; they are not immediately identifiable as

a 'fake' – the museum's technical staff really could have left all this behind.

PF After it was first shown in Cologne, the raft came back to Switzerland, and we then set it up for an exhibition not as a raft but as a storage room which can only be looked into from outside. This gave us the idea for rooms like *Raum unter der Treppe* (Room under the Stairs, 1993) at the Frankfurt Museum of Modern Art.

DW Someone is busily working away there, but they've just popped out – the whole thing is actually a big illusion, but it works.

JH With the walk-in situations featuring replicas, the question arises of whether or not you're allowed to touch the object, an issue that didn't arise with the raft, which was clearly delimited and identifiable as art object.

DW Sure, visitors to the exhibition want to hold them in their hands, and it's disconcerting to find how light they are, especially the larger objects.

JH Which is also a psychedelic, uncanny effect.

PF They're a bit like will-o-the-wisps – there in visual terms but not corresponding in terms of touch. Phantoms.

'A professor in Germany once asked us if we were thinking about the French Revolution when we made *The Way Things Go*.'

David Weiss

Taste

JH Duchamp once said that an artistic decision in favour of a particular object as a ready-made comes from a certain kind of 'indifference' – that it is no longer a matter of taste in the sense of deciding whether the object possesses beauty or not. How does taste come about for Fischli/Weiss? What appeals to you and what does not? Do you have a system for how to gauge it?

PF One method of avoiding the decision for or against beauty is certainly our approach of making groups of works with many parts. The flower series consists of 111 pictures, which means we can include some we find particularly pleasing as well as some that we find less appealing. And the same happens in the 'Rooms': unlike Pop art, which turns one particular object and that one object only into an icon, they are a collection of replicas of worthless everyday objects. So instead of saying this is the most beautiful object, this is the most beautiful flower, this is the most beautiful airport, and there is only one, what you get is simultaneity and a selection. Slightly switching off the aspect of naming or creating a hierarchy.

DW Yes, but at the same time the opposite is also true. If we have a collection of black and white slides of the fairground and the fairytale motif appears in 12 variations, then we select what best captures the core of this motif. And by the end that leaves maybe 20 images, and then within these we establish our own criteria: which are good, which fit together. This means that within the system we inevitably create value judgements and hierarchies, criteria for taste.

PF But the fact that there are two of us also comes into play. Some are David's favourite motifs; some are mine. That breaks down the hierarchies again.

DW Then I'm glad that he shoulders the responsibility for a particularly ugly flower. When you have 111 pictures of flowers, that kind of thing is negotiable – if we agree on 30, then each of us gets five bonus images, but the rest have to be done without.

PF The little book of questions, includes the question: 'Do I suffer from good taste?' In the 'Equilibriums' we were slightly relieved of the question of which object must be selected according to which criteria: it didn't matter whether the colour of the cigarette lighter that establishes and maintains the balance is a nice green or not.

DW The only criterion shaping the composition was balance.

PF Gerhard Richter once said something I really liked: a lottery ticket with six out of six winning numbers marked on it can only be good. Only an idiot would say, 'But the crosses aren't nicely distributed'. And the same is true with the 'Equilibriums': if it stays up, then it can only be good.

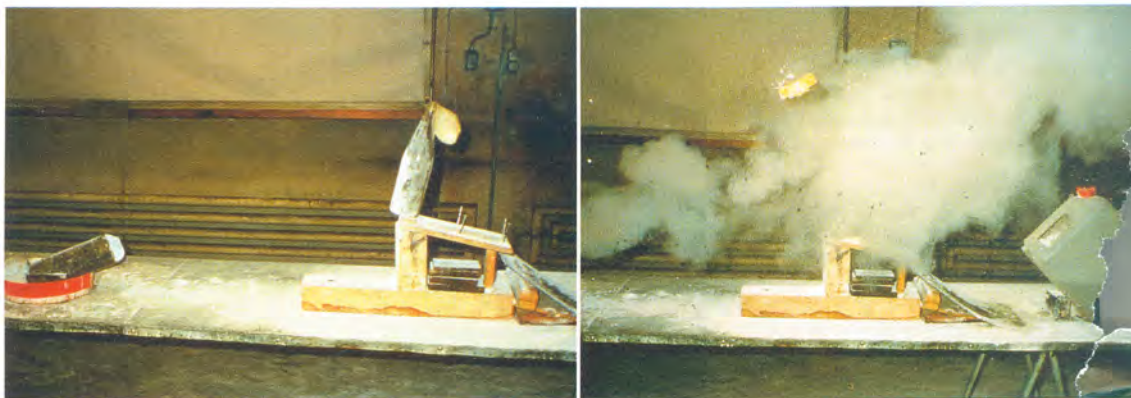
Jörg Heiser is co-editor of *frieze*.

'Fischli & Weiss – Flowers & Questions: A Retrospective' is at Tate Modern, London from 11 October – 14 January.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

523 West 24th Street, New York, New York 10011 Tel: 212-243-0200 Fax: 212-243-0047

MODERN PAINTERS



The Office

TEXT BY KAREN WRIGHT

Nine to Five with Fischli and Weiss

ABOVE
STILLS FROM
DER LAUF DER DINGE
(THE WAY THINGS GO),
1986-87
16MM FILM, 30 MIN
COURTESY MATTHEW MARKS
GALLERY, NEW YORK

We are riding in an old station wagon on a highway heading out of Zurich. David Weiss is driving and doing most of the talking, which I later discover is atypical. On the rare occasions that they talk to writers about their work, Peter Fischli invariably takes the lead with Weiss making only the occasional trenchant and often sardonic remark.

"We like working in the Zurich suburbs," Weiss says. "Dietikon is in an area for small and middle businesses like ours. We like the ordinariness of the suburbs. There are no distractions, no beautiful shops, nothing artistic here—just everyday life, which is our main target."

We come off the motorway into a zone of office blocks, stopping in front of one of the less attractive ones, gray with a single yellow chair perched on its loading bay. As we enter the three-story building, Fischli takes over the conversation: "We didn't have a studio at all for years," he says. "We used to camp out in other people's spaces when they went away. We made all of the clay pieces for *Suddenly This Overview* in 1981 in the studio of a friend who was traveling. We liked that feeling of the

temporary. There are artists who live in their studios, and some who spend their time looking for the perfect space. But we could never be like that."

Since renting the building three years ago the duo has spent most of their time there, focusing their recent efforts on an upcoming show at Tate Modern. As befits the neighborhood, they make a point of treating it like an office, keeping regular business hours. There are two studio areas, the "clean" for video and photography and the "dirty" one for their sculpture, and a third space on the top floor for installing and considering new pieces. We go first into the "dirty" space. I nearly sit on a battered black vinyl sofa, but Fischli stops me, hurriedly pointing out that it's carved from polyurethane. To diffuse the embarrassment, he holds up a pair of carved-polyurethane children's boots. "This is based on the kind of thing that gets left in the studio after people have gone and just accumulates along with other detritus," he says. "That's what we're interested in, the bits that no one throws away because they think it might be useful one day." Weiss interjects: "But the thing about all these

objects is they have no use at all. By removing their function we can admire them as objects. It gives a value to things of no value. That is what this is about—to make useful objects that are useless. They may have no use, but spending a lot of time in making them is important."

Next we move upstairs into the "clean" studio, and peer over a scale model of Tate Modern's temporary exhibition space. Weiss emphasizes that theirs "will be a retrospective no self-respecting art historian would ever hang. It won't be chronological, and there will be lots of things missing." Fischli interrupts him to talk me through the exhibition room by room. "Here are all the clay pieces from *Suddenly This Overview*," he says, pointing. "We are remaking them from memory and from photographs. They'll be different but in the same spirit." The originals, made 20 years ago, reside at the Schaulager in Basel, but they're too fragile to move. "We chose not to fire the clay all those years ago," Fischli says, "and hence they must stay."

In similar fashion, other old favorites will reappear in the Tate with new inflections. The much-loved video *The Way Things Go* (1986-87)



ABOVE LEFT
OUTLAWS, 1984
FROM *QUIET AFTERNOON*, 1984–85
COLOR PHOTOGRAPH, 16 X 12 IN
COURTESY KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

ABOVE RIGHT
NATURAL GRACE, 1984
FROM *QUIET AFTERNOON*, 1984–85
COLOR PHOTOGRAPH, 16 X 12 IN
COURTESY KUNSTHAUS ZÜRICH

will screen alongside a previously unseen film: “A few months ago a friend called to say we should see something. He had a film of us in the studio making *The Way Things Go*,” Fischli laughs. “We looked different then, two young men making work. Weiss had black hair for starters,” Fischli continues. “He filmed it over three days. We had forgotten it existed. It shows the way we made the film work, completely by trial and error, but, more importantly, it dispels the idea of the myth of the artist. There is no boss here. There is the neighbor, there is an electrician, and everyone’s making suggestions on how the film should work. Who is the artist?”

Another gallery will house 2003’s *Big Projection with Question*, which won the Golden Lion in Venice. At the Tate it will be reconfigured from its original four-wall format into a narrow space that Weiss describes as “more of a question tunnel.” From the original version I remember questions like “Is it true that traces of aliens have been found in yogurt?” and “Does a ghost drive your car at night?” appearing and melting away. Here the questions spiral around the large black sculpture. Their complete reworking of such a *succes d’estime* seems natural for artists who attach little value to acclaim. Later, looking through some shelves with more objects that visitors have left behind,

I discover the gold statuette of the lion itself, poking out of a picnic basket stowed next to a gaudy woollen pink hat.

Fischli continues my virtual tour. “Here is a room based on *Untitled* [1989], a son et lumière piece.” Weiss interrupts him, picking up a small turntable made of paper, with a glass on it. He holds a bicycle light with his other hand, flashing it on and off as he moves the paper. “It will be a rotating turntable with a projection through it. It’ll all be very psychedelic,” he says dryly.

We move up to a room entirely devoted to carved objects. Next to a chair belonging to the same suite as the one I almost sat on are polyurethane peanut shells, cigarette butts, milk cartons, pens, a drill lying disconsolately on a table, some orange peels, and a few biscuits by the side of a cup. To make me feel better about my near disaster on the ground floor, Weiss points to a carved builder’s pallet. “A photographer came crashing through that when he climbed on it to take photos,” he says. “We haven’t allowed any photographers back.”

On the drive back to Zurich I ask them if they’ll continue to work together, as they have for the last 25 years. They both make it clear they don’t think of their relationship as a collaboration. Instead they like to say that

they merely happen to work together on a project-to-project basis. I try a different tack. How has what they’ve achieved together over a quarter of a century influenced contemporary artists? They are loath to answer. Before Gavin Turk could elevate a trash bag to iconic status, Fischli and Weiss made *Room Under the Stairs* (1993). Before Sarah Lucas used vegetables for sculptures, Fischli and Weiss made works like their series *Quiet Afternoon* (1984–85): a kitchen grater, a carrot, and a zucchini transformed into an object of elegance, eroticism, and wit. Before Urs Fischer used candles or chairs, the duo were exploiting flame in *The Way Things Go* and *Outlaws* (1984–85). When I suggest that they should at least concede that Fischer owes a lot to them, they reply, “You’ll have to ask Urs himself.”

As I’m about to leave, I realize I’ve forgotten to ask who is curating the Tate show. “Fischli and Weiss” is the swift retort. Of course. For Fischli and Weiss, working assiduously in their neighborhood of small and middle businesses, no one else could do the job.

Fischli and Weiss’s *FLOWERS & QUESTIONS: A RETROSPECTIVE* will be on view at Tate Modern, London, from October 12, 2006 to January 14, 2007.

Art in America

NEW YORK

Fischli and Weiss at Matthew Marks

The centerpiece of this exhibition by the Swiss collaborative team of Peter Fischli and David Weiss was *Visible World* (1986-2001), an elongated light table measuring 92 feet positioned just inside the gallery's front glass wall and jutting at a slight angle all the way to the back wall. It displayed 3,000 small-format photographs taken by the artists over the past 15 years during their various jaunts around the world.

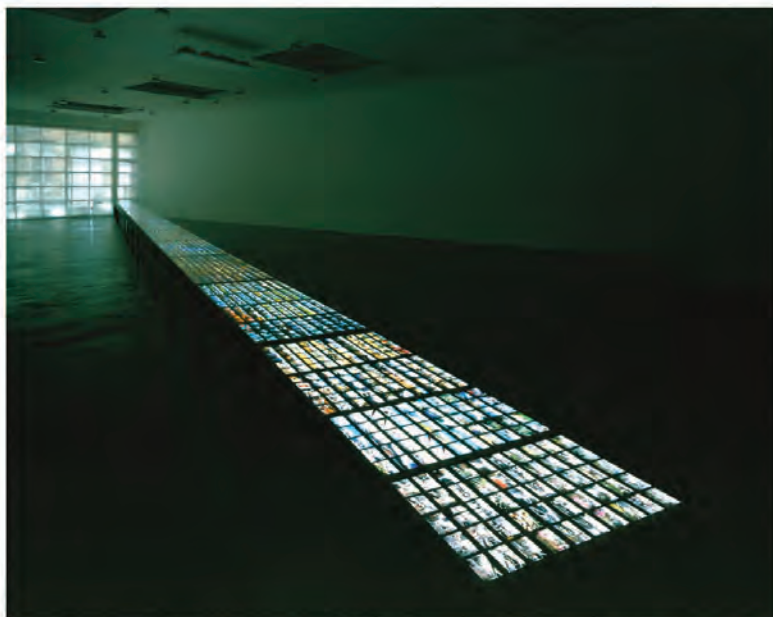
Fischli and Weiss are known for their use of humble stuff that is in headlong flight from rareness and highness, and these photos were no exception. Many resembled standard tourist shots—famous sites like the Manhattan skyline, the Roman Coliseum, the Pyramids and crowded street scenes in Asian cities. Others—notably of sleek horses, cute lambs, elephants and a hippopotamus—could be auditioning for kitschy animal calendars. Nature shots of glowing sunsets and sunrises, desert rock formations, palm trees, billowing clouds, steamy jungles and snow-covered alpine peaks seemed like the stock, romantically tinged images available from photo agencies. Meanwhile, many images, including those of scrubby fields and apartment buildings, are so unremarkable that normally you would hardly give them a second thought, while others are frankly exotic, such as those documenting a suite of Buddhist statues. What's remarkable is how this reeling mix of images yielded an installation that was both bedazzling and psychologically transporting. It functioned a bit like a latter-day

cabinet of curiosities, thoroughly scrambling distinctions between the highly unusual and the inarguably banal.

From any one point in the gallery, you could only see clearly the few photos right before you, while the rest spread out into the distance with a refulgence worthy of stained glass in cathedrals. Clusters of images played off one another, more associatively than narratively—for instance, urban skylines leading to airplanes, then airports and tarmacs and on into cities, harbors and ships, before eventually segueing into rural fields and villages. The result was a kind of Möbius strip moving between sky and ground, city and country, human and animal, motion and stasis, embarkation and arrival.

For an eminently practical structure perfect for displaying a vast archive of images, *Visible World* was also complex and evocative, an ultra-mediated variation on Minimalist sculpture, a visual history of where the artists have been and what they've seen, a highway of images angling off into the distance, a film strip, even a kind of beacon projecting distant places and past events into the gallery. In the midst of its wonderment, it also suggested a cheesy attraction at a theme park—not inappropriately, given the overall tourist theme.

Also included in the show was a neighboring installation consisting of a mini-bed near one wall and dreamlike projected text sliding across other walls, but the artists' light table in extremis was by far the more riveting work. —Gregory Volk



Peter Fischli and David Weiss: *Visible World*, 1986-2001, 15 light tables with 3,000 small-format photographs, 92 feet long; at Matthew Marks.

MATTHEW MARKS GALLERY

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MODERN PAINTERS

'FISCHLI & WEISS'

Matthew Marks Gallery,
New York

22 February - 20 April

THE IDEAL OF COMPLETION, all-inclusiveness, totality, has been less fashionable in the last 50 years than the idea of the fragment, the partial, the ruin. Most contemporary art is about the shard, the exception, but here come Fischli & Weiss attempting to exhibit everything the world contains, to capture the entire globe in a single exhibition. *Visible World* consists of one very long, narrow table, a light box for the display of 3,000 transparencies showing a vast range of cities, countries, airports and seas, as much of our physical planet as can be contained on these strips of film. This work was begun in 1986, finished only last year and bears comparison with other works of 'completionist' contemporary art, whether Douglas Huebler's project to photograph every living person, or Richter's *Atlas*.

Visible World is effective on every level, not least because of the elegance of its installation, the gallery divided on a diagonal by the table-as-barrier, with a narrow gap at each end to squeeze past into the other half of the room. Showing the perfectionist professionalism that wins him such a roster of artists, Matthew Marks has gone to great lengths to darken all the skylights and windows, so the light box

casts a cool, frankly beautiful glow in the sacred gloom. The metal table (15 specially constructed units) looks tremendous simply as minimalist sculpture, an almost aggressive intervention. And the individual transparencies are highly enjoyable to study: some generic – snowy mountains at sunset; some expressionistic – the abstract blur of car lights in rain; some recognisable, others anonymous. Indeed cries of pleasure are to be heard from visitors on spotting their home town presented here in miniature. *Visible World* also works best if one does not know whether these photographs were actually taken by Fischli & Weiss themselves or are merely images archived by the artists. After all, nowadays there does not exist a village or vista in the world that has not already been

photographed and can't be obtained through the gigantic international image libraries.

Questions, similarly begun in the '80s and recently completed, was also on display, 243 cryptic handwritten questions on slides projected onto the walls above a tiny model bed. Yet few visitors even seemed to notice this complementary work and its philosophical parallels, entranced as they were by the pure visual lure of the *Visible World*. AD

ARTFORUM

PETER FISCHLI AND DAVID WEISS

MUSEU D'ART
CONTEMPORANI DE
BARCELONA

GLORIA MOURE

Though articulated around a single new work, *Món visible* (Visible world), 2000, Peter Fischli and David Weiss's MACBA exhibition of the same name took on a selectively retrospective character. Indeed, the imposing centerpiece (realized in an edition of three and shown simultaneously at ARC Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris) acted as a survey in itself: Fourteen vitrine-like light-box tables lined up in the dark displayed 2,800 slides taken by the duo since 1987, images recalling stock tourist snapshots that range from sunsets to farm animals to the Sphinx.

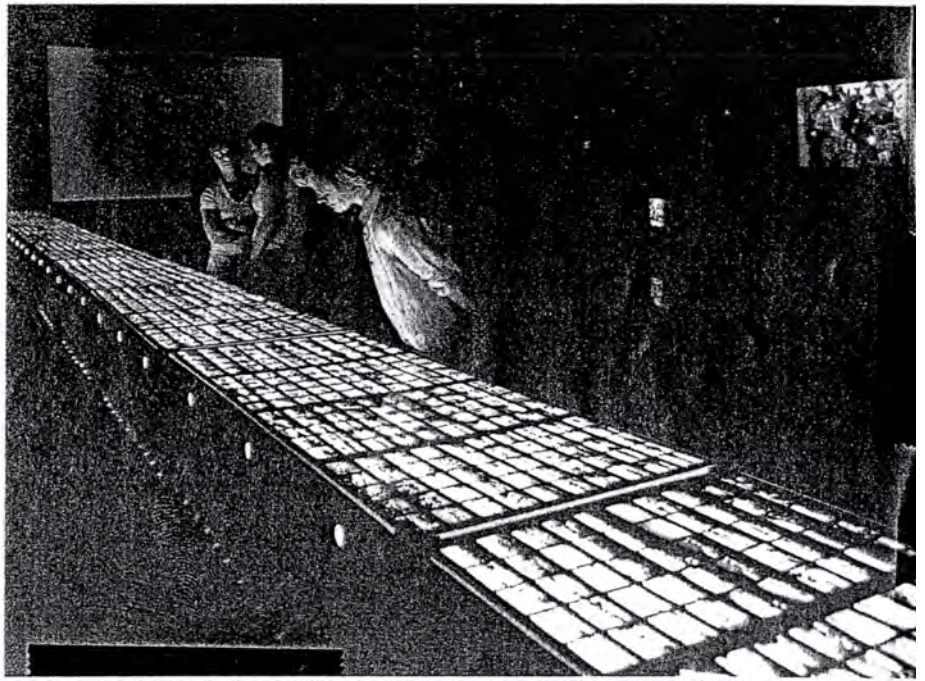
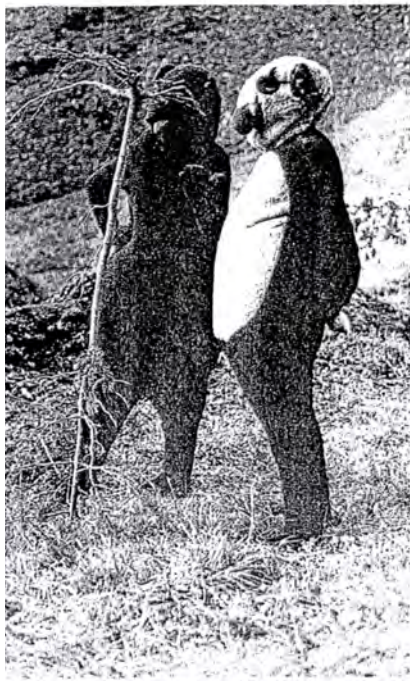
This show, the artists' first in Barcelona (their previous Spanish retrospective was a decade ago at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern), reminded us just how resistant Fischli and Weiss's work is to programmatic interpretation: Indeed, it is the work's elusiveness that occasions a measure of disquiet in not only the museum-going public generally but the cognoscenti as well. Without a doubt, their work contains a critical element, but it is filtered through a kind of deadpan "attitude": The subject matter tends to be concrete; there are no complex messages secreted within their deliberately simple iconography. And yet it is precisely at the level of this attitude, with its certain ironic grounding—however subtly manifested—that one glimpses their engaged disposition. Each work seems to move beyond its particular connotations, drawing on a mixture of lazy wakefulness, jealously maintained distance from the ideological, and passion for play and immediate experience. The attitude keeps any connotative density light, as if the very possibility of meaning were brushing against its absence; indeed, the result is a denotation that resists willful dramatization or iconic "presence," particularly in the initial encounter. Fischli and Weiss do more than exalt the banal in the consecrated context of art; they trade in raw verification, sidestepping those refined concessions to that which occupies art in the aftermath of the positivist project of modernity. However, this approach

inevitably opens a metonymic void—an absolute outside—where all critical readings reside, held at bay with respect to the sense of transparency and immediacy these artists convey through image and materials.

The show included three seminal 16 mm films: *Der Geringste Widerstand* (The least resistance), 1981, *Der Rechte Weg* (The right way), 1983, and *Der Lauf der Dinge* (The way things go), 1987. In the first two, the artists, disguised as animals, explore a pair of divergent realities: the first, that of the art world—specifically '80s Los Angeles—with its complex institutional framework and pointedly strategic character, here parodied in the film's detective-story plot; the second, a wilderness scene describing an elemental universe of things endowed with innate vitality. The third film—comprising a series of staged low-tech chain reactions—abounds in quotidian objects and apparently simple causal effects, yet it renders everyday reality precarious via the chaotic concatenation that escalates into spectacular catastrophes, which seem wholly removed from the modest operations that occasioned them. A certain melancholy emanates from all three films, but it is balanced by an optimism as unlikely as it is willfully fabricated, depending on the power derived from its apparently makeshift quality. Perhaps this balance corresponds to the relationship of the two

artists, united as they are by shared skepticism—or better, by a sort of nihilism whose leitmotif is less the "void" than a deliberately nurtured, pragmatic openness to all that reality has to offer.

The matter of technique as it relates to the question of what constitutes art and the issue of the replica as it relates to the problematic of kitsch occupy an essential place in the Fischli and Weiss oeuvre; in fact, their gestures suppose a connection between the poles of art and artlessness as evidenced in *The Least Resistance* and *The Right Way*. The MACBA show did not include the duo's objects formalized in patinated polyurethane or the original stagings in prefired clay, but we did see a couple of plaster pieces, some of these also realized in rubber. In the series of life-size everyday objects, 1986–87, the simulations dramatically alter the aesthetic nature of their models, based on a perverse play between their legibility as identifiable objects and their formal elaboration as replicas. The results are anti-readymades that resist the aesthetic anesthesia from which their forebears emerged and anti-Pop devices that distance themselves from mere celebration. In both cases, the work wallows in the kitsch in which the ubiquitous conception of the artwork as an object in a world of objects is mired. Moreover, the dispersal of groups of objects through the exhibition space reveals the same indisputable



Left: Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Rat and Bear*, costumes from the films *Der Geringste Widerstand* (The least resistance), 1981, and *Der Rechte Weg* (The right way), 1983. Right: Peter Fischli and David Weiss, *Món visible* (Visible world), 2000. Installation view.

love of landscape that informs Fischli and Weiss's endless series of slides and video takes. For them, landscape has less to do with actual geography than with the ready-made terrain of the tourist's snap, the view of the casual passerby, which the artists enter, fully cognizant that they shoulder the weight of convention, of language, to linger over things and their "secrets" slowly, leisurely, but eschewing the praise that would exalt them.

It was vision that begot reflection and abstraction and made the search for causality possible; language likely appeared on that same road, so our metaphysical relationship with things is imperative because it is biological, not because it is transcendental. Modern rationalism forgot all this; it put Logos before contingent nature and before the precariousness of landscape, attempting to manipulate the environment when in reality language and matter lived together inside an immense loop. Fischli and Weiss understand this reciprocity, and thus their efforts are absent of all traces of tragic sentiment, finding a basis in play and serendipity instead. Their "attitude" involves neither pure negation nor promiscuous affirmation but rather is imbued with their particular irony, the cultivated poise that characterizes their inquiry into the visible. □

Gloria Moure is a critic and curator based in Barcelona.
Translated from Spanish by Vincent Martin.

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PARKETT

Friendship is Unstable Equilibrium

(On the Beginnings of a Model Collaboration)

PATRICK FREY

Alone you can easily get shitscared, but when there are two of you it's fine.

(F.K. Waechter: Kiebach und Dutz)

1. As if conducted by a ghostly hand, the camera moves through a gloomy urban scene toward a solitary, brightly-lit window in which a strange-looking profile can be discerned. A Bear is dreaming these images in broad daylight, and he is still fast asleep when the telephone rings. It is hot in his room; a fan turns gently, stirring a spider that hangs over his bed. The Bear lives alone, as contented as Oblomov. The Rat, on the other hand, of whom he has been dreaming – and who is now on the other end of the telephone – has a French-speaking girlfriend (no more is known), is wide awake, and wants to read the Bear something out of the California State Journal about conterefting and Mafia crime in the art world, with large sums of money at stake. The Rat is galvanized and full of great plans, but the Bear's reaction is grouchy and skeptical. With some justification, he regards the Rat as a bigmouth and a boaster. Nevertheless they have a friendly meeting above a sixlane freeway and discuss future tactics. The Bear lets himself be talked into joining in. He is lured by the glittering art world and the rapid success that both Rat and Bear suppose to be within their grasp.

Thus begins *Der geringste Widerstand (The Least Resistance)*, "a partly nonrepresentational color film" by Peter Fischli and David Weiss, shot in Super-8 (later blown up to 16 mm) at various locations in Los Angeles in 1979 and 1980.

PETER FISCHLI/DAVID WEISS, FILM STILL,
DER RECHTE WEG, 1983. 16 mm, 60 Min.

(Photo: Andreas Züst)



PRACTICE Superior to theory.

MELANCHOLY A sign of a superior mind and a noble heart.

METAPHYSICS One has no idea what it is, but one laughs at it.

(Gustave Flaubert: *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*)

2. Between 1978 and 1980 David Weiss made a protracted stay in Los Angeles, his favorite city – which he had first visited much earlier, in 1967, to see the Hippie movement at first hand. After training as a stone-carver and draftsman, David Weiss, son of a Protestant pastor, involved himself in many of the fundamental ideas and concerns of the period between 1966 and 1973, including Jungian psychology and the culture of psychedelia; he also came into contact (not entirely voluntarily, as he himself remarks) with a number of esotericists and ecologists. In all this he maintained the lucid detachment of the convinced skeptic – the iconoclastic sobriety of his Zwinglian background stood him in good stead here – who can never lose sight of the sharp contours of immanent everyday reality amid the colorful mists of the transcendental (or vice versa, for that matter).

In Los Angeles in 1979, David Weiss had a number of drawing exhibitions behind him, and a lot of his 1970s interests lay behind him too. He relaxed on the West Coast, driving far and wide along the freeways, and observed with some amazement the manic productivity with which Hollywood was turning out motion pictures and television shows. In an essay written in 1980, and published in the catalogue of his exhibition "Bilder" (Pictures), he wrote: "It is twenty after seven, and Channel 5 is showing my favorite show, about the half-Chinese guy who goes through the old Wild West unarmed and barefoot, every day from seven to eight. Fischli laughed at me when I said I was a bit like him. I don't mean that I look like Caine – that's his name – or act like him either, but you can be like someone in your thoughts... At the moment I like Caine best of all. He's supposed to be looking for his brother."

It was in 1979 that Peter Fischli visited David Weiss in America. They had first met in 1977. Peter Fischli, son of an architect and sculptor of the Bauhaus school, grew up in a climate of pure, concrete, uncluttered form. He is six years younger than David Weiss. When Punk reached Zürich in 1977, only a year after it started in London, Peter Fischli (who had studied at two famous art schools in northern Italy) designed graphic images for various Zürich bands. He evolved a geometric, reductionist style that handled the formal idiom of geometric abstraction without ever quite losing sight of the ratlike design level of Punk. This cheerfully subversive, infantile manner reveals Peter Fischli's skeptical, ironic, heretical attitude, not only to the geometric tradition of "Concrete Art," but to the rational sublimities of pure design – *die gute Form* – and even of high art as such.

These otherwise rather disparate artists are united by their heretical skepticism. Their disparities are mutually complementary: the rather passive, inquiring, melancholy, and even pessimistic calm of David Weiss,

PATRICK FREY is an art critic and publisher in Zürich.

and the nervous energy and hyperactive curiosity of the skeptical optimist, Peter Fischli.

This is an attitude that avoids the phony sublime like the plague; and the melancholy skeptic knows that all emotional display has something slightly phony about it. Hence the determination to seek for the truly sublime in the banal: not by glorifying banality (whether kitsch, trivia, bad taste, or just ordinariness), but by imposing comparisons. The high and the low, the large and the small, theory and practice, the theoretical and the practical, the known and the intuited, the immanent and the transcendent, are catholically and systematically juxtaposed. To Fischli/Weiss, from the very beginning of their partnership, such comparisons have meant the creation of interference patterns through the superimposition of existing, self-contained systems of signs and meanings. Fischli/Weiss compare explanatory models of the universe from different sources: typologies, organizational models, evaluative models.

Such strategies naturally presuppose a knowledge of existing systems. Fischli/Weiss's first collaboration (one that did not lead, at least directly, to a work of art) has the paradigmatic character of a voyage of exploration. In 1978 Fischli/Weiss visited Switzerland's largest furnishing store, which contained the Moroccan cushion that they were later to cast in rubber. In this they jointly interpreted the complex rules of an order that governs material objects; they investigated the cybernetic laws inherent in the comprehensive system that is made up of things that belong to the lower and middle orders of taste.

3. After the parodistic juxtapositions in the photographs of the "Wurstserie" (in which, among other things, slices of sausage are seen as carpets while retaining the wurst of their identity), Fischli/Weiss's first film together, *The Least Resistance*, illustrates their strategies of comparison and juxtaposition in the form of a strange narrative parable acted out by two large, shaggy, shapeless soft toy animals. Both are as big as a man, and so the Bear – actually a decorative panda – is also about the right size for a bear; the man-sized Rat, on the other hand, is a menacing monster. The costumes themselves, which come from the wardrobe of a Hollywood studio, thus impose a natural contrast of scale.

The Least Resistance was a summation of the Fischli/Weiss collaboration. It was followed by a succession of art objects and by a second film, also starring the Rat and the Bear, which I shall mention only briefly. In *Der rechte Weg* (*The Right Way*), the Rat and the Bear move through a prehuman landscape and interpret for themselves the signs and phenomena of the wilderness. In the epic style of an age-old tale, the film traces the path to understanding: the profound, melancholy, but also comic realization that every "right way" is also a wrong way (and every wrong way also a right way).

The Least Resistance handles the same theme with episodic lightness. Here, too, Bear and Rat are seekers in the midst of a reality that is harsher than any theory; on their very first expedition into urban civilization they

come to grief, less as a result of this harshness than as a result of their own overdeveloped faculty for theorizing and their insatiable, megalomaniacal longing to put their theories into practice. Another factor in their downfall is of course their human scale. Rat and Bear are neither heroes nor simpletons: they are hyperintelligent, imaginative – with a strong tendency toward projection – and by no means devoid of rationality. They are also, however, endowed with a superb collection of mutually complementary



PETER FISCHLI/DAVID WEISS,
IN DEN BERGEN / IN THE MOUNTAINS, 1979,
(WURSTSERIE) PHOTO.

human weaknesses and vices: vanity, sloth, self-importance, capriciousness, cowardice, boastfulness, drunkenness, and cupidity, to mention only the major ones. And so – because their intelligence is consistently greater than their strength of character – nothing in *The Least Resistance* happens the way Rat and Bear think.

Their “own” artistic plans, largely inspired by looking at flash-arty magazines, are thwarted by a crime. In an art gallery, in which both are admiring some abstract sculptures, a man lies dead. Rat, in particular, immediately wants to turn artist-detective. A vision solves the crime for him: the sculpture was the murder weapon! But he can prove nothing. Bear gets sore and calls Rat “an ugly, runty, stinking rat in the sewers of capitalism,” which does not deter Rat from pursuing his artist-detective theory and even writing it down in the form of some bold similes: “An unsolved case is like an empty canvas”; “Justice is the policeman’s good taste”; and, finally,

"What the revolver is to the policeman, the eraser is to the artist." Here the Bear opts out, observes that beauty and justice have nothing to do with each other, and vanishes.

Unruffled, Rat notes: "Beauty and truth (colon) beauty is not always true and truth not always beautiful (comma) unfortunately." It is not long before the accuracy of this is savagely confirmed. Rat is thrown from a window and barely escapes with his life (thanks to some elegant low-budget special-effects photography); he then drinks himself into penury and is forced to turn to Bear for help. Bear is happy to rally to his side: by succoring Rat, he affirms his own stature. He sings a few smug staves on the theme of the demon drink: "For Wine brings only grief, quite apart from light relief." He then gives a somewhat ill-timed and patronizing demonstration of his ability as a judge of character. He drops two round, white objects in front of the prostrate Rat. Type A is a tennis ball; Type B is a raw egg.

The friendship between two men is a state of highly unstable equilibrium. But Bear's posture of superiority does not last long. When Rat is engaged once more on some dubious project, Bear announces the comprehensive futility of all their endeavors and reads a fatalistic, philosophical interpretation into their personal failure. He makes a confession that is pure melancholia: "I hate the chaos in the world. . . . Nothing works. Everything is hopeless and sad. It's enough to make you weep."

The depth of their grief at this generalized projection of individual imperfection mends their precarious friendship. The setting sun, in which Rat and Bear naturally sense the presence of something greater – namely the cosmic order of things – consoles them once more. "In Japan the sun is rising. A new day is beginning, and people are going to work," remarks Bear, and Rat comments: "It's good, the way it's all arranged. There's an explanation for everything."

Such thoughts finally lead them to the right idea, an idea that shares something of the global validity (and the beauty?) of the natural phenomenon they have just been admiring. They decide to become philosophers: philosophers at the drawingboard. With paper, compasses, ruler, and pencil, they elaborate at last the comprehensive system that will bring order into the chaos of reality: a system in which, for example, crime and art are classified and defined as comparable human achievements; in which artists and policemen alike will simply be superior individuals within an overriding typology; in short, a system in which Rat's reaction to the cosmic world-order is actually valid: "It's a good thing that there's an explanation for everything."

The outcome of all this thought is a merchandizable product, a slim little volume with the title *Ordnung und Reinlichkeit* (Order and Cleanliness). At the end of the story, the wildly inflated aspirations of Rat and Bear – "We bring light into darkness!"; "Suddenly this Overview!" – blend into some images that are once more decidedly bleak. With an elegant little suitcase full of Order and Cleanliness, the two friends vanish in a helicopter, a final gesture which casts considerable doubt on the title of their book.

4. *Order and cleanliness* was in fact published in a small edition in 1981, for sale at theater exits to the departing spectators of *The Least Resistance*. The book forms a parallel to the narrative exposition in the film; it marks the conceptual superstructure of the visual art world of Fischli/Weiss: a graphic and verbal introduction to their systematic, which here means system-comparing, world. Here Rat and Bear expound their world-view; and in *Order and Cleanliness* everything does indeed have an explanation – but only if the term “everything” is taken in rather an exclusive sense. Nothing specific is explained at all. What is shown is, exclusively, how to imagine the whole – all the details – in an overriding context: everything is tidied, ordered, docketed, pigeonholed, to hell and back.

With the aid of fairly well-known metaphors, allegories, and symbolic representations (such as the “Life is like a football” type of allegory, or the family tree as a genealogical symbol), and of a number of newly devised geometrical figures, the following points (among others) are made: the wave-like rhythm of life and death; the “social force field” between the “pressure zones” of “crime” and “order and cleanliness”; the evolution of technology and instinct in the form of two trees. Spherical models, begirt with caption strips, represent various forms of consciousness, starting with a basic type labeled EATING, SLEEPING, and SEX. A model of molecular structure is used to clarify a complex web of relationships, between Fredi, Susi, Bruno, and others, in cybernetic terms.

Figure 10 deals with the predetermined patterns of human development, starting with the crucial option between *Bed Wetter* and *Good Baby*, and propelled forward by the *Power Impulse*. *Good Babies* with *Good School Records*, for instance, become *Policemen*, and in the most fortunate cases *University Professors*. *Bad Artists*, like *Idiots* and *Lunatics*, start out as *Bed Wetters* with *Bad School Records*; and the highest achievement to which they can aspire is that of becoming *Prisoners* or *Terrorists*. Artists? (with question mark) were once *Good Babies*. They stand on the same high level of achievement as *Policemen*, benefiting only from an even better *School Record*.

In *Order and Cleanliness* there are several references to later works by Fischli/Weiss, including the collection of *Grosse Fragen – Kleine Fragen* (*Big Questions – Little Questions*) – e.g. *Where is the Galaxy heading? Is there another bus due?* – which Fischli/Weiss were to paint on the inside of their *Grosse Fragetopf* (*Big Pot of Questions*) three years later. Another interesting item is Figure 5, in which the general “consciousness,” made up of “views and perceptions” (Dior, Einstein, etc.), is summed up as a thick rubberized raincoat that overlies the inner areas of “Sleep” and “The Unknown (Gas?)” within the spherical ego-model. In Figure 7, this same sinister garment, from whose material Fischli/Weiss will make sculptures seven years later, is labeled “ego-shell.”

Order and Cleanliness is an attempt to set up a private explanatory model of the world; and its main priority is to establish clearly, and at times crudely that this is indeed the intention. (Anyone who has been following developments in the esoteric, parascientific, and parareligious spheres will

have no difficulty in seeing that Fischli/Weiss are on the track of a central, paradigmatic need of the late 1980s.) As for the tenability and success of the various systems, the breaking points are to some extent preprogrammed. They do not result from the eccentricity of the rule systems themselves, or indeed from a failure to observe those systems; they are the points where the rigidity of the schematization reaches its (to some extent self-parodying) extreme: where its insane logic collides with specific, but apparently trivial, factual details and brings the whole system crashing down – shedding a few highly illuminating sparks in the process (as a byproduct of the systematic cognitive urge). This investigation of the inbuilt failure of all attempts at systematisation makes Order and Cleanliness basic to all later Fischli/Weiss works.

The question why Fischli/Weiss seem so interested in an apparently profoundly futile form of activity has to be answered on two levels simultaneously. On a macrocosmic level, they have a near-instinctive insight into certain corollaries of the Law of Entropy, which in real life are getting harder and harder to ignore, such as the one that says: the more firmly structured the order within a system, the greater will be the chaos in the immediate vicinity of that system. On a microcosmic level, their love of systematized failure has something to do with a total submission on their part to the specific identity of the individual things themselves. This specific identity can be detected only when those things drop out of the structure of a meaningful order.

In 1985 I wrote as follows of *La Vanité*, a large polyurethane sculpture of 1984 (with a title which stands for vanity in the personal sense, but also in that of transitoriness and futility): “Fischli/Weiss want to press forward to the true essence of things, where nothing is manifest but their ‘contented propinquity’: the state (or rather the process) of their living presence. In order to reach the point where things become unique, charged with meaning, and at the same time empty of meaning, Fischli/Weiss seem always to design their attempts to create order in such a way that those attempts will fail: in fact, they are assembling a typology of systematic catastrophes.”

(Translation: David Britt)

