



When the Angel of History Plays with Fire

Producing some of the wittiest artistic pranks in sculptures, installations, photography, and video works, in an ever more pompous art world, Fischli/Weiss have always advocated wild thinking. Michal B. Ron writes about the duo's major retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim.

Critique / Michal B. Ron March 15, 2016

The Swiss artists Peter Fischli (b. 1952) and David Weiss (1946-2012) have collaborated as duo for 33 years, from 1979 up to 2012, when Weiss's unexpected passing, at the age of 66, brought their joint oeuvre to a close. Producing some of the wittiest artistic pranks in sculptures, installations, photography and video works, in an ever more pompous art world, Fischli/Weiss have always advocated wild thinking. Now, *Rat and Bear (Sleeping)* (2008), their alter egos, Take over the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, in New York, with their comprehensive retrospective "Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better." In fact, Guggenheim's landmark, the architectural rotunda, couldn't have worked better for the presentation of Fischli/Weiss's production, which had been continuously going round and round, repudiating any logical direction or progress. And the empty costumes of Rat and Bear (who are of course only "sleeping") on the museum's ground floor, cleverly play the haunting presence of the now half-absent exhibition protagonists.¹

FW Exh_ph05.jpg



[1]Installation view: Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better
2016. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

[FW Exh_ph03.jpg](#) [2]



[3]Installation view: Peter Fischli David Weiss: *How to Work Better*
Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

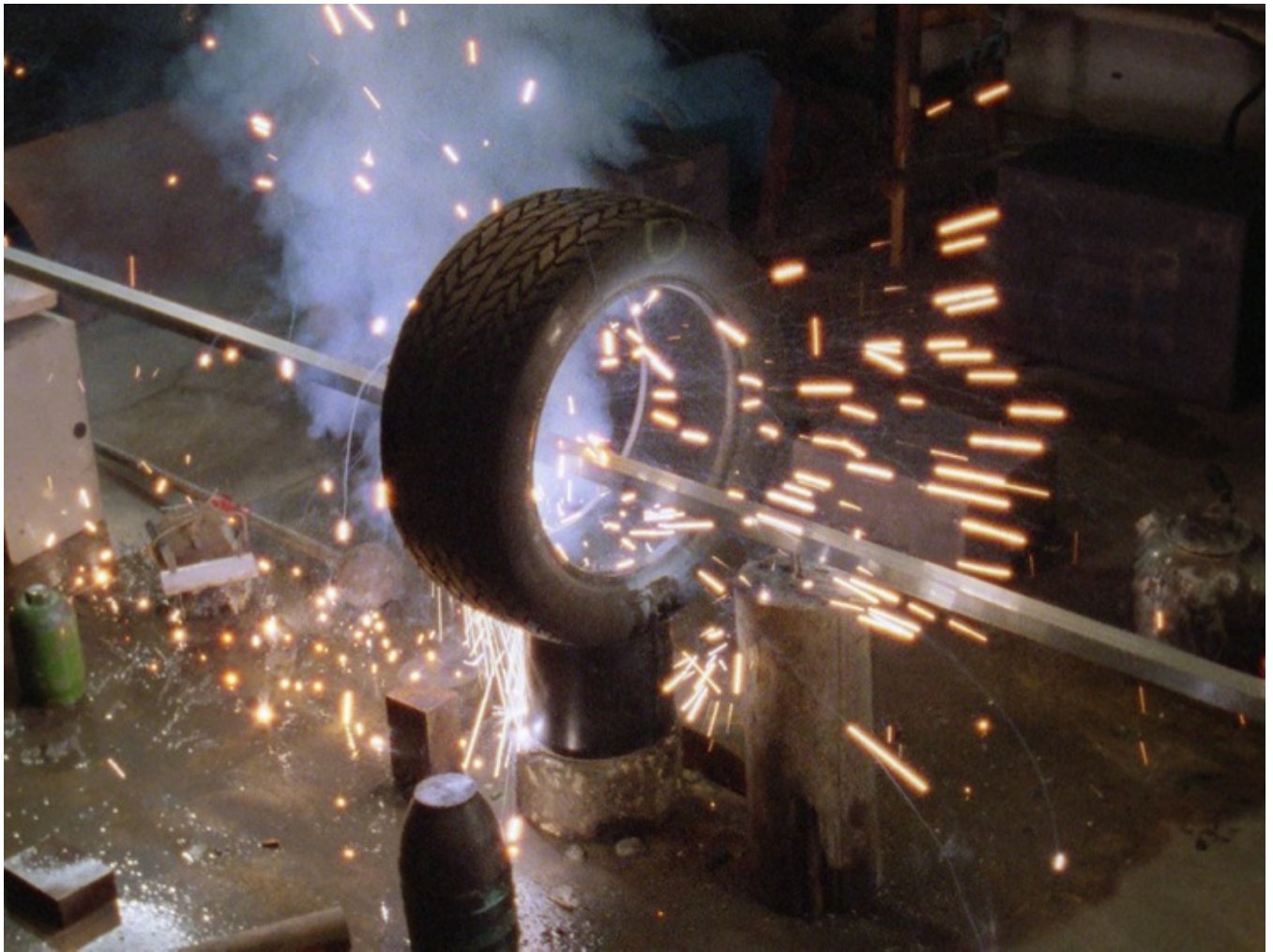
The exhibition leads the viewers from one project to the next, each in itself superfluous. There are plenty of sculptures, like *Cars* (1988); a lot of photographs, such as *Visible Worlds* (1986-2012), a series of tourist-style pictures of sites around the world in sunny weather, and *Airports* (1987-2012), taken in airports around the world in any kind of weather; hours and hours of video footage, documenting daily activities of labor and leisure – I happened to witness a woman measuring and evaluating cats in a competition – in *Untitled (Venice Work)* (1995); and lest we forget, the number of objects the artists have carved from polyurethane and then colored (1991-), to achieve the true likeness of the equipment and, well, stuff, in an artist's studio, including paint tubes and pizza cartons, meticulously producing very persuasive not-readymades.

[FW Exh_ph04.jpg](#) [4]



[5]Installation view: Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better
2016. Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

[The Way Things Go.jpg](#) [6]



[7]Peter Fischli David Weiss. *The Way Things Go*, 1987 Color video, transferred from 16 mm color film, with sound, 30 min.

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Matthew Marks 2015.18.3 © Peter Fischli and David Weiss

In *Suddenly This Overview* (1981-) the artists created a visual encyclopedia made of unburned clay, depicting every historical fact or concept, known or imagined, that came into their minds. Among other moments, they sculpted “The First Fish Decides to Go Ashore”, and “Jesus Walks on Water, the Fishes Are Amazed.” They also dealt with dichotomies through “Full and Empty Dog Bowls,” or squirrels demonstrating “Few and Plenty” with the quantities of their nuts. Economical and social concepts are rendered simplistic and ridiculous, while the world’s history is displayed in amateurish produced bad sculptures. Only the earlier photographs of *the Sausage Series* (1979), representing scenes of culture and consumption through compositions of sausages and household items, were more idiotic, in a liberating sense. A good example is pickles as customers that seem to negotiate the patterns and sizes of different sausages *At the Carpet Shop*.

[Sausage Series.jpg](#) [8]



[9] Peter Fischli David Weiss. *At the Carpet Shop* (from *Sausage Series*), 1979 Chromogenic print, 24 x 36 cm

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Clinton and Della Walker Acquisition Fund, 1993 © 2015, Peter Fischli and David Weiss

The artists show no distinctions, neither between the beautiful and the banal, nor between the significant and the trivial. Fischli/Weiss cannot be differentiated through authorship, and in their continuous projects one year seems no different than 33 others. What is there is always what there is. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, such is the time-perception of the animal, existing happily in a present of blissful forgetfulness². Fischli/Weiss introduce such a being-animal in their work, which indeed includes many cats, dogs, pigs, lambs, and more. And while Rat and Bear ubiquitously inhabited New York City in posters advertising the exhibition, *Büsi (Kitty)* (2001) the cat was lapping milk on multiple screens in Times Square every mid-night throughout February.

[Kitty_TSA.jpg](#) [10]



[11]Peter Fischli David Weiss. Büsi (Kitty), 2001 Color video, silent, 6 min., 31 sec.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Matthew Marks 2015.19 © Peter Fischli and David Weiss

[FW Exh_ph01.jpg](#) **[12]**



[13]Peter Fischli David Weiss Rat and Bear (Sleeping), 2008 Cotton, wire, polyester, and electrical mechanism, overall dimensions vary with installation

Jumex Collection, Mexico City Photo: David Heald © Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

Animals inhabit not only profound philosophical ideas, but also the world of cartoons. In the films showing the adventures of the human-sized rat and panda bear they express both: *The Least Resistance* (1980-1981) shows slapstick scenes in the urban environment of Los Angeles, whereas *The Least Resistance* (1983) depicts romantic struggles in the alpine wilderness³. Fischli/Weiss embrace animal mannerisms in their actions, in both the Nietzschean sense of a constantly regenerating present, and in the cartoonish sense of absolute absurdity and dark humor. The most epic of their untamed activities is documented in [The Way Things Go](#) [14] (1987), their famous video concluding the possibilities discovered in the photographic series *Equilibres (A Quiet Afternoon)* (1984-1986). Whereas in the photographs the artists have captured domestic items in compositions that stayed in equilibrium against all odds and expectations, in the video constant movement was created as a chain event. Objects roll, fall, hit, and push one another, and thereby activate various chemicals that stir everything forward, in an endless happening that seems to have no goal. This has often been seen as historical critique: disaster awaits the ripe conditions to erupt. This is Walter Benjamin's Angel of History turning wild, or rather a reinterpretation of Paul Klee's beastly-looking Angelus Novus: no longer helplessly looking in horror at a pile of debris left by the storm we call progress; here, the angelus raises his hands just after igniting the dynamite!⁴



[How_To_Work_Better_red.jpg](#) **[15]**



HOW TO WORK BETTER.

1 DO ONE THING

AT A TIME

2 KNOW THE PROBLEM

3 LEARN TO LISTEN

4 LEARN TO ASK

QUESTIONS

5 DISTINGUISH SENSE

FROM NONSENSE

6 ACCEPT CHANGE

AS INEVITABLE

7 ADMIT MISTAKES

8 SAY IT SIMPLE

9 BE CALM

10 SMILE



Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Gift, Matthew Marks 2015.19 © Peter Fischli and David Weiss

[Suddenly This Overview.jpg](#) [17]



[18] Peter Fischli David Weiss Selections from Suddenly This Overview, 1981– Series of approx. 600 sculptures in unfired clay, various dimensions, between 6 x 7 x 5 cm and 82 x 83 x 5 cm

© Peter Fischli and David Weiss Installation view: Peter Fischli & David Weiss: Flowers & Questions: A Retrospective, Kunsthaus Zürich, 2007 Photo courtesy Fischli Weiss Archive, Zürich

As a final note, I would ask - isn't there something machoistic in all this playing with physics and fire by two male artists, reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's dripping paint on a horizontally laid canvas, subject to the artist's acts? If so, isn't there also something machoistic in Nietzsche, Benjamin, Klee's Angelus, and in Tom and Jerry as well? Whereas for patriarchal thinkers femininity has been traditionally closer to the animal, perhaps we can find here a complementary model, in which the machismo turns wild: free to play with explosives, rationalize history, and compare few and plenty through the size of the squirrels' nut pile.

[Animal.jpg](#) [19]



[20]Peter Fischli David Weiss. Animal, 1986 (from Grey Sculptures, 1984–86/2006–08) Polyurethane, paint, and cloth, 45 x 50 x 85 cm

Private collection © Peter Fischli and David Weiss Photo: Courtesy Fischli Weiss Archive, Zürich

This article is published as part of a cooperation between Tohu and [Basis](#) [21] Magazines.

[Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better is on display at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum](#)

[22] until April 27, 2016

- [1.](#) The empty costumes stood in for the artists' performance already in 2004, following a request by Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster for her exhibition at the Kunsthalle, in Zürich. In an interview with Jörg Heiser, Fischli explained that "instead of appearing as clowns, we hung the costumes in dark Perspex vitrines and celebrated them as fetishes." Jörg Heiser, ["The Odd Couple"](#) [23], Frieze Magazine 102 (October 2006). It is important to note that the planning of the exhibition at Guggenheim began during Weiss' lifetime. The sculpture gains a new meaning with the artist's death.
- [2.](#) Friedrich Nietzsche, On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life (1874).
- [3.](#) When Heiser asks about the motif of "the odd couple" in relation to slapstick and cartoon, Fischli answers: "These two types exist not only in comedy but also in novels, in Flaubert and Dostoevsky." See Heiser.
- [4.](#) I of course refer here to the often-quoted ninth thesis in Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (1940).

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