

Peter Fischli and David Weiss, How to Work Better, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

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Peter Fischli and David Weiss

How to Work Better, exhibition views,
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum,
New York, 2016.

Photos : David Heald, © Solomon R.
Guggenheim Foundation

Peter Fischli and David Weiss

How to Work Better

Two wooden chairs are perilously balanced on top of each other. While they face opposite directions, their forelegs meet in the middle, executing a balancing act that mirrors the teeter-totter of working collaboratively. The hazardingly assembled configuration is stabilized by the camera's ability to hold a moment in time. *Outlaws* is part of a photographic series titled *Equilibres/Quiet Afternoon* (1984–1986) by Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss in which everyday household objects are liberated from their intended practical functions and form precariously stabilized arrangements.

Fischli and Weiss's retrospective exhibition presents a body of work that developed during their thirty-three-year collaboration, from 1979 until Weiss's death in 2012. Arranged along the Guggenheim's curved ramp in a non-chronological logic, the works embrace contradictions, destabilize false dichotomies, and unravel popular opposites. We are greeted by *Rat and Bear (Sleeping)* (2008), a sculpture of Fischli and Weiss's alter-egos: the omnipresent rodent and the endangered panda whose adventures and misadventures have appeared in the duo's films since the 1980s. The two tattered stuffed animals are sleeping by the entrance of the exhibition, their bellies rising and falling with every mechanical breath. The exhibition's title, *How to Work Better*, is taken from a curious list of motivational instructions Fischli and Weiss found pinned up in a Thai ceramics factory, which is recreated as a public mural at the corner of Houston and Mott streets in Soho. As our waking hours are oriented around productivity and efficiency, divisions between rest/work and labour/leisure become increasingly blurred. Oblivious to the chaotic bustle that surrounds their peaceful slumber, Rat and Bear perform the work of unproductivity.

The artists' collaboration began with *Sausage Series* (1979), photographs of scenes created with things found lying around in Weiss's apartment. In *At the Carpet Shop*, three

gherkin pickles are interested in purchasing a carpet made of a slice of processed meat, and in *Fashion Show*, sausages dressed in cold-cut skirts wear little hats made of bottle caps while modelling on a makeshift runway. Disrupting the ways in which we usually create hierarchies and categorize objects, Fischli and Weiss's works seem to have emerged like the constructions we might fabricate from creamers and breadsticks while waiting for our food.

The extraordinary *The Way Things Go* (1987) presents a carefully choreographed and sometimes catastrophic sequence of chain reactions in which objects such as ladders, tires, balloons and wheels fall, roll, explode and tumble independently of an acting subject. A pair of shoes set in motion by a rolling cylinder totters down a ramp. Here, human subjects do not figure as masters of material objects. As things hesitate and wait for their turn and go—flaming, sparking, expanding and bubbling—we anticipate and are often surprised by their reaction. As we watch the slow burst of a balloon or the explosion of a set of firecrackers igniting a puddle of oil, we are reminded that things go suddenly, gently, and always in their own time.

Significant, trivial, and ridiculous events in the history of the world are given equal weight in *Suddenly This Overview* (1981–2012), a desultory encyclopedia of small unfired clay sculptures that are set on individual white plinths. The same clay is moulded to represent everyday objects and situations such as a loaf of bread and important or fantastical events like the invention of the miniskirt and the moment Jacques Lacan recognized his image for the first time in the mirror. Undeniably handmade, the sculptures are rooted in the physical world; the unfinished nature of the unfired clay foregrounds their materiality and invites the possibility of being remodelled, which points to the open-ended nature of any attempt to map the world. Humorous and absurd, a series



of “Popular Opposites” level seemingly contradictory categories: work and leisure, profane and profound, possible and impossible, order and chaos, and theory and praxis. Despite the abundance of objects and events represented, *Suddenly This Overview* is decidedly not an overview, and the works ultimately underline the project’s absurdity.

At the top of the museum’s ramp, metaphysical inquiries such as “Are there no limits to the impossible?” and “Do I have to imagine the universe as foam?” are projected, appearing and disappearing in undulating patterns alongside everyday queries like “Are my body juices ok?” The endless questions, which waver between the whimsical, the philosophical, the mundane, and the odd, remain unanswered.

What goes up must come down, isn’t that the way things go? While the walk up the spiralling ramp is filled with delightful discoveries, the walk down leaves us to reflect on over more than three decades of artistic collaboration. As we take one last look at the duo’s photographs, sculptures, videos, and drawings, we realize that sometimes “to work better” is simply to work together. At the bottom of the ramp, Rat and Bear are still asleep.

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