

GAGOSIAN GALLERY ARTFORUM



Urs Fischer

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY
ART, LOS ANGELES

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IN THEIR 2008 BOOK *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs*, Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson categorize artists according to their dietary habits. There are the Kafkaesque hunger artists who scrupulously monitor their intake, consuming as little as humanly possible and aspiring, in their works, to reduction, exactitude, and otherworldly ideals. And then there are the gluttons who stuff it all in and spew

it back out half-digested. As has been noted by others, Urs Fischer is one of the latter, among those for whom the real and existing world in all its gross, heterogeneous profusion is an endless source of nourishment, and he descends from a line of likewise prodigious gorgers, all of whom also appear in his output. Birnbaum and Olsson's example of this ilk is Dieter Roth, who certainly plays a role here, as do Sigmar Polke, Martin Kippenberger, and Paul McCarthy, to name just a few of the more contemporary figures in the pantheon of Fischer's aesthetic enablers whose influence is everywhere evident, often glaringly so. One could easily point to a specific precedent for nearly every piece in this survey show, curated by Jessica Morgan—Fischer's *Untitled (Bread House)*, 2004–2005, for instance, recalls Polke's *Kartoffelhaus* (Potato House), 1967, just as his drooping streetlamp *Frozen Pioneer*, 2009, is obviously modeled on Kippenberger's long series of drunken ones—but this is not necessarily a failing. It is simply what happens with this type of artist, who is less intent on building an integral body of work than on constructing a whole ecosystem.

It is reported that Kafka was a fastidious masticator, managing to swallow just a few forkfuls in the time it took others to polish off their plates; Fischer obviously has no patience for such self-rationing (and potentially antisocial) tactics. His self-indulgence, so seemingly indiscriminating, is anything but selfish; it is endearing and ultimately contagious. Although the artist has met with a fair share



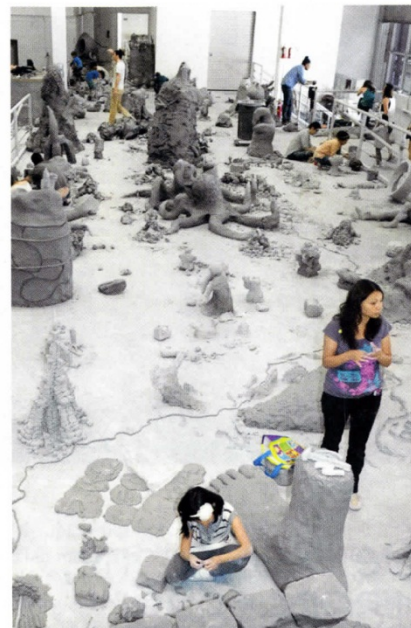
of negative criticism in recent years, he has achieved a level of general popularity that is undeniable. On my every visit to this exhibition, the galleries were packed with visitors of all ages, most brandishing cell phones and/or posing before works. The opportunities for spontaneous interactions were abundant in the twenty years of production on view: At LA MOCA's Grand Avenue address, for instance, one could poke a "Heeere's Johnny!" head through the

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gaping holes cut into the museum's walls (*Portrait of a Single Raindrop*, 2003), or else stand, with palms upturned as though testing the weather, beside a frozen deluge of raindrops hung by fishing line from the ceiling (*Horses Dream of Horses*, 2004). Even the skeletons featured in so many of Fischer's freestanding sculptures—getting into or out of a stack of old boxes, slumped on a sofa, or caught in narcissistic reverie before a mirror—radiate trick-or-treat amiability, inviting visitors to mimic their postures for pictures that doubtless flooded the Internet during the show's run.

However dispiriting such modes of instant gratification might be to those who prefer a more contemplative experience of art, this artist knows exactly what is desired of him, and he delivers. To embrace the terms of one's own

Opposite page, from left: *View of "Urs Fischer," 2013*. Foreground: *Untitled (Suspended Line of Fruit)*, 2012; *Frozen Pioneer*, 2009; *Untitled (Floor Piece)*, 2006; *Portrait of a Single Raindrop*, 2003. Background: *Horses Dream of Horses*, 2004; *Frozen*, 1998; *Untitled (Bread House)*, 2004–2005. *View of "Urs Fischer," 2013*. From foreground: *Paris 1919*, 2006; *Violent Cappuccino*, 2007; *Undigested Sunset*, 2001–2002; *Untitled (Floor Piece)*, 2006. Photos: Stefan Altenburger. This page, from left: *View of "Urs Fischer," 2013*. Clockwise from left: *Untitled (Nude on a Table)*, 2002; *Untitled (Floor Piece)*, 2006; *You Can Only Lose*, 2003; *Tisch mit (Table With)*, 1995–2001. Urs Fischer and collaborators, *YES, 2011–*, unfired clay, dimensions variable. *Participants in Urs Fischer's YES, 2011–*, at the Geffen Contemporary at MoCA, Los Angeles, 2013. Photos: Stefan Altenburger.



popularity with such gusto is perhaps reactionary, and certainly one cannot overlook the ties to the 1 percent that have enabled Fischer's largesse. At worst, the work's fun-house quotient is tactical, a way to trump the opposition and render every high-minded complaint hopelessly academic, but there is also a covertly subversive side to his ability to mobilize the public without telling anyone what to do. In this regard, *YES, 2011–*, a teeming installation of unfired clay works that filled the entirety of the Geffen Contemporary at MoCA, amounted to a statement of purpose. Produced in situ by a casually assembled battalion of either unpaid fabricators or volunteer collaborators (depending on your point of view), it was at first glance remarkably Fischeresque in its excremental ebullience. The artist provided his fifteen-hundred-strong workforce with an inventory of objects to model, then gave them free rein. The results were frequently astonishing. In this hot-house environment, every imaginable genre, from figuration to still life to landscape and architecture, was presented in every conceivable state between formation and deformation. Narrow walkways divided dense clusters of objects, big and small, linked less by curatorial oversight than by the on-the-ground relations of production of the people who made them. Vectors of influence could be charted from one piece to next, making for zones of thematic cohesion, condensing here, dissolving there: a zone of the fallen hero, the anal grotto, the city in ruins; a zone of laceration, subdivision, dedifferentiation; a zone

of religious ecstasy, anguished laughter, funereal hush; and so on. Visitors were invited to wander through such unities of form and ambience not as art connoisseurs but as cultural anthropologists, always attentive to the point at which one good idea, in its farthest-flung and most degraded reiteration, met another—which is perhaps how we should treat Fischer's work overall.

Even if it is true that everything we do and are learned through imitation, this does not impugn the originality of the outcome, which, as this work of Fischer's suggests, always fluctuates between flexible interpretation and stubborn misreading, the non sequitur. Here, moreover, the old arguments about authorship and "anxiety of influence" are countered well outside their usual polemical context; for Fischer, a different approach is simply automatic, a physical reflex. Elements of grotesquerie and phantasmagoria circulate through his art as signs of a body and being that is both in the process of training and impulsively resisting it, as when a child proves either unwilling or unable to accurately reproduce the example of his elders. These various distortions are like a carnal froth bubbling up from a practice that ultimately can be distilled down to a moral core, somewhat like one of those many fairy tales that concern dietary matters. Yet Fischer's lesson is not "Eat your soup" or "Avoid the sweets," for in his ideal world, balance would be maintained through a continuous omnivorous feeding of the community by the community.

Of course, all of this could easily be written off as infantile escapism, just another symptom of art's assimilation to the con-art logic of spectacle, with its promise of ever more filler. When the full belly is more readily equated with poverty than with wealth, Fischer's endless buffet might not seem like much of a solution, but neither are the current calls for restraint (which are always top-down). In light of the debates about austerity raging across Europe and elsewhere, for instance, even the most lavish and wasteful aspects of his work—in terms of scale, material expenditure, production cost, and so on—might be reconsidered as both celebratory and indicting. Fischer's candle-wax copies of classical statuary, melting before our eyes, are a case in point. But no less pointed is his habitual, reverse-Midas-touch tendency to coat sumptuous materiality in a squalid veneer, as when the tangled skeins of Pollock-style painting are echoed in massively enlarged photographs of Morris-style dust bunnies from the studio floor, or when that emblem of Minimalism, the sleek steel cube, is illusionistically endowed with the look of cheap cardboard. Whether such moves amount to an elevation of the low or a debasement of the high is impossible to tell; either way, though, it is clear that Fischer has no intention of leveling the playing field. His art thrives on all the social inequities and corresponding aesthetic disparities that characterize our times. Its sole utopian rule is not to exclude: All comers, rich and poor, are invited to sit at this table, to eat and be eaten. □

JAN TUMLIR IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO ARTFORUM.