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Urs Fischer, *PLAY*, 2018, nine chairs, electric motors, electronics, sensors, software, fiberglass, lithium-ion batteries. Installation view. Photo: Chad Moore.

Urs Fischer

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For those of us who work in offices, the very sight of a swivel chair can be enough to launch a raft of anxieties. So the sight of nine of them, seemingly gifted with independent life and, worse still, attempting to interact with viewers like something out of Disney's *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* (1940), was uniquely alarming. For his installation *PLAY*, 2018, Urs Fischer worked with artist and choreographer Madeline Hollander—plus a crew of animators and programmers—to produce furniture that wheels around the gallery, responding to body heat and motion in such a way that the viewer and the viewed end up determining each other's trajectories. "The armrests and headrests don't move," Hollander explained in an issue of *Gagosian Quarterly*, the gallery's magazine, "so all you have are five wheels, the rotation of the base, the angle of the seat, speed, and the rate of acceleration. Using combinations of these five elements, we were able to create really dynamic characters, like unique personalities."

Whether such individual quirks are really discernible in Fischer's work is debatable, but there's certainly a quasi-human quality in the way they duck and weave around you, pausing and then taking off for empty floor space when given the slightest opportunity. In spite of their associations with the corporate grind, Fischer's chairs do indeed seem to be at play, encouraging us to perform some unusual moves, too, as we test and tease these ordinary things made strange. The movements are programmed and triggered by sensors. (My six-year-old son was warned by a guard not to get too close to the chairs in case they failed to acknowledge his presence; apparently he may have been too small to generate the requisite amount of heat.) Fischer has described his automatons as a "not-so-complex species."

PLAY reflected its maker's branded irreverence. (A concurrent installation at a London branch of the gallery featured one of his signature life-size candle figures, this time in the shape of Dasha Zhukova, a co-founder of Garage Museum of Contemporary Art in Moscow). But here the artist drew on his collaborator's training in classical ballet, hardly a puckish discipline. The work was colorful and interactive, with a slapstick streak, but there was a darkness to it as well, a suggestion that human beings have ceded authority to even our most mundane inventions. For instance, those who tried to enter a backroom maintenance station for the chairs were instantly and melodramatically stymied by flashing lights, as if the would-be trespasser was a character from the television show *Lost* who had just failed to press the "Execute" button in the Swan station. (Readers unfamiliar with the series should google for an explanation).

Fischer has made use of furniture in his work before, often as stand-ins for human figures. In *Studies for chairs for individual seating positions*, 1993, for example, the absence of people was suggested by sawdust-and-rubber molds draped over the titular objects. If the chairs in *PLAY* had a malevolent presence, it was one that always pointed back to a kind of self-imposed restriction. Just as its components seemed to hesitate, act in concert, or respond to obscure impulses, so the tone of *PLAY* oscillated between the carefree atmosphere of an ice rink (Gagosian's polished concrete floor felt *vast*) and an office without end—a space of labor that was either delightfully invigorating or nightmarishly inescapable.

—Michael Wilson