

PETER FISCHLI & DAVID WEISS Are Animals People?



Imágenes de la instalación de Fischli & Weiss en el Palacio de Cristal del parque de El Retiro. 2009

- DATES:** 30 April – 31 August 2009
- PLACE:** Palacio de Cristal (Crystal Palace). El Retiro Park
Sabatini Building / 4th Floor
- ORGANISATION:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
- COORDINATED BY:** Soledad Liaño

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Are Animals People?, the exhibition by Peter Fischli (Zürich, 1952) and David Weiss (Zürich, 1946) organised by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, focuses on a selection of works featuring Bear and Rat. Iconic avatars from some of their earliest works, this duo has made a comeback in recent works.

Played by the artists themselves, Bear and Rat stand in as projections of their roles in their own artistic practice. Through this distancing device, Fischli/Weiss ironically manifest an idea of art as an alternative system of knowledge that creates manifold ties between reality and fiction; these roles also embody the conversational style undergirding their collaborative work. The exhibition at the museum's main facility comprises films from this ongoing saga, and related works. Functioning like a kind of museum devoted to Bear and Rat, it is presided over by vitrines containing the costumes used to play the characters. The Palacio de Cristal, the museum's site in the Retiro Park, contains their latest work based on the two animals. The presentation of this series offers an excellent chance to acquaint ourselves with the artists' creative universe.

Peter Fischli and David Weiss have been working together since 1979. Their earliest collaboration, executed immediately prior to the first film featuring Bear and Rat, consisted of a series of photos, their Wurstserie (Sausage series), portraying everyday scenes made from sausages and other ordinary objects. Using everyday materials to counter the solemnity and weight of traditional art genres it proposed an "amateurish" aesthetic closer to children's handcrafts, and so brought into play many different aspects that would prove central to their later work.

In their sculptures, installations, photographs and films, Fischli/Weiss couple an exploration of their immediate surrounding environment with a signature deadpan wit, in order to generate far-reaching reflections, which uncover the pettiness subsumed in

theoretically sublime concerns. In this fashion, they implement a systematic dehierarchisation that posits new subjective orders and classifications in what surrounds us. In their films, the artists acknowledge certain similarities with educational cinema, yet, by contrast, their works offer no explanations. In fact, far from

analyzing, they show their contents with a laconic directness. They also frequently put the spectator in an uncomfortable predicament, sometimes by dint of the disproportionate quantity of stimuli included and other times because of the ambiguous or striking character of what is shown.

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Rat and Bear made their first appearance in 1981. Shot on an 8 mm film in Los Angeles, *Der Geringste Widerstand* (The Point of Least Resistance) is an experimental and burlesque fable strewn in equal parts, with clichés and philosophical observations, as the two animals try to make their way in the art world. Their mission to become artists underpins various escapades, after which, now much wiser, they construct a pseudo-encyclopaedic system, a global image of the world. The series of drawings, diagrams and charts they create to illustrate their newfound system was published in a book titled *Ordnung und Reinlichkeit* (Order and Cleanliness, 1981) which was then sold at the première of the film. According to curator Nancy Spector it outlines their conceptual program, offering a glimpse of their future vision of the world, albeit in inevitably fragmentary and eccentric terms. This film and booklet marked the beginning of a body of work with a linguistic and interrogative philosophical focus, which became even more pronounced in *Kanalvideo* (1992). Seemingly a hypnotic trip to the depths, the video was actually filmed in Zurich's sewage system (Fischli/Weiss, who classify sewers as among the most beautiful public constructions alongside railways and motorways, earlier touched on parallels between sewage workers' tasks in sorting waste and the ways that artist's work with reality in *Kanalarbeiter* (Sewer Workers), 1987). Another work in this series, *Der Rechte Weg* (The Right Way), 1983, a 16 mm film transferred to DVD, traces a journey through landscapes comprised of caves, forests, lakes, fields and glaciers.

Fischli/Weiss' trajectory has been largely predicated on a succession of different thematic projects. To a certain extent, the Rat and Bear works are exceptional insofar as they have appeared and reappeared intermittently in their oeuvre. With the final venue of a touring retrospective *Flowers and Questions*, 2006-2008, shown in UK, Switzerland and Italy, Fischli and Weiss returned to Bear and Rat with a three-screen installation. Twenty five years after *Der Rechte Weg*, *Parts of a Film with Rat and Bear*, 2008, shows Bear and Rat as mannikins playing in the frescoed and stuccoed halls of the Palazzo Litta in Milan where they encounter reflections and images of themselves as both cubs and as adults.

The mannikins used in *Parts of a Film with Rat and Bear* are at the core of the installation in the Palacio de Cristal. On the ground, the two animals are apparently sound asleep while, up above, they soar weightlessly in the space. The installation was conceived in collaboration of Stephan Wittwer, who created the onomatopoeic sound. When entering the space we try to connect with the animals which may be sleeping and, perhaps, dreaming. In a book filled with questions published some year ago Fischli/Weiss asked themselves: "Can I rediscover my innocence?... Are animals people?"

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