Outlaws, from Equilibrium Series, 1984-85
The art of Peter Fischli and David Weiss articulates the meeting point between order and disorder, the ordinary and extraordinary, creation and destruction. These two Swiss artists, who work as a collaborative duo, construct clever, comic contrivances of common components. The spirit of child's play prevails, though this is coupled with evocations of absurdity, waste, wreck, and ruin.

Absurdity reigns supreme in the 1979 Wurst Series (10 color photographs), where sausages of all types are transformed into protagonists or stage props within fanciful, often ribald scenarios. In Accidental, for example, a collision occurs between two frankfurter cars on a street in a cardboard village populated by cigarette butts. In Sweet Shop, pickle people peruse displays of dog biscuit "mats" and piles (slices) of finely patterned cold cuts. While scale distortions and nonsensical substitutions distance the imagery from actuality, comparisons with the nonsensical actuality of human behaviors and values—especially the valuation of objects of desire—are readily suggested.

A second photographic series, Quiet Afternoon (also titled Equilibrium 1984–87), features a diverse range of ordinary materials (objects the artists see as "next to nothing, or nothing special") which have been arranged as precariously balanced "still life" conglomerates. The camera captures moments of wondrous poise as eccentric constructions teeter on the edge of impending collapse. A ladder, broom, chair, and bottles may hold each other upright in Provisional Arrangement, but stasis is clearly a momentary condition. And a carrot-spatula-fork-grater-bottle circuit, in Roped Mountaineers, may evince a feat of acrobatic wizardry and high caliber tension-suspension engineering, but here, too, it is an occurrence about to fall apart. Represented are inventive but utterly vulnerable structures. They are structures of contextualized individual parts wherein each part functions to sustain and physically support a complex, contrived system. Like Swiss watches, the structures are highly regulated and precisely equilibrated. They are, however, also irrational designs and useless constructions with an inherently tenuous character. While proudly manifesting a brief instant of stability, they offer full realization that the stability, no matter how ingenious, will lead to self-destruction.

Because focus is not on the end result, a more heartfelt tone predominates. Nevertheless, a disquieting undercurrent permeates the imagery due to its metaphoric power, particularly the allusion to those shaky and often insane organizational architectures within contemporary socioeconomic-political systems which likewise are a hodgepodge of borrowed elements, futile gymnastics, shortsighted strategies, and suicidal structurings.

In their film The Way Things Go, Fischli/Weiss animates the frivolous/ill-fated constructions of the Equilibrium photographs, making the tragicomic spirit and metaphoric implications even more compelling. The film proceeds slowly, each conglomerate setup being methodically activated by energy released from the collapse of another setup. Chaplinesque horseplay merges with Frankensteinian madness as flowing, dripping, steaming water, smothering and freezing, and falling, crushing, sliding, rolling, melting, hurling, sputtering obtrusions of crafty contraptions sustain a relentless concatenation.

The film is structured as an anonymous, determined yet lumpen chain reaction that is inherently eruptive and death-ridden. Indeed, efficiency is measured by success in effecting disorder and destruction—actions which keep the system operative. And meaning resides not in individual objects but in their power to transport energy and perpetuate a continuous motion. Recurrences occur, each somewhat different but all ultimately repetitions of an already familiar image or type of activity. And the whole has the character of an unremitting, utterly irreversible system that is devoid of denouement, hierarchical stratas, or closure. It is, however, tension-ridden and tension-producing (despite its playfulness), for one feels frustration with the plodding pace, anxiety with laborious movements that attempt to defy gravity and logic, uneasiness in anticipating what comes next, and fear of a failure that will stop the system.

On the one hand, the film can be viewed as an awesome metaphor for the life-threatening experiments performed in "real" research laboratories and the wasteful, counterproductive operations of technocratic institutions and societal organizations. On the other hand, the film alludes to natural systems of entropy wherein matter undergoes continual degradation and energy expenditures decrease order within the universe.

For Fischli/Weiss, the film and most all of their art follow a desire to show "the way things go," to call attention to the play of meanings that can be provoked by common objects, to manifest paradoxes and oppositions while indicating that there are no clear dividing lines or resolutions.

Fischli was born in 1952 in Zurich and attended the Academy of Fine Arts, Urbino and the Academy of Fine Arts, Bologna. Weiss was born in 1945 in Zurich and attended the School of Arts and Crafts, Zurich and the School of Arts and Crafts, Basel. In 1979 the two artists began working collaboratively and have since shown their art in galleries and museums throughout Europe and the United States. Fischli/Weiss live in Zurich and are represented by Sonnabend Gallery, New York, and Galerie Monika Spruth, Cologne.

Sidra Stich
Senior Curator
Works in MATRIX (all works courtesy of Sonnabend
callery, NY; Galerie Monika
Spruth, Cologne, W. Germany;
and the artists):

1. Wurstserie (Wurst
Series), 1979, 10 color
photographs, 18-3/8 x 24-
3/4".

2. Stiller Nachmittag (Quiet
Afternoon, or Equilibrium
Series), 1984-85, 20 black
and white and 10 color
photographs, 10-3/16 x18-
1/8".

3. Der Lauf der Dinge (The
Way Things Go), 1986-87,
color film.

Selected bibliography about
the artists:

Winter, P. "Zwischen
Plastik und Malerie,"
Kunstwerk, Apr. '84.

Curiger, Bice. "Peter
Fischli und David Weiss,"
Kunstwerk, Sept. '86.

Ratcliffe, Carter.
"Masters of the Glum Eureka,"
Art in America, Jan. '87.

Grazioli, Elio. "Peter
Fischli & David Weiss," Flash
Art, May '87.

Tazzi, Pier Luigi.
"Peter Fischli and David
Weiss," Artforum, Summer '87.

Collings, Matthew. "The
Stumbling Objects of
Fischli/Weiss", interview in
Artsciribe International,
Nov./Dec. '87.

Saltz, Jerry. "Peter
Fischli and David Weiss, The
Way Things Go," Arts
Magazine, Apr. '88.

Selected one-person
exhibitions:

Galerie Monika Spruth,
Cologne, W. Germany, '83,
'85, '87; Galerie Crousel-
Hussenot, Paris, '84;
Kunsthalle, Basel,
Switzerland '85; Groninger
Museum, '85; Kunstverein,
Cologne, W. Germany, '85;
Sonnabend Gallery, NY, '86.

Selected group exhibitions:

The Museum of Modern Art, NY,
International Survey of
Recent Painting and
Sculpture, '84; Kunstverein,
Hannover, W. Germany,
Zwischen Plastik und Malerie,
'84; Paris, Biennale, '85;
Arnhem, Netherlands, Sonsbeek
'86; Kassel, W. Germany,
Documenta 3, '87.

The Fischli/Weiss exhibition
was organized by the MIT List
Visual Arts Center and has
traveled in modified form to
the Renaissance Society,
Chicago; the Institute for
Art and Urban Resources, New
York; P.S.1, New York; and
the Museum of Contemporary
Art, Los Angeles. A
catalogue is available in the
Museum bookstore.

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