



## ART IS A TRANSLATOR, ART IS A FRIEND

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN  
ADAM MCEWEN AND URS FISCHER

Above - Urs Fischer, *Problem Painting*, 2013, installation view at Gagosian Gallery, Rome, 2013. © the artist. Courtesy: the artist and Gagosian Gallery, Rome. Photo: Stefan Altenburger

Opposite, left - Adam McEwen, *Instrument*, 2014. Courtesy: the artist and Art : Concept, Paris. Photo: Claire Dorn

Opposite, right - Adam McEwen, *Conduit*, 2014. Courtesy: the artist and Art : Concept, Paris. Photo: Fabrice Gousset

Adam McEwen and Urs Fischer weave a conversation that touches on the more personal and human aspects of the work; on the one hand, the past that intervenes as an element of investigation and comparison with the present,



and on the other the revelation of what is in some ways a manifest truth, though it has been repressed and resurfaces to destabilize things. Art as the maieutic possibility of extracting an upheaval, not to free ourselves from it but to reify it, to make it visible and manageable. Finally, poetry as ultimate, rarified, available and universal expression.

**Urs Fischer** was born in 1973 in Zurich and studied photography at Schule für Gestaltung, Zurich. He has exhibited extensively all over the globe, and his work is included in many important public and private collections worldwide. His recent solo exhibitions include "Urs Fischer," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2013), "Madame Fisscher," Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2012), "Skinny Sunrise," Kunsthalles Wien, Vienna (2012), "Oscar the Grouch," Brant Foundation Art Study Center, Greenwich, Connecticut (2010), "Marguerite de Ponty," New Museum, New York (2009), Cockatoo Island, Kaldor Art Projects and the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust, Sydney (2007), "Mary Poppins," Blaffer Gallery, Art Museum of the University of Houston (2006), "Paris 1919," Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, the Netherlands (2006), "Jet Set Lady," Fondazione Nicola Trussardi, Milan (2005), "Kir Royal," Kunsthaus Zürich (2004), and "Not My House Not My Fire," Espace 315, Centre Pompidou, Paris (2004). Fischer's work has been presented in numerous group exhibitions, including the Venice Biennale (2003, 2007, 2011), "Lustwarande 2011 – Blemishes," Park De Oude Warande, Museum De Pont, Tilburg, the Netherlands (2011), "L'invention de l'oeuvre: Rodin et les ambassadeurs," Musée Rodin, Paris (2011), "Modern British Sculpture," Royal Academy of Arts, London (2011), "Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century," New Museum, New York (2007), "Fractured Figure: Works from the Dakis Joannou Collection," Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens (2007), "Sequence 1: Painting and Sculpture in the François Pinault Collection," Palazzo Grassi, Venice (2007), and "Cinq milliards d'années," Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2006). Fischer lives and works in New York.

Born in London in 1965, **Adam McEwen** lives and works in New York. He studied English literature at Christ Church, Oxford, before attending California Institute of the Arts, where he graduated in 1992. His work moves freely between the disciplines of painting, sculpture, and installation. After writing obituaries for the *Daily Telegraph* in London, McEwen turned the genre into artworks with a series of obituaries of still-living figures, including Kate Moss, Bill Clinton, and Jeff Koons. He is known for his life-size graphite sculptures of such familiar consumer objects as an ATM, a drinking fountain, or a credit card. His "Bomber Harris" series consists of monochromatic paintings covered with chewed gum, and other recent works include prints on oversize sheets of sponge. McEwen's recent solo exhibitions include "Non-Alignment Pact, Art : Concept," Paris (2014), "Factory Tint," Captain Petzel, Berlin (2014), "Sawney Bean," the Modern Institute, Glasgow (2013), "Rehabilitating the Steinway Tube Ducts," Rodolphe Janssen Gallery, Brussels (2013), and "The House of Marlon Brando, Art : Concept," Paris (2011). He has been in the important group shows "Love Story, Sammlung Anne und Wolfgang Titze," 21er Haus, Belvedere, Vienna (2014), "Wanted: Selected Works from the Mugrabi Collection," Tel Aviv Museum of Art (2013), "Haunted," Guggenheim Museum, New York (2010), the Whitney Biennial (2006), and "Into Me / Out of Me," MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York (2006). As a curator he has conceived various projects, including *Fresh Hell: Carte blanche à Adam McEwen* at Palais de Tokyo, Paris (2010).



**ADAM MCEWEN**  
When I was at CalArts in the early 1990s, the word "co-opted" was constantly being invoked. Specifically in the sense of how to make art that would resist being co-opted.

**URS FISCHER**  
How much work from that time succeeded in that?

**A M** That's what I was just thinking. For a long time, it seemed like a lot of art made then had an indestructible armor. Works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Mike Kelley, Richard Prince, Christopher Wool—it all seemed to be perfect. Perfectly made of steel. But now, as time goes on, and for instance Mike Kelley's no longer around, it doesn't seem as indestructible anymore. That's a strange thought; it bothers me. Can Kryptonite drain of its power?

Another, related thought: on a bigger time scale, when I was growing up in the 1970s it seemed like rock and roll, and that culture, was everything. It was *the* defining factor. Now, today, I can actually imagine that rock and roll could simply dissipate.

**U F** It will be like jazz music. Some people still do it, but it's not...

**A M** For instance a 12-year-old someday might know about Jimi Hendrix, or not. Jimi Hendrix could become a niche interest.

Then I was thinking about how any conversation about production has to come back to Warhol as the archetypal producer. But a lot of his late work was rejected when it was first shown. His last shows at Castelli, the knives and guns, didn't sell a single painting. He was making work that was troublesome, and subversive, and political, and people didn't want it. He was working in a context of outsider-ness on a certain level. Even though he was still going to every party, he was feeling under siege.

**U F** He started out as an outsider.

**A M** We've talked before about how the things we really like tend to be subversive in some way. A Mike Kelley teddy bear sitting on a knitted carpet is a fucked-up object. It implicates you.

Then it begins to ripple out and talk about everyone it touches. It's like a virus. It talks about its context. (This is giving it the most benefit of the doubt.)

**U F** Like Kelley, you frequently call upon elements that have a relation to your past.

**A M** Yes, as a way of looking at a situation in the present. I ask myself, "What is the difference between what this thing looks like now and what it looked like then? And what is the blank area in between them?" It's not about nostalgia in the sense of wishing for the past, but more like wondering about the relationship between the past and the present.

**U F** You mean the relationship between things that you encountered in the past and how they partially manifest in your memory, and how they manifest in reality now?

**A M** Well, it's interesting how you can take what appears in the present and scratch the surface a bit and very quickly reveal a different present or a different reality, which is usually less manicured than you might wish. I think that's what some of this is about—the way that time refracts and collapses and expands. You scratch the surface and very quickly get to distant places.

**U F** When I look at what you do, it's charged emotionally. The memory is emotionally charged, and these things go revisit the charged memory. For instance the Cold War captures a specific feeling that was attached to something, and that feeling sometimes evacuates, like a ghost leaving a body. It leaves this thing that was charged when you were a younger person, and which is now an empty thing in some way. Or, not an empty thing, but *just* a thing. It's just a can now. It maybe looks old or colorful or cool in this case, but all the things it links to aren't there anymore.

**A M** I'm simply looking for motive, trying to keep myself interested. The Tennent's cans from when I was a kid, they keep me

interested. And I do it because I believe, I suppose, that if I stick a chair leg in the can, and it disturbs me and says something, then it will say something to somebody else—to someone I don't even know. I don't really know what the feeling I'm trying to evoke is, but in this case it's not a good feeling.

**UF** What are these newspaper pieces about?

**AM** These are two pages from the *New York Times* that appeared opposite each other on the same day in 2012. They were brought to my attention by Dick Hebdige, the English writer. He lives in Los Angeles and wrote that book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, about teddy boys and mods and rockers. Anyway, on the left-hand page is an article about Jimmy Savile, the English television personality who throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s was very much a part of British culture. He was on TV every week and worked with handicapped kids, and it turned out after his death that he was a serial child molester. Even young girls in hospitals. It was something that he subtly kind of boasted about and everybody unconsciously knew it was happening, but nobody wanted to do anything about it. But when it was revealed after his death, nobody was surprised. The article has a photograph of him with a cigar.

And on the right-hand page is an article about the skeleton of a carrier pigeon from World War II, which was found in a barn with a little coded message around its leg. They were trying to decode the message.

Dick Hebdige suggested to me that this was what my work was like, and I thought he was right. Both have to do with scratching the surface and revealing something that is in plain sight. Right in front of you is this guy Jimmy Savile who's smoking a cigar, he's got his arm around little girls and you know he's messing with them. But you don't want to see it. The same with the bird. The past is right there: there's a lot of hidden and coded stuff right in front of us and it somehow seems to say the same kind of thing that my work is trying to say. To put somebody in the position where they feel on uncertain ground, and they don't know why. I like art that does that. I like it when art makes me constantly destabilized.

**UF** When you look at it, it shifts something.

**AM** Right. Of course, some art can do that and make you feel great. But for some reason I don't feel equipped to try and do that. Although, don't you think that even when somebody makes you feel uncomfortable, it's a good feeling, ironically? It's good to feel anything.

**UF** I think sometimes art works as a translator. An interpreter of sorts.

**AM** You mean translating feelings that you have?

**UF** Translating an understanding of something through matter into something you can then read again.

**AM** In order that it can be felt again.

**UF** Exactly.

**AM** That it can be felt anew, in a different way. So that you can feel bad again. It's like: "Here, have this, I don't want it anymore!"

**UF** In your case, you think you can give things away by making art that is connected to your past. The impression I get with a lot of the graphite works is that you have a very particular way of selecting things that interest you, and you go through a long process of evaluating them again and again and again. Many of the things you select reject the viewer. The roll-down gate is clearly rejecting you. Even the air conditioner pushes you away.

Or they contain, like the air conditioner or the safe. They contain something and you would like to have it, but they don't let you in.

**AM** That's right.

**UF** The air conditioner contains literally, but the AmEx card is also something that contains. It contains something that is not yours.

**AM** Well, they all promise. And I feel that they wish to deliver on the promise, but they fail. The air conditioner in theory provides some kind of sustenance, but it cannot deliver. There is something hellish about a machine that blows cold air, artificially refrigerated air, at a human. I remember being eight years old in a hotel room with a window unit, and it was a horrific object.

**UF** You could say something similar about the installation you did with the fluorescent tubes, where they don't give light. It makes a promise, and then there is nothing.

**AM** That was about minimalism—the promise of minimalism. When I was in my teens, what I always got from minimalism was this slightly punishing aura of a cleansing.

**UF** Or a ritual or something.

**AM** Exactly. By the time it comes to the 1990s and certainly the early 2000s, minimalism didn't seem to be able to deliver on its promise any more.

**UF** It has a repressive core. It's interesting to me that, say, in Carl Andre's work, the repressiveness of minimalism seems to go with a repressed emotional side. It's very emotional, but it deals with repression and manifests itself with this purity.

**AM** I believe that was again something that our generation inherited.

**UF** The absoluteness of it.

**AM** So the work with the lights is about the promises of minimalism. It's not that I have anything to say about that; I simply don't understand it. I don't have anything to say about anything except trying to point to things that I don't understand.

Somebody told me the other day that my art was absolutely closed and shut down. They used the words "fascism" and "fashion." In a way I don't think this person was wrong—it was actually astute—but I would then say in my defense that it's very emotional because it's talking about the attempt to deal with a closed-down system.

**UF** Do you think you can rid yourself of the bad by making works that deal with past memories? When you do something with a thing from your past, is it cathartic?

**AM** Um, no.

**UF** No.

[both laugh]

**AM** I do think it allows me to move on to the next problem. It's like, you take something unpleasant, something from inside yourself, and you don't get rid of it but rather place it outside of yourself, and then you carry it with you. Better to have it sitting next to you and visible. Then in a sense it becomes a companion. The works become friends and they talk to you, to each other, and to other people.

**UF** I consider art a friend.

**AM** Exactly.

**UF** It sounds so terrible.

**A M** Well, it's tough. But what might be a problem could be turned into a solution. So an enemy can become a friend. And then you realize that maybe an enemy is not an enemy. It simply has its own problems.

**U F** Do you consider a lot of your work as dealing with the past, the far past, the recent past, or the present? And do you make works that deal with the future?

**A M** I think it's all about the present—the constant, ongoing present. But since you constantly fall into the future, moment by moment, it's about trying to make the future closer to the future you wish to see.

**U F** Based on your past, in some way.

**A M** Yes. For instance, how can you make art and not acknowledge whatever other art you want to talk about, minimalism and so on? We are inheriting, we have made art in a context, and to ignore context is ignorant.

**U F** So you can say that art is a language. You didn't invent it, but...

**U F** One thing I never understand, when I look at an artwork, is why it speaks to me, or not. How can anything be transferred or invested into an object so that it communicates back? When we look at a work that has clear references to the past, for instance the Cold War, it triggers a similar sentiment in other people from the same background. But a bunch of shells, to someone from a culture where shells have a totally different value, maybe as currency, means something other than "vacation." There are so many different layers. And somehow, as an artist, you believe in something being contained, and your understanding of it, and where it begins and ends. When does your way of dealing with it become more important than what it is? At what point does this happen?

**A M** Ideally, the common ground actually recedes and fades, and the thing that you make is somehow empowered by your relationship to it such that it can speak to somebody else, even if you have no common ground. Of course, somebody from another culture may never have seen an air conditioner and it probably will mean nothing to them, so maybe that one is a failed artwork for those viewers. But I hope that if you have a slight inkling of what this object was, then there's a kind of iconic quality that I can get to. I think that we *don't* see the world around us. I don't see, I cannot see, the world in front of me, and I think it's possible that I could. And in a way, an odd way, making art is an acknowledgment of the attempt to see reality because I'm putting the feeling that I have in conjunction with an object. And that's a stronger sense of reality than one or the other alone.

**U F** This morning, while taking a shower, I was thinking about atheists.

**A M** Atheists?

**U F** Yes. Then I was thinking about believers. And about religions. The Vatican is the HQ of one religion. For any human being, given the short time you have, it's insane to ever think you're right about anything at all. Sure, people might agree on something, and that's fine. There's a lot of thought to be done, a lot of meditation. But the universe is so incomprehensibly vast, and in time, everything we ever knew will be overtopped. It's ridiculous to insist on anything. Whereas at the Vatican, people have the audacity to think, "We know we're right. We've researched this stuff."

**A M** But given the vastness and the incomprehensibility of the universe, the upside of the belief is A) it deals with the problem of the fear of the unknown, and B) it makes you powerful.

**U F** I think that religion is a great concept. Nowadays, we get to take whatever we want from any religion without being religious.

It helps you, sometimes, as a human being. I understand that part. I'm very indifferent to it. I'm not pro or con.

**A M** I think that it's inspiring when you see things that include the possibility of pain and failure.

**U F** Spirituality.

**A M** Right, because it's inclusive. It's inclusive because it's made on the basis of being human. I aspire to make something out of things that are, maybe, cheap, or even better, nonexistent. No materials, available to everybody, and speaking to everybody's fears.

**U F** Poetry, reciting poetry. It's good, it works.

**A M** Poetry is the best, except that nobody has time to read it.

**U F** I do.

**A M** Do you?

**U F** Not a lot, but I like poetry. I like it better than fiction because it's more to the core of things.

**A M** Poetry is the most rarified of all. For me, I want a context that protects the artwork—that turns the noise down.

**U F** Your Kryptonite concept.

**A M** I want to walk into the room and think about the artwork, that's all. If you can perform a sleight of hand, in which—even though the context is compromised and the world is compromised and it's all an illusion—a viewer walks in and only thinks about the artwork, what it might be doing, then it gives the artwork the best chance to do what it can do. It maximizes the possibility. Given that the artwork is flawed and maybe not very good at doing what it's trying to do.

If I make, say, a limousine printed on a sponge, real scale, it's kind of funny and hopefully it's curious and slightly confusing. But it's also about the way people wish to escape their lives—escape a bad week or a bad day or a bad marriage. A limousine, those things that roll around New York, they are like sculptures. Their shape is based on a promise of desire. They talk about sex and glamour and what goes on inside. They have mirrored windows because then you feel, inside the mirrored window, that you're powerful.

**U F** It means you're happy.

**A M** The person outside cannot look in and the person inside cannot be seen. And maybe things get turned around: maybe you can live out a fantasy. A sense of relief. Or you might look at a limousine with disgust. And there are all these connections between the limo industry and drugs, prostitution. They trigger all different responses.

But as well as being stupid, I want it also to include peoples' hopes. It's about aspiration and about wishing to be helped, or to be free. It's about being trapped and about escape. Even if it is a slow release, to get to this feeling, that this 15-foot limousine would give this thought. A sense of movement, but it's not really going anywhere. I think, for that to happen, you need a context that is slow, where things are slowed down. I want the melancholia to be included.