

Inside, Outside, and Out There

by Jessica Morgan

"Basically, you're on duty—every artist is on duty. It's a matter of tempering your self-indulgence: 'Don't get high on your own supply.' What I hate about doing art is it never gives me lasting satisfaction."

—Urs Fischer

Space and scale, interior and exterior, representation and reality: Urs Fischer's work wrestles with the issues posed by sculpture, a medium that is singularly challenging for its placement in the highly competitive world of things. How is the work made or fabricated? Is the surface painted, or is the material allowed to exist unaltered? Does it sit on the floor, rest in the landscape, or hang from the ceiling? What is its profile or silhouette, can it hold attention from all angles, and how does the human figure fare beside it? Does it look heavy or light, natural or unnatural, illusionistic or handmade?

All of these questions sit alongside the basic query of what is being represented, what kind of an image or thing it is, and what our associations with it are. Fischer's work has passed with poise through many of the problems of sculpture, never resting on one solution but constantly exploring and extending the medium's remit, moving swiftly on to a different challenge. Some of these shifts—for which Fischer is well known, but which at times prevent his work from being immediately recognizable—are created by the increasingly expert technology he and his studio develop that allows another dimension or application to be explored within a given material or mode. In some instances the artist intended an idea or concept to be realized only in a limited fashion (in his mind it had a logical end point), while other works, which he may not have deemed successful enough, exist as the odd one-off. Certain projects have had the air of an evacuation, such as Fischer's large-scale excavation *You* (2007), which suggests the conflicting impulse of wanting to "not-produce" while at the same time making a radically memorable material statement. Meanwhile, certain motifs—the chair and table, for example—appear repeatedly, and particular materials—wax especially—are associated uniquely with Fischer's work and could be said to be some of the few mainstays of his diverse practice.

The challenge in discussing Fischer's oeuvre is how best to categorize work that appears, initially at least, to

be immensely varied. Moving beyond technique, imagery, or technology, however, it is possible to think about his production in relation to types of space, both real and imagined, from which the work may have emerged or with which it may most closely be associated. Three overlapping spheres can be defined: the studio, the exterior or public space of images and objects, and the realm of fantasy or the fictional. It is in part the movement between these three zones, or the treatment of something from one realm in the manner of another, that creates the friction and liminal quality in Fischer's work, where things, images, and materials seem not to behave as we might expect them to.

Studio

Fischer's own studio, at the time of writing, is visually chaotic. First impressions are of a roughly divided open-plan area. There is a zone for photography packed with lights and computer equipment; another loosely delineated space for screen printing; a shop area for welding or cutting; an enclosed room for an inkjet printer; and a large area occupied by tables with models for sculpture, wrapped works, stacked paintings, sculptures by other artists, and various objects that have accumulated in the space from mannequins and signs to a rack of bicycles far outnumbering the people working there. There are office spaces for Fischer and for others working on digital projects; Fischer's is largely filled with books (art, architecture, design, photography, and fiction) and every surface is covered with objects, images, and things, some of which one might recognize as serving as a model for one of his works. Moving around the space are four dogs and various assistants, while on a mezzanine level studio staff are devoted to scanning materials for the artist's archive, handling the publications that he produces, and attending to shipping and exhibition details. The mezzanine also holds the kitchen and dining area—always well stocked with produce—where staff take turns cooking and washing up, the communal lunch and the quality of the food perhaps reflecting Fischer's (very European) emphasis on community and shared responsibility.

I have only seen two other studios of Fischer's, one in Berlin in 2003, which was similarly hangar-like in proportion, but which I recall had fewer people around and fewer materials. The other, a studio from Fischer's time in London on a residency at Delfina Studio, is now an artwork, *Madame Fischer* (1999–2000), the walls, floor, and interior having been carved out of the space and placed inside a simple wood frame construction. Like a miniature version of his current location, this interior is a chaotic

allover accumulation of wall drawings, doodles, and tests; upturned pedestals; sheets of polystyrene; half-finished paintings and sculpture; as well as the ubiquitous table and chairs. Off to one side a mutilated carved figure—presumably a self-portrait and perhaps the first that he made—is seated on a metal chair, armless, naked, with incomplete blocks of polystyrene for feet, and painted a fleshy yellow-pink. It is not altogether a comfortable space to enter, and, although there is no ceiling, it is claustrophobic and suggests a sense of prolonged occupation over days and nights and the frustration as well as the joyful play of making art. This is no Brancusian modernist atelier. The corpse-like figure adds an air of menace, and outside the graffiti-covered window of the studio, supported by a wooden structure, is a ravine piled full of rubbish—some perhaps the byproduct of the artist's work, the rest just the usual plastic and paper river that flows through London. The dichotomy is unsettling: art inside and trash outside? Yet the detritus is also part of this artwork, and the studio seems to be ambiguously placed in relation to it, as there is no clear material or spatial division between the two.

There are precedents for Fischer's work with the studio space, most notably Dieter Roth's *Fussboden* (Floor, 1973–1992), which was removed from its location and raised vertically to create a massive, haphazard painting surface, as well as his *Work Tables* and *Tischmatten* (table mats, made in collaboration with his son Björn Roth), which similarly preserve the space of making, transforming it into the work itself. All of this, of course, flies very much in the face of Daniel Buren's famous essay "The Function of the Studio" (1971), in which he rejects the studio and the type of artmaking it obliges. In recent decades, for many artists the studio has been an office, a digital suite, or a constantly changing environment that lies between and is akin to the nonspaces of the airport and hotel. *Madame Fisscher* harks back to a more traditional (at least in the twentieth century) notion of the studio as a place of thinking, doing, relaxing, and living, but the gesture of turning this space into an artwork suggests that it is also a thing of the past, something to be preserved and discarded. It is just one of a number of coexisting studios, and Fischer remains ambiguous about fetishizing it as a uniquely productive space.

Though *Madame Fisscher* might be the most literal rendering of the studio in Fischer's work, its space is evoked on many occasions through objects, installations, and photography. Thus the chairs and tables of *Frozen*

(1998) and *Untitled* (1997) resemble the dining/drawing/thinking/sculpting surface of the studio table. Both have made the transition from use object into the realm of sculpture, one taking on the linear tension of drawing and the other showing the diners' dirty hands—each touch leaving behind a pinkish-white splotch of epoxy. The numerous chairs Fischer has made—among them *Chair for a Ghost: Urs* (2003) and *Last Chair Standing* (1997)—could also be read as studio furniture (typically found, mismatched orphans of the street, daubed in paint, stickers, and detritus) that has been given an exaggerated personality and physical presence. Similarly, *Portrait of a Single Raindrop* (2003) is the kind of experiment that first took place in the studio as a creative act of demolition. Its transferal to the pristine space of the gallery or institution renders it a giant-size act of institutional critique, returning the exhibition space to the work/studio itself. Almost a reversal of *Madame Fisscher's* transformation of an active studio into a work of art, *Portrait of a Single Raindrop* brings the unfinished spirit of something "in the making" to the clinically preserved institution. *Untitled* (2006), for which the floor of the exhibition space is covered in black adhesive vinyl while the white walls are sloppily painted at the base where they meet the floor, creating a gestural and clumsy overlap, produces a not dissimilar effect. The space itself takes on the energy of a painting in process.

In recent years Fischer has once again made more direct reference to the space of the studio. Working with Georg Herold, he turned to the classic study of the live nude, each artist modeling a number of different clay figures in various poses. The finished work, *Necrophonia* (2011), consists of the now cast sculptures presented on cast pedestals adjacent to a live model who changes positions on a couch. Fischer's intent is unclear. Is this contrast of living presence (a somewhat uncomfortable encounter with relaxed nudity in the institutional space) with "dead" sculptural matter to remind us of the process of transformation in art? Like *Madame Fisscher*, does it undo the mystique of creation? Perhaps it is also a straightforward celebration of the act of modeling in clay and representing the female form? Fischer's work seeks to return some of the sense of activity and life in the process of making, an experience otherwise lost in the finished work.

Not long after creating this work, Fischer photographed the empty studio of a friend, the artist Josh Smith, and produced it as high-definition wallpaper. Fischer had used this kind of illusionistic wallpaper print in the past to

document and re-create the exhibition spaces of Palazzo Grassi in Venice, Tony Shafrazi Gallery, the living room of collector Peter Brant, and the New Museum. At times works by Fischer or others have been hung on top of these flat surfaces that carry the impression of the photographed space, so that a collage of three-dimensional pieces forms across the wallpaper's representational space. Smith's studio wallpaper has not, at the time of writing, been shown, but the space itself is that of a quintessential New York loft, and the dark, grimy shadows and paint-spattered walls speak to the generations of real, fictional, filmic, and clichéd depictions of the downtown New York artist. Fischer's presentation of the wallpaper will add another dimension to this tale, as the site in which it is installed becomes an artwork, albeit one that can be contrasted with and occupied by quite different work than that of the original artist-occupant. Indeed, the work could furnish a private collector's apartment—someone looking for a little authentic (but clean) grime to contrast with the designer furniture. Meanwhile, the Josh Smith studio will be preserved in the manner of Francis Bacon's at the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, only this time in a digitized and immaterial manner appropriate for our twenty-first-century existence.

While *Necrophonia* partially re-creates a studio experience, and the wallpaper of Josh Smith's studio and *Portrait of a Single Raindrop* transport something of its atmosphere and appearance, a recent large-scale public and collective project by Fischer, *Untitled* (2011-ongoing), operates as drop-in studio/school. It has been realized thus far in Venice (at the Accademia di Belle Arti), Paris (at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-arts), and Tilburg, The Netherlands (as part of the "Lustwarande" exhibition at the Park De Oude Warande). Inviting students and other members of the community to join him in making cats out of clay (slabs of which are freely available to those interested in participating), Fischer puts into action a multiauthored sculptural studio. The choice of the cat, a familiar form to all, allows for variation within a theme so that the possibilities for style, structure, scale, and finish are open to exploration while the overall refrain remains the same. The end result is a low-lying field of sculpture with the remains and debris from the collective effort strewn among the "finished" works. Rather than a belated comment on the Barthesian "death of the author," *Untitled* lends itself more readily to comparison with Fischer's obsessive amassing of objects and images and the grafting, layering, and colliding of this material that is typical of his work. In this respect, *Untitled* is concerned

not with the studio so much as with the external world of mediated imagery and things—cats in films, cartoons, children's toys, advertising, and reality—all of which we have absorbed into our unconscious.

Exterior

There is a degree of violence in the way that Fischer processes this barrage of materiality and imagery—perhaps reflecting the unintentional force with which products, photography, and things collapse into each other within the visuals that surround us daily. Many of the works that could be said to belong in this particular gambit can be characterized by an excessive profusion and collage of elements. *Jet Set Lady* (2000–2005) is where a lot of what seems to have been emerging from this morass was swept up and regurgitated: two thousand prints of drawings by the artist that are funny, pornographic, digitized, brightly colored, cartoons, figures, abstract shapes—a confused and confusing diversity that resists classification—all suspended from a highly unnatural steel-limbed tree lit by fluorescent tubes. The images for *Jet Set Lady* were all originally drawn by hand, the act of producing this quantity (albeit over many years) suggesting a routine practice of experimenting and digesting ideas or images that entered the mind and had to be drawn to be expunged. The process of scanning and printing the drawings—thereby annihilating their uniqueness—makes the tree something like a vertical and radial archive of a period of time, or a genealogy, and, as in *Madame Fisscher*, the end result and its manifestation as a work suggests an end point for preservation or disposal.

A few years later, after the mental clearing-out of *Jet Set Lady*, Fischer began to produce singular images silk-screened onto the surface of mirror-glass. Here the images are photographed objects, entirely free from the touch of the artist's hand, and the end result has an incomparable toughness. The first manifestation of this work, *Service à la française* (2009), consisted of fifty-two boxes bearing images ranging from fruit and shoes, wood blocks, and models of other sculptures to a CD case and a computer hard drive. The scale of the objects, laid out like a maze to be navigated, was deliberately confusing—some were blown up to outsize proportions while others (though taken from model-scale originals such as a souvenir toy of a red London phone box, for instance) were given back their appropriate scale. The objects are reduced to images on the five visible sides of the box and any blank space is filled by the reflective surface of the mirror within which images of the surrounding boxes multiply.

Fischer subsequently improved the images' photo quality and has produced further groups of these boxes, often with fewer images brought together in somewhat perplexing combinations: a duckling with a shopping trolley, for instance (*Fritz Lang / Shorty*, 2010), or a glass Pinocchio sculpture with a penny farthing bicycle (*Concert / Comichon*, 2011). Both of these works are large-scale and as tall, if not taller, than most viewers. The experience of walking around them involves a confusion of real and representational reflection, and viewer and object/animal or sculpture become confused and collaged. The present world of images and things is blindingly reflected around us, magnified in a scale that echoes the ocularcentrism in contemporary environments that so profoundly marks our perception. While Marcel Duchamp presented the found object at a moment when the role of fabricated things in our material culture was in ascendance, Fischer's work emphasizes the role the representation of these objects and images plays in our visual culture.

Fischer's paintings since 2010—large-scale prints on aluminum panels—have consisted of collaged images of movie star headshots (taken mostly in the 1950s) that are overlaid with images of fruit, nails or other small metal objects, cigarettes, and so forth. Both the headshot and the obscuring object have been blown up to the scale of a small billboard, and the violent occupation of the face by the foreign item can at times appear graphically shocking. Fischer's technique plays with the layering of the quality of the images; the older, murkier portrait sitting behind the perfectly lit and three-dimensionally convincing object placed on top. Despite the artist's training as a photographer (at the erstwhile Hochschule für Gestaltung in Zurich), these works—as much as the literally three-dimensional polished mirror boxes—function in a highly sculptural manner. Fischer's approach to images, and in particular the layering or collage of imagery, derives more from the experience of daily life—an advertisement seen in front of a sign, beside an object on the street—rather than the graphic effect of photomontage, where one flat image is layered illusionistically on top of another. His work has benefited from the dramatic contrasting of heterogeneous imagery pioneered by artists such as John Baldessari. In Fischer's practice, the space of the image and its depth are always integral to the effect of the work, and the apparent layering of "real" and representational harks back to the street or daily life experience of object and image overlapping: an endless collage of things, and their representations, that surround us.

Imaginary

Whereas the studio in Fischer's work is like an archive, with each representation containing within it a body of work to be buried or preserved, the exterior realm is suffused with readymade images and objects that call for the control and manipulation of their heady presence. The third space that Fischer's work occupies is one of the most familiar tropes in the history of art: the fantastic or imaginary. Within Fischer's work the fictional manifests itself as the relatively benign presence of the fairy-tale world to which *Untitled (Bread House)* (2004–2005) or the oversize blue raindrops, *Horses Dream of Horses* (2004), belong, but equally the less romantic and darker presence that is suggested by *Kratz* (2011) and the collapsed purple piano, *Untitled* (2009), in which something humorous but nevertheless destructive has taken place. Mining a rich surrealist vein, Fischer produces images and objects that stand out from those in the exterior world. In contrast to the collaged images or the mirror boxes, these are not things we might expect to encounter in the everyday or which we recognize as a found image that has been degraded or altered. They have emerged quite inexplicably from the mind of the artist.

The image, however, is not everything, as in almost all of these works the materiality itself is integral to the effect of the work. *Kratz* is a single bed on which a dump of concrete has landed, the pristine white sheets unaccountably sullied by the dirty gray mass that pours onto the floor. Close inspection reveals that the bed is in fact only an illusion of the soft, pliable surface we assume it to be. A cast-aluminum structure, the work has been painted and treated so that the sheets retain the appearance but not the feel of starched, crisp bed linen. There is something odd about the work, which is partly explained by its form but also by the cold atmosphere it gives off, in contrast to the normative associations of comfort that beds hold. But why would the artist choose to present an everyday object in this manner, and what are we to assume happened to it? The cement has landed where a body might sit—was it intended to hit someone or to function as a stand-in for the lumpen body? The weight of the cement has collapsed the bed, which sags in the middle, its short legs a little splayed. Presented in the chapel of the École des Beaux-arts in Paris (as part of the Festival d'Automne 2012), adjacent to the sarcophagi plaster casts that are displayed there, the bed took on tomb-like associations. A memorial or tomb for our age, *Kratz* is a reminder of the death-like weight of sleep.

The macabre, although present in the other realms of Fischer's practice as laid out here, plays a significant role in these fairy-tale landscapes. An ongoing series of works in which skeletons play a lead role humorously reanimates the *danse macabre* or the many other cultural traditions in which skeletons come to life (for instance, the Swiss carnival time or Mexico's Day of the Dead). Fischer's bony figures, rather than acting as spooks, loll around on a couch, perform a burlesque high kick, or collapse on top of a dirty washing machine. Their antics are decidedly unserious, and Fischer deliberately miscasts the skeleton as a louche but somewhat inept character whose etiolated limbs are hard to control. The skeletons might well live alongside Fischer's bread house, which reads as a fable come to life in the form of a Swiss cabin placed incongruously atop of a pile of oriental carpets. Hansel and Gretel or Pippi Longstocking might be the expected habitués of such a residence, but instead its first occupants were a few young parakeets who set about devouring the structure over the course of the exhibition.

Perhaps the most affective space for the imaginary or fantastical in Fischer's work is realized in his exhibition construction. Here the worlds of studio and exterior meet with the fictional, and the *mise-en-scène* he choreographs deliberately opposes these realms to create a new landscape. Fischer has used mirrored walls to evoke an endlessly repeating and destabilizing spatial configuration (for example, in "Paris 1919" at the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in 2006) or the punched walls of *Portrait of a Single Raindrop* to create the partial and occluded view of his works between rooms. In other situations he has made a virtue of a single overarching statement that through its bravado creates a particular atmosphere and impression (see *dngszjkdufiy bgxfjkglijkhtr kydkhgdghjkd* [with Cassandra MacLeod], 2011, for example). It is in this setting that the diversity of techniques, the range of sculptural styles, and the shifts in scale and finish are able to establish a lexicon of Fischer's work. The exhibition environment provides the ideal space in which the deliberate contrast that is behind his practice can be read as a total experiment.

Interview with Urs Fischer

Gerald Matt: *Mr. Fischer, two years ago several of your works were shown at the Kunsthalle Wien as part of a group exhibition called "Dream & Trauma." Among the pieces on exhibit was your sculpture Untitled (2004). This martial looking sculpture seemed to come right out of a great heroic epic. Where did you get the idea for this work, and who are the heroes of our age for you?*

Urs Fischer: Yeah, well, that was the piece with the sword, which probably had more to do with the relic of an epic than with the epic itself. Personally, I don't relate to heroes and epics any more than the average person. Besides, the sword in my case is set in concrete and cannot be pulled from the stone.

For me, it's not about some quotation either, and the story is quite different from King Arthur's. This is not about omnipotence or a promise of salvation; rather, it's about the relationship between the moment and permanence. I would rather see this work in the context of other interests, other works that are about the idea of simultaneity, about before and after, about two parallel types of experience, internal and external. In fact, it is also about an ordinary and simple form that can be used to visualize this idea of the simultaneity of inside and outside, of before and after.

GM: *When I think of your piece The Membrane from your 2000 exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, which, like many of your works, shifts between dream and nightmare, what comes to my mind is like a scene from a Tarantino movie: an empty room, and the zombies gone. This has something of a horror story to it, but also of a cruel children's fairy tale. How Freudian is your work?*

UF: Well, children's fairy tales and horror stories, that's more or less the same thing. When I was a child, I got to know it all, of course, from the Brothers Grimm to Pinocchio and from Mickey Mouse to Tom and Jerry, but I don't have any special memories of any of it. What gives me pleasure eventually are images that captivate me, that keep pulling me in, that I feel a need to address

in and through my work. In fairy tales, great narratives and emotions of course congeal into strong and indelible images, but we should let fairy tales be fairy tales. I don't give much thought to where my pictures actually come from. The work with the broom and the balloon [*A Place Called Novosibirsk* (2004)], for example, that was something that just kept popping up in my mind, and I think it worked out in the end.

The question of in how far my work is Freudian seems very Viennese to me, so I'll gladly return it to you.

GM: *You and Gavin Brown curated a show entitled "Who's Afraid of Jasper Johns?" at Tony Shafrazi Gallery, where you brought together artists and artworks that are close to your heart. Was this more about paying tribute to, or exorcizing, your artist heroes?*

UF: For me, it mainly was about a local history. About what New York means to me and my friends, about relationships with artists, but also about approximations, and appropriation today, and the boundary of an artwork. In any case, it was a great opportunity to oppose copies and originals. Fusing iconic artworks with even more iconic ones, mounting artworks on wallpaper I made of the previous show ["Four Friends," which featured works by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Donald Baechler, and Kenny Scharf], creating a disorder, a mix-up, even including photos of the gallery guards on the wallpaper. All that was fun, and I could bring together artists and works that I appreciate a lot, such as Malcolm Morley, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Lawrence Weiner, Picasso, Sue Williams, Richard Prince, Christopher Wool, Lily van der Stokker, and Rudolf Stingel. It was about the intersection of parallel stories of the same decade, and people who probably never talked to each other back then became friends. And that Tony also had his sixty-fifth birthday on the occasion put the icing on the cake. We had two policewomen-strippers and a Guernica cake, which we had him "vandalize" with red icing. The whole historic action, his attack at MoMA in 1974, was reenacted once more, as a pleasant exorcism.

GM: *The invitation for the show showed a black-and-white photo of the arrest. You see Tony being led away by police after launching his spray-paint attack on Picasso's Guernica at the*

Museum of Modern Art as a protest against the Vietnam War. Is your exhibition to be understood as an homage to Shafrazi and the clear position he took?

UF: I'm not sure how clear he was. But sure, an homage to the gesture.

GM: *How did the exhibition come about?*

UF: Tony invited me to dinner and asked me to do an exhibition with him. I already had the wallpaper idea from a show I did at Palazzo Grassi the year before. He had also asked Gavin to curate a show at his gallery. Gavin and I decided to fuse it all together into one thing. At the time I was very interested in different mindsets that existed in New York in the 1970s and '80s and in the different schools and groups of people—how they came of age, and how much they overlapped and then started to diverge over time. There are all these parallel histories that compact into something strange over time, kind of like how the city itself is built. It's a unification of chaos; it's not conceived according to some unified plan, like Vienna. It's not the work of a single author—it's a symphony of multiple authors. Or a cacophony.

GM: *So it was a possible picture of the New York art scene.*

UF: One variant.

GM: *You studied photography at the Zurich School of Design and Art, but you work across genres now. Your oeuvre encompasses painting, drawing, collage, printing, sculpture, and installation, although I get the impression that sculptural work has lately become more important to you.*

UF: Yes, that may well be. I like working with people, and making sculptures also means working with others. Painting is a lonely practice, of course; you have to rely more on your own hand, and there is this constant struggling with classical forms, with tradition. All that comes in sculpture, too, but it's a collaborative effort. At the same time, I also need to do things myself, as a balance, if you will, from time to time. What I hope to do is something new every time. I get easily bored and scared by repetition.

GM: *To build a brand, to gain recognition value in the art market, it's not particularly helpful if you are all too fond of the new, is it?*

UF: I don't really care; after all, I'm not Hundertwasser. I once sat in a McDonald's and Hundertwasser prints decorated the wall. Not bad. I love brands. Yes, a brand can be very good and enjoyable, but it does not come easy. It works well for tourists and tourism: "Klimt meets Gaudí." Just think of Switzerland and all the Carl Jung and Rudolf Steiner kitsch there. I admire Dalí and Warhol, who kept producing relentlessly and eventually transcended the notion of what an artist can or cannot do. Some artists won't let themselves be locked in. This whole fuss about what may or may not be done bores me. It's very limited. The art world is very conservative in its obsession with its own value. As an artist you have to decide to whom or to what you want to make a vow of chastity.

GM: *However, you still draw. Are your drawings a kind of preparation for your sculptures?*

UF: I'm no longer making drawings; I don't like it anymore. There still are boxes full of them around, but I don't want them to keep piling up. I used to be interested to see what comes out when I make a drawing and how it is implemented in a sculpture, in fact, in the whole relationship of drawing and sculpture. Today, my take on sculpture is much more direct. It's not so much about authorship, but about the question, "What can I bring to this, of what nature is my input?"

GM: *How about your exhibitions? From time to time, you produce exhibitions as a curator, as in the example of the Shafrazi show. How do you go about your own exhibitions? Does Urs Fischer, the artist, remain in the background or does he become the curator of his own work?*

UF: Yes, in fact I do it all by myself. A curator's input is okay, but these are my exhibitions and my responsibility. Don't get me wrong, here I'm talking about projects where I show new works or series of works. With a retrospective, things are different; I don't care, that's something that others can do as well. Generally, I don't like to see shows

again. The moment immediately after—after the opening—in fact is dreadful. You need some distance to take in your own work, and the works themselves take their time, too. This is not to say that I don't like my own work, but I need time to really take it in, and eventually, they keep changing. There is this rule in criminology of the criminal always returning to the scene of the crime, but I don't feel that way; I really don't need to keep returning to my own work.

GM: *Your exhibition at the New Museum was not called a retrospective by the exhibition makers, but rather an introspective. What do you say to that?*

UF: Oh, you know, this was [the curator] Massimiliano Gioni's take on it. I thought it was kind of funny. To make a show in the whole New Museum was not easy because there are three separate floors, and each floor is its own self-contained space. The issue for me was to provide three clear images and not a chronological survey of my work. In those three rooms, I wanted to demonstrate three essential or possible takes on what I do. Each floor had its own group of works, all of which basically dealt with the absence of the author in some way. The clay sculptures on the top floor, which were made by the most simple gestural act of creation—just a grab—putting a print on nature, like the trace of an existential grasp ... And then the middle floor is the empty room, there's nothing really there, just the space itself. And on the floor below, you have the mirrored boxes, which are a random collection of objects that all get treated through the same process. And through it all, like a spine, runs a work that is vertical, that has a much more physical approach, which is basically these skins of objects: the piano, the crutches, the streetlamp. They're basically stacked on top of each other throughout the floors. I wanted to make a show where romantic sentiment is absent to some degree. A show of the future. But as it goes with the future, have you ever been to Disneyland? There's a ride called Tomorrowland, and it's the '50s take on the future and it's more dated than anything else you've ever seen. Therefore I don't know if that approach will bear the fruits I intended ... It might blossom in ways we don't expect, or not at all.

GM: *Back to Vienna: Your Bread House was the first project you did in Vienna?*

UF: Yes, I realized the *Bread House*, for the first time incidentally, in 2004 in the Viennese district of Hietzing. I had been invited by the Gruppe Österreichische Guggenheim. They had a place for the project, across the street from a branch of the Dorotheum Auction House on Hietzinger Hauptstraße; the whole thing came under Art in the Public Realm. The *Bread House* was installed outside in the open—this caused, of course, some reactions. I had conversations about hunger, the Second World War, and the body of Christ. A house out of the body of Christ? At some point an old drunk politician came and declared war on me. But that was about it.

A year later in New York reactions were totally different. The main association people had here was the Atkins Diet, which is a low-carb food regimen. Self-imposed hunger. Maybe there is something Catholic to it after all? Food to me is like wood. It's a very natural material.

GM: *What's the difference if this piece is shown in a museum?*

UF: Better there than in the trash!

GM: *Your exhibition in Vienna combined intimacy and openness: the exhibition space was designed into a kind of apartment with a large number of rooms, which, however, did not create an atmosphere of narrowness and boundaries, but afforded views and insights and let visitors move and look around freely and openly.*

UF: Yes, playing with spaces and visual axes was important to me, particularly because many of the works shown formally have something domestic about them. The problem with the usual exhibition spaces is that they are ghettos. It was not always so, and it is not so in other cultures. The problem with exhibitions is that they are exclusive, not integrative. That is why it was important to me to play with the harshness, the seclusion of art spaces, so as to make them softer, more human. So I think the setting of the Viennese exhibition corresponded to a kind of apartment with different rooms; it was a place for which we had found a human scale. The human measure, this is what was important to me.

GM: *In the last room of the exhibition, Urs Fischer himself was shown as a life-size wax sculpture, an oversized candle that was melting away over the course of the show. An ironical comment from Urs Fischer?*

UF: It was a sculpture like any other. It is about the sculpture, not contents.

GM: *Nonetheless it is Urs Fischer?*

UF: Otherwise it would be someone else. Again, I believe that what counts is sculpture, an essential nature of sculpture. Art—independent from content, time, and space—functions. It's about something esoteric, though not in the sense of a spiritual path. It's about internal, not external contemplation and understanding. Emotions and beauty that feel factual. You can describe it from the outside but they live from within.

Pigs dream of pigs. As a human, you dream of humans. Those feelings exist and are not explicable in their entirety. Of course, you can analyze anything, but this cannot account for their quality, let alone the emotion. To talk more about this would be a philosopher's business. And then there is art history, but the relationship between art and art history is sufficiently described in terms of the chicken and the egg. The great, even uncanny, thing is that if somebody succeeds artistically, the material transformation appears to radiate energy. Anybody encountering this work will have an emotional reaction. Eventually, it is all about energies, not about text or analysis. Art can be very well packaged information. A good piece of work is something like a *perpetuum mobile*.

GM: *Going back once again to the two exhibitions at the New Museum in New York and now at the Kunsthalle in Vienna: where do you see distinct differences, apart from a different engagement of space?*

UF: In New York, it was all new works, like an overlarge gallery show. In Vienna, it is also a look back; this was your suggestion, and I thought that suited me very well.

GM: *Now comes Venice. What are you going to do there?*

UF: Venice will be a mix of old and new works, but for the most part will comprise other groups of works than in Vienna. For example, I will be showing a new piece I did together with Georg Herold. All in all, it will be about a different aspect of my work ...

It was interesting—in Vienna and in Venice—to look back on what I did in my past, and on the path I've taken since. And it was also about bringing together again a number of works roughly created at the same time and in the same place and to see how they get along today, like at a class reunion. These exhibitions also stood for recollection and the question of where I once was, emotionally, socially, economically, and also personally.

GM: *The German Romantic poet August von Platen once wrote, "Who has beheld Beauty with his eyes, / To Death he is already given, / In earthly service not his mission lies, / And yet in fear of Death he'll shiver, / Who has beheld Beauty with his eyes!" Death and transience, whether it's a skeleton or a wax figure melting away, seem to play an important role in your work. What is the relationship of beauty and death in the cosmos of Urs Fischer?*

UF: Basically, skeletons are pretty likeable figures for me. They are simple, like prototypes; they are an easily workable form of figuration, and for me, they have a pleasurable, curious liveliness.

If you talk about the work in Dakis Joannou's garden—a skeleton breathing into a mirror—which is a central element of the view he has from his living room, this is, superficially, a *vanitas* motif, a *memento mori*, but I actually make the skeleton pose. To me all the medieval skeletons seem to be the ones that still look fresh and new because they don't wear dated clothes. Old paintings with skeletons always look much fresher ... I like Walt Disney's skeleton dance from 1929.

To understand things nowadays as *vanitas* or *memento mori* motifs is too simple, and all the other celebrations of death are even more vain than any homage to life. That said, homages to life can be the most morbid things. For me the skeleton is actually a light, even playful basic human figure. My skeletons are pretty funny guys.

GM: *I still think that you cannot simply detach yourself from art-history references. Could you perhaps name a number of artists or attitudes that may be surprising but still are significant for you?*

UF: Oh, all of them! All good. Today Renoir, Debussy, or Courbet come to my mind because these artists seemed to want to slice reality differently in their time. They looked for a hard edge, a friction or interference, a way to engage with the changes at the time of industrialization. There's a very strong undercurrent, like they seem to understand that something is shifting. There's a brutality to their approach. Well, of course, a lot of what was tough has meanwhile been absorbed into our culture and our institutions and is looked at as something harmless or beautiful or historical now. An old oil painting, an old musical score ...

GM: *Are you afraid of having your work institutionalized?*

UF: Every generation should build their own museums, their own context for art, their own surroundings or reality. I believe there was once a proposal for that from Otto Wagner, the Austrian architect, to build a museum to which each generation keeps adding its own rooms in its own style, so the building keeps growing in every direction. I don't know if I am remembering that correctly, but I like the idea. Today we're in an incomprehensible situation anyway; things are absurd.

GM: *By choosing transient, perishable materials, like fruit, for your work Rotten Foundation (Faules Fundament, 1998), but also bread, cheese, eggs, or garbage for others of your sculptures, you evade their institutionalization. Are you giving over a work of art that is never finished to a process of endless transformation?*

UF: Basically, these are all replaceable materials which, through the possibility of replacement, also have a chance of ageing honorably, with the transformation still under way, so to speak. After all, what remains in conceptual works is the idea; matter can be replaced. And in the end it's all a matter of time, even art.

GM: *Still, the question of the institutionalization of art seems to be a recurrent issue in your work. In your wallpaper work Verbal Asceticism (2007), you included traces of previous exhibitions—such as "Where Are We Going?" of 2006 and "Picasso, la Joie de Vivre 1945–1948" of 2007—that had been shown at the same venue, Palazzo Grassi in Venice, featuring selected twentieth-century works from the Pinault Collection. Old exhibit labels for works by artists like Mark Rothko or Richard Serra as well as architectural details or paper prints of the works from the collection echoed those earlier exhibitions and were overlaid with your own works.*

UF: Yeah, you know, it's like having imaginary friends as a kid.

GM: *In your work, you keep going at museum walls, tearing them down, breaking holes in them. In 2007, you had a huge hole dug in the floor of Gavin Brown's gallery, which you then entitled You. What do institutions have to endure from the sculptor Urs Fischer, and how far does your notion of sculpture go?*

UF: This is what excites me. Sculpture—it's as simple as that—can also be subtraction. Taking away is as important to me as adding. Taking away, adding, or leaving things as they are, these are the possibilities. That's what I'm playing with. A few years ago I did a project at the Brant Foundation. This was again a giant hole; actually it was a lot bigger than the one at Gavin Brown's. I rebuilt the building itself there, as a kind of vestibule, an overture. And then there was this big hole.

GM: *Why do you take such a liking to certain objects which sometimes serve rather prosaic purposes? You keep mentioning your broom, for example.*

UF: The broom is simply there. I can see it, others can see it, it is needed; this is about clearly defined function, but also and above all about clear images. In the end, what I use is not all that important. Things are just a vehicle for me, and any vehicle can be looked upon this way or that. The crucial thing is not what I use but what I make of it. Just think of the *Untitled* sculpture, or maybe something entirely different, my latest box works, silkscreens on mirror-polished chrome steel.

GM: *Speaking of appropriation ...*

UF: What does a Duchamp readymade look like today? How does his *Bottle Rack* look? Did it ever look new? It has gone out of use, become exotic. I find this transformation very beautiful. The ageing of appropriation art, like the Koons vacuum cleaners, is totally unpredictable. In this case, they're real vacuum cleaners, but they seem to fall apart rather than age. There comes a point where simple industrially made things have to be replaced, remade, as expensive individual things. As a sculpture of a mass-manufactured object, to have that object remade as a one-off seems almost perverse and is extremely unresourceful. It's actually almost anti-industrial. It's the longest way to get from A to B.

There was something beautiful I noticed in the Fischli & Weiss piece made for the Zurich Stock Exchange, a building never used for the purpose it was intended for. They installed vitrines all throughout the building, including in the parking garage, and just filled them with objects of the time. Back then, the things they chose were all really contemporary items but now they look absurd, like a time capsule. Appropriation art often takes something that's very "now," but "now" becomes old so fast. Back to Courbet and his peers: because they worked using traditional techniques, their works also aged traditionally. These things were made as artworks; they were not mass-produced for minimum cost. It will get even worse in the future when things become recyclable.

A lot of appropriation artists decided to cast consumer objects or find other means to replicate them, and through this metamorphosis of the material ended up with actually much more interesting stuff in my opinion. Precursors of this can already be found in the remakes of Duchamp's readymades in the 1960s by Arturo Schwarz.

GM: *To stay with your broom: you keep combining apparent incompatibles in your work. It reminds me of the Surrealists, for example of Dalí's Lobster Telephone (1936) or Man Ray's The Gift (1921). How surrealistic is your work?*

UF: I have no idea. I like Dalí. As an attitude, the surreal has long ago become a mainstream understanding of reality. Just watch TV ...

GM: *But incompatibles or, more precisely, the dialectic as a play of opposites seems to have great attraction for you?*

UF: Not only in the piece with the broom; many of my projects are about a balance between weight and lightness, between gravity and suspension. Maybe that's the essential thing.

GM: *Let's go back once more to vanitas or memento mori motifs, the here and the beyond, greed for life and fear of death, moments that remind us of Baroque thinking, where we find death and fear and horror next to the joy of living, laughter, and humor. We also find this feeling of "over the moon, down in the dumps" in the subjects of your work. Is this also true of Urs Fischer, the person?*

UF: It's mainly the idea of an idea of life expressed through an object. This object then becomes a gift that keeps on giving. Yes, and pleasure is of course a subject; in this respect, work and life are one.

GM: *And now a final question, speaking of pleasure: Urs Fischer not only likes to eat, he also likes to cook?*

UF: But that is the first and foremost and best question. By the way, we've just cooked some lunch here at the studio. If you want, stay, and let's eat something together. Although I can't offer you spaghetti today, which is my favorite.

Translated from German by Michael Strand