Peter Fischli David Weiss

HOW TO WORK BETTER

Peter Fischli David Weiss
HOW TO WORK BETTER

February 5–April 27, 2016

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
Teacher Resource Unit

For more than three decades, Swiss artists Peter Fischli (b. 1952) and David Weiss (1946–2012) collaborated to create artworks that offer a deceptively casual meditation on how we perceive everyday life. *Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better* presents the most thorough investigation to date of their joint production. The retrospective reveals connections between their seemingly disparate works in sculpture, photography, installation, and video, and points to the ways that they challenged the seriousness of "high art." The exhibition features key objects from virtually every project the artists worked on together, including *Sausage Series* (1979); *Suddenly This Overview* (1981–); *Equilibres* (*A Quiet Afternoon*) (1984–86); *Grey Sculptures* (1984–86/2006–08); *Rubber Sculptures* (1986–90/2005–06); *Visible World* (1986–2012); *The Way Things Go* (1987); *Airports* (1987–2012); *Polyurethane Installations* (1991–); *Question Projections* (2000–03); and *Fotografías* (2005), among others. Through these varied series, Fischli and Weiss posed essential, open-ended questions on the aesthetic value of the everyday, the false dichotomies central to Western thought, the role of travel in contemporary life, the tension between wasted and productive time, and other trenchant themes.

This Resource Unit focuses on various aspects of Fischli and Weiss's art and provides techniques for exploring both the visual arts and other areas of the curriculum. This guide is available on the museum's website at **Guggenheim.org/artscurriculum** with images that can be downloaded and projected for classroom use. The images may be used for educational purposes only and are not licensed for commercial applications of any kind. Before bringing your class to the Guggenheim, we invite you to visit the exhibition, read this guide, browse our website, and decide which aspects of the exhibition are most relevant to your students. For more information on scheduling a visit for your students, please call 212 423 3637.

Initially planned during David Weiss's lifetime, *Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better* is organized by Nancy Spector, Deputy Director and Jennifer and David Stockman Chief Curator, and Nat Trotman, Curator, Performance and Media, in close collaboration with Peter Fischli.

To coincide with this exhibition, two public works by Fischli and Weiss will appear on the streets of New York. From February 5 to May 1, Public Art Fund presents the text-based monument to labor *How to Work Better* (1991) as a wall mural at the corner of Houston and Mott Streets. At 11:57 pm nightly throughout February, the video *Büsi (Kitty)* (2001) will appear in Times Square as part of Times Square Arts' Midnight Moment program.

Major support for the exhibition has been provided by Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager, Basel.

The Leadership Committee for *Peter Fischli David Weiss: How to Work Better* is gratefully acknowledged for its support, with special thanks to Chairs Maja Oeri and Hans Bodenmann. Additional support is provided by Matthew Marks; Monika Sprüth and Philomene Magers; Galerie Eva Presenhuber; Glenstone; Collection Ringier; Alfred Richterich; Per Skarstedt; Walter A. Bechtler Foundation, Switzerland; Thomas Ammann Fine Art AG, Zürich; Ulla Dreyfus-Best; Hauser & Wirth; Gigi and Andrea Kracht; Arend and Brigitte Oetker; and Sylvie Winckler.

Funding is also generously provided by ART MENTOR FOUNDATION LUCERNE, National Endowment for the Arts, the Swiss Arts Council Pro Helvetia, and New York State Council on the Arts.

‹ ABOUT THE ARTISTS ›

The collaboration between the Swiss artists Peter Fischli (b. 1952) and David Weiss (1946–2012) spanned more than three decades and produced hundreds of artworks in mediums ranging from film and photography to sculpture and installation. Theirs was a playful, conversational partnership that explored ideas relating to time, work, and the value of the everyday.

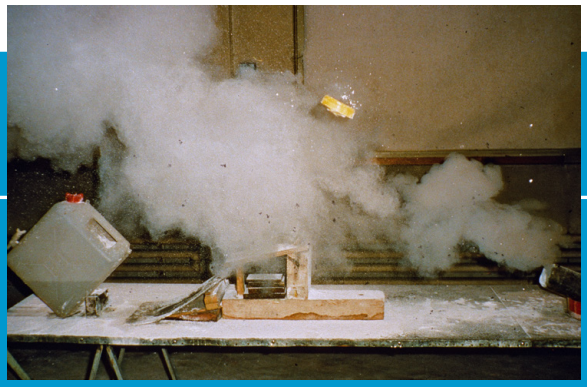
The artists met in 1977 and became fast friends and associates, realizing they shared a fascination with consumer objects and the commonplace, as well as a love for play based in dialogue. Their first project together, *Sausage Series* (1979), picks up on these themes. This group of ten photographs depicts narrative scenes made with sausages and other foods and household items. The series pushed the boundaries of the definition of art and introduced another concept that would reverberate throughout their careers: the notion of wasted time. The arrangements look much like the result of games. Play—activity that might look like pointless loafing—is transformed into artwork.

The pair initially had no plans to work together beyond *Sausage Series,* but when Fischli visited Weiss in Los Angeles, a whole new project emerged. They rented two scruffy costumes from a costume-supply store—a brown rat and a panda bear—and their **alter egos**, Rat and Bear, were born. Seemingly opposites (the panda is endangered and lovable, the rat ubiquitous and ugly), they appear as partners of equal stature in their roles as the protagonists of Fischli and Weiss's first film, *The Least Resistance* (1980–81). Together, Rat and Bear set out to achieve wealth and fame. In the end, they satisfy themselves with writing a book to explain the universe through opposites and "big and little questions," firmly establishing the artists' interest in mocking **false dichotomies**.

Questions infuse Fischli and Weiss's work. They interrogated everything from the trivial to the existential with sincerity and humor. In *Large Question Pot* (1984), they inscribed their questions on the interior of a polyurethane vessel. The subjects range from the profound ("Do souls migrate?") to the quotidian ("Should I go to the zoo?"). Later works in the series *Question Projections* (2000–03) present queries that seem to have come from the mind of a brooding fictional character, this time in the form of an installation using slide projectors.

Throughout their careers, Fischli and Weiss explored their favorite themes—the quotidian, opposites, play versus work, questions, and time—in a variety of materials. They used everything from clay and cast rubber to **polyurethane foam** and slide projections. Their 33-year alliance came to an end in 2012 with Weiss's death. This retrospective gives audiences a chance to see how the artists were able to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, the trivial into the profound, and boredom into something worthy of our time.

"A major point in the Sausage Series that is never really mentioned is that by simply . . . giving something a specific name, the named object is transformed. . . . That is the method children always use. Children actually do not need any toys. They would just rename the bottle [to be] the rocket."
—Peter Fischli [1]



‹ EVERYDAY OBJECTS ›

Fischli and Weiss spent their careers investigating the everyday. They remade ordinary items such as dog bowls and candles out of rubber. They played with food and other household items to create narrative scenes or test physics concepts. They chose commonplace materials. In doing so, the pair challenged traditional definitions of art and basic societal distinctions, prompting intriguing questions: What is **kitsch** and what is beauty? What is banal and what is sublime? What is high art and what is low?

From the start, it was clear that Fischli and Weiss shared an interest in the quotidian. An early trip to a department store helped them discover their shared tendency to see common objects—from a kitchen table to a sink—as aesthetic ones. In 1979 they used sausages, other foods, and household items to craft miniature narrative scenes; photographs of these tableaux make up their first joint project, the ten *Sausage Series* photographs. The artists made the images in Weiss's apartment after deciding, as he recalled, "not to go out, but instead to work with what was there."[2] The decision "was basically a convenience and a constraint."[3] In one photograph, a plate of water is transformed into an Alpine lake and crumpled bed sheets into mountain peaks. In others, slices of mortadella are reimagined as carpets in a store with cornichon customers, and sausages become cars involved in a traffic accident in a cardboard-box city.

Less than a decade later, for *The Way Things Go* (1987), the artists used typically discarded materials—old tires, candles, fuses, and wood planks—to set up a series of chain reactions involving ramps, seesaws, and other elements. The assembled objects set each other into motion like an elaborate **Rube Goldberg machine**.

At the Carpet Shop, 1979. From *Sausage Series*, 1979. Series of ten chromogenic prints. Printed in three sizes: 24 x 36 cm, edition of 24; 50 x 70 cm, edition of 12; and 70 x 100 cm, edition of 3

The Way Things Go, 1987. 16 mm color film, with sound, 30 min., edition of 12; also available commercially as an unlimited edition video

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *At the Carpet Shop* (from *Sausage Series*), 1979
The Way Things Go, 1987

- Look together at the photograph *At the Carpet Shop*.
- Ask students what they notice. What is going on in this image? What materials can they identify?
- Tell students that this image is part of a series of ten photographs by Fischli and Weiss that show miniature scenes the artists constructed by combining sausages with other bits of food and items available in Weiss's apartment. In this case, they used slices of mortadella and miniature pickles called cornichons to create a picture that they titled *At the Carpet Shop*. Ask students what they think about the artists' technique. How have they manipulated the everyday objects? How does this work differ from art the students are familiar with? In what ways does it challenge their ideas of what art should be?
- Read the quotation at the top of this section to your students. Ask what they think about it. What can they guess about what is important to the artists by looking at the artwork and thinking about the quotation?
- Now show students the still from the film *The Way Things Go*. If possible, play them a clip from the film on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXrRC3pfLnE. Ask students what they notice about the materials the artists used. Compare the choice and use of the materials in this work to those in *Sausage Series*. What ideas do students think are being explored in *The Way Things Go*? In what ways is it an extension of the themes of *Sausage Series* (made some eight years earlier)? In what ways is it a departure from the earlier work?

EXPLORATIONS

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Some *Sausage Series* photographs depict specific historical events. In *Titanic*, a plastic bottle becomes an ocean liner sinking among Styrofoam icebergs in a bathtub ocean. For this activity, challenge students to raid their pockets, backpacks, and desks for objects and use them to create a scene from history, literature, or film.

  Reflect on their process and products. What surprise discoveries did they make in reimagining the objects as historical or fictional figures? What challenges did they face? Was the constraint of using what was at hand helpful to their process? Why or why not?

- *Sausage Series* is a good example of how Fischli and Weiss played with metaphor. In German (their native tongue), the word *Wurst* has multiple connotations beyond "sausage." German verbs associated with *Wurst* are common slang for doing work in an amateurish way. Ask students how they see this play on words relating to *Sausage Series*. Now ask students to pick an English word that has multiple meanings—whether formally or as slang. In pairs or small groups, have them brainstorm a list of meanings associated with the word. Then challenge them to make a drawing, collage, or poem based on their list.

- Fischli and Weiss had to be familiar with scientific concepts to construct the set of chain reactions featured in *The Way Things Go*. The artists explored the principles of physics and chemistry and the properties of water, fire, and gas. They were inspired in part by children's experiments, a book for teenagers called *The Young Chemist*, and advice from specialists. For this activity, challenge students to identify and list scientific principles they can see demonstrated in the clip of *The Way Things Go* on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXrRC3pfLnE.

  For instance, students might note examples of Newton's Laws of Motion—the third law states that for every action (force) there is an equal and opposite reaction (force). Students should then choose a scientific concept from the list they generated and demonstrate it with objects available in the classroom.

"Everything started with talking, increasingly meeting: in the city, in the bar, wherever it was, and each of us felt that the other was an interesting conversational partner . . . Dialogue was the basis of our work together, and that remained so until the end." —Peter Fischli [4]

The Dog of the Inventor of the Wheel Feels the Satisfaction of His Master. From *Suddenly This Overview*, 1981– . Series of approx. 600 sculptures; individual works undated, unfired clay, various dimensions, between 6 x 7 x 5 cm and 82 x 83 x 5 cm

Popular Opposites: Clean and Dirty. From *Suddenly This Overview*, 1981– . Series of approx. 600 sculptures; individual works undated, unfired clay, various dimensions, between 6 x 7 x 5 cm and 82 x 83 x 5 cm

‹ COLLABORATION ›

Fischli and Weiss collaborated on artistic projects for 33 years. In order to work together for that long, Fischli has said that they had to figure out a "system" for their joint efforts. They would begin by discussing an idea together, and then continue by working independently. Later they might adjust each other's pieces. Occasionally, they created something together. They often shared their ideas through questions and worked in ways that did not emphasize power or authority. The identity of each object's primary creator was never clear. Neither artist felt the need to claim ownership.

They refined their methods during their work on *Suddenly This Overview* (1981–), which they conceived as a "**subjective** encyclopedia."[5] The entries in this "encyclopedia" take the form of small clay sculptures on various topics: "popular opposites" (such as *Work and Leisure*, in which one worker carries a ladder and the other sits on it); everyday things (*Snacks*), and humorous renditions of historical moments big and small (*The First Fish Decides to Go Ashore*). In creating these pieces, the artists found "a good model for working together," according to Fischli. "By making many figures on our own, we found the space to accommodate both our ideas."[6]

Through this project, the artists also developed a strategy of ongoing production. They often revisited a given project as the years went on, adding to it when new ideas or exhibition opportunities arose. Work on *Suddenly This Overview*, for example, continues to the present.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: Selections from *Suddenly This Overview*, 1981–

- *The Dog of the Inventor of the Wheel Feels the Satisfaction of His Master*
- *Popular Opposites: Clean and Dirty*

- Look together at the two examples from *Suddenly This Overview*. Ask students what they notice about the materials and the techniques. What is going on in each image?

- Give them the titles of these objects: *Clean and Dirty* and *The Dog of the Inventor of the Wheel Feels the Satisfaction of His Master*. Ask them to look again with these titles in mind. What do they notice now?

- Tell students that these pieces belong to a series called *Suddenly This Overview* that eventually included approximately six hundred unfired clay sculptures. What can students guess about the artists' process for creating the pieces?

- Read the quote at the top of this section. Ask students what they think about it. Have they ever worked with someone else on a project? How would they compare their process to Fischli and Weiss's?

- For *Suddenly This Overview*, Fischli and Weiss created clay sculptures that depict supposed opposites (for instance, clean and dirty), seemingly random objects, and historical, personal, and pop cultural moments. They did not worry about factual accuracy. Instead, they imagined many of the scenes, such as the moment when the wheel was invented. Ask students what they think about the artists making up their own versions of historical events. Why might an artist choose this approach over an attempt at factual accuracy?

EXPLORATIONS

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Fischli and Weiss said that using clay as they did in *Suddenly This Overview* was considered unserious and akin to adopting an amateur technique. "But it was also a material which we found was good to work fast with, and to tell a story with," said Weiss.[7] Traditionally, fine-art sculptors use metals like bronze or stones such as marble. Ask students what they associate with the commonplace clay seen here. Then give a bit of clay to each student. Ask them to experiment with it. What are its strengths and weaknesses as an art material? Challenge them to tell a story with the clay and to give their work a title. What do they see as the advantages and disadvantages of using clay to create a narrative?

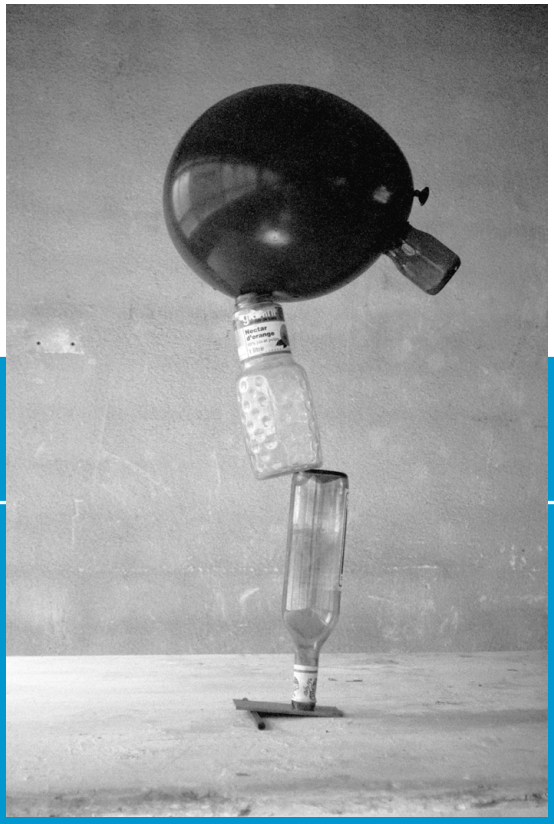
- Fischli and Weiss's "subjective encyclopedia" includes investigations of opposites, such as *Work and Leisure*. Many examples also depict historical events (*George Washington Crossing the Delaware*), personal moments (*Peter on His Way Home after His First Day at School*), and pop cultural occurrences (musicians walking down the street after composing a future hit song)—many of which were invented or imagined by the artists. As Fischli put it: "We had this idea of making something you could call a private lexicon of the things you have in your mind, things you learned in school, things you know from mass media, things you know [because] somebody told you. . . . We wanted to bring all these different things together, not making a [hierarchy in the] selection."[8]

  The titles are essential to the pieces in *Suddenly This Overview*; without them the audience would not necessarily understand what was being depicted. Challenge students to create their own "private **lexicon**" or "subjective encyclopedia" with titles. Which opposites, objects, and moments would they include? Write lists and share them as a class. How does each student's list reflect his or her personal, subjective interests?

- A curator described the benefits of Fischli and Weiss's collaboration this way: "One person working alone can easily lose himself and go completely astray. However, when two artists who are in creative exchange with each other work in concert, the silent understanding between them brings an astonishing artistic quality to the results."[9]

  Challenge students to respond to this quotation with reflections on their own experiences of collaboration.

"To celebrate boredom was also to go against the whole idea of the 'inspired artist.'"
—Peter Fischli [10]



‹ WASTED TIME ›

Fischli and Weiss developed most of the ideas for their artwork through conversations with one another. A recurring discussion topic was boredom and its power to alter the experience of time. When one is bored, time slows down. The artists thought that boredom might be a path to creative inspiration.

Fischli explained: "As an artist, if you are always just receptive to the things with which the world entertains you and make your work in response to them . . . that's not so interesting. The moment when you are disconnected and go into this deep boredom . . . this is really a great experience."[11]

One evening in Fischli and Weiss's studio, a new project developed from this idea: *Equilibres (A Quiet Afternoon)* (1984–86). They began to arrange the objects around them in compositions that defied gravity just long enough to take a photograph. Later they began to make these compositions anywhere—a friend's house or a restaurant—using whatever was available. Embracing the element of chance, the artists found the unexpected results intriguing. Due to the constraints inherent in the project, there was little emphasis on whether a given composition was "right." Whatever configuration made the objects balance was the right one. When they later published the photographs as an artists' book, the **epigraph** read: "**Equilibrium** is the most beautiful right before it collapses."

The artists often spoke about their deliberate misuse of time and materials. For a later work for the 1995 Venice Biennale, they spent hours filming the ordinary world around them: people at work, the landscape, and commutes from one place to another. Fischli and Weiss regarded the time spent shooting this footage as a year of "not working." Like *Equilibres*, this project plays with notions of how boredom can shift to absorption and wasted time to productive making.

The Man of Constant Sorrow, 1986. *From Equilibres (A Quiet Afternoon)*, 1984–86. Series of 45 gelatin silver prints and chromogenic prints, printed in two sizes: 30 x 24 cm and 40 x 30 cm, each in an edition of 3; expanded in 2006 to include 82 prints from the original negatives, 30 x 24 cm, edition of 3 complete sets; also published as artists' book in 1985 (37 images) and 2006 (140 images)

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *The Man of Constant Sorrow*, 1986
From *Equilibres (A Quiet Afternoon)*, 1984–86

- Look together at the photograph. Ask students what they notice about it. What materials do they recognize? How have the artists used the materials?

- Explain that this photograph belongs to a series called *Equilibres*. For each work in the group, Fischli and Weiss used everyday objects to build a structure that defied gravity for a moment. Read students the epigraph that the artists chose to accompany a book of these photographs: "Equilibrium is the most beautiful right before it collapses." Ask them to respond to this notion. How could this moment be considered beautiful?

- The artists gave each *Equilibres* photograph an individual title, often basing it on a narrative implied by the form. Ask students what they think this example should be titled and why. Give them the title: *The Man of Constant Sorrow*. Ask them to examine the image again with the title in mind.

- The artists said they were celebrating and exploring the potential of boredom by creating these pieces. Ask students how they feel when they are bored. Has their boredom ever led to creativity? How or why did this happen?

- This series was inspired in part by a book titled *A Thousand Games You Can Make Out of Nothing*. The artists claimed that they deliberately misused time and materials. Ask students if they think of games and play as a form of misusing or wasting time. Why or why not? Ask students to debate the idea.

EXPLORATIONS

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- In a book that inspired Fischli and Weiss, *A Thousand Games You Can Make Out of Nothing*, one of the featured games involves balancing objects. For this activity, ask students to imagine other games that would fit the title of this book. How can you make a game out of nothing? Ask students to write the instructions or inspirational text for the game and accompany it with drawings. Compare the games they created. What do they have in common? (Many of the games Fischli and Weiss developed involve chance, **ephemerality**, and the everyday.)

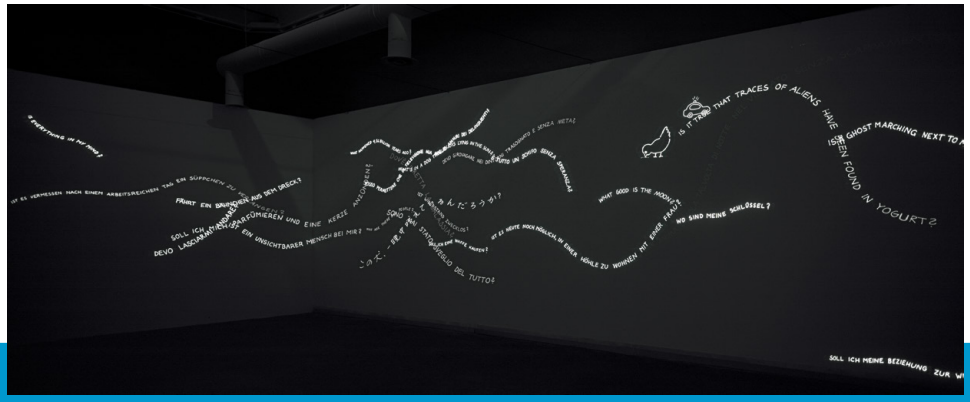
- Ask each student to work with a partner to collect an assortment of nearby objects (have them check backpacks, desks, pockets, etc., but avoid anything valuable or breakable). Now they should try to balance the objects in some way, taking turns adding new items to the temporary construction. If possible, have a camera ready to capture the creations just before they tumble. Have them repeat the building process several times. What did students learn from the process, if anything? Do they regard the experience a waste of time? Why or why not?

- As an extension of the above activity, consider how Fischli and Weiss experimented with scientific concepts. In *Equilibres* and other works, they explored physics. Ask students to look at the list below and try to identify the concepts in the image from *Equilibres*. (They can also look for these concepts in Fischli and Weiss's film *The Way Things Go*. See the Everyday Objects section of this resource.)

gravity	inertia	kinetic energy
mass	momentum	potential energy

Next, challenge students to use the balancing techniques from the previous activity to explore these concepts. Ask them to reflect on the experience using these terms as a guide. For instance: How did the mass of the object affect its inertia? How did potential and kinetic energy interact? Which elements led to the best equilibrium?

"And then came the pair of opposites 'small questions and big questions': for example, small question—'Has the last bus gone?'—as compared to big question—'Where is the galaxy going?' The answer to the former question may, of course, be far more important than the latter, which one can take more time over." —David Weiss [12]



Questions, 2000–03. From *Question Projections*, 2000–03. Series of multiple-slide-projection installations, each between 3 and 15 projections of 81 slides each, dimensions variable. Installation view: *Sogni e conflitti: La dittatura dello spettatore; Ritardi e rivoluzioni*, Venice Biennale, June 15–Nov. 2, 2003

‹ QUESTIONS ›

Fischli and Weiss investigated the world, developed their ideas, and worked with each other through dialogue—specifically, a dialogue of constant questioning. They preferred the **interrogatory** to the declarative and the whimsical to the authoritative. No matter the medium, they asked questions. Their queries played many roles. As exhibition curator Nancy Spector writes: "Questions raise awareness, shift viewpoints, introduce uncertainty, unravel assumptions, and challenge perceived dogma. Questions undermine and disrupt."[13]

Fischli and Weiss's questions ranged from the trivial to the profound, but they always delivered them with a mix of humor and earnestness. In the early film *The Least Resistance* (1980–81), the artists' alter egos (Rat and Bear) embark on a journey, seeking meaning. In the end, their discoveries are compiled into a book, *Order and Cleanliness* (1981), which includes an outline of "big and little questions," from "Should I change the bedding?" to "Is there life in outer space?"

From that point on the artists continued to gather questions, together and individually, that informed future works. In 1984 they created the first of two *Question Pots*, vessels made of polyurethane, painted gray, and inscribed on the interior with a swirl of questions. By this point, the queries had transformed from "big and little" to "**egocentric**," according to Fischli.[14] They were like questions posed by a fictional character embroiled in self-analysis. Weiss said: "In very vague terms we did imagine someone asking himself slightly paranoid questions that revolve very much around himself. That is part of the legacy of psychoanalysis: broody self-questioning."[15]

The pots anticipated another series: *Question Projections*. In *Questions* (2000–03), for instance, the artists projected 35 mm transparencies of hundreds of handwritten questions on the walls of a dark room. The texts cross over and under each other, appearing and disappearing every few seconds. Touching on the mundane and the existential, the practical and the absurd, they have the character of questions we ask ourselves, even if we do not utter them aloud.

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Questions* (from *Question Projections*), 2000–03
Page from slide inventory for *Question Projections*, 2000

- Look together at the installation view of *Questions*. Ask students what they notice. They may explore elements such as the words, the font, or the materials.

- What do they notice about the types of questions the artists have included? The questions in this piece range from "Do I have to be cheerful?" to "Was I a good child?" and "Will insects overtake us?" Ask students what they think the questions have in common and how they differ.

- Tell students that this piece is a room-size installation with multiple projectors showing transparencies of the artists' handwritten questions. Each bit of text appears for a few seconds before being replaced with a new one. Ask students to imagine they are in this room watching the questions go by. What would they think and feel? What would they wonder?

- Weiss said that when they developed the questions they imagined "someone asking himself slightly paranoid questions."[16] They are the types of questions we might silently ask ourselves. What kinds of questions do students ask themselves? How do they compare to the ones projected in *Questions*?

- Ask students if they are familiar with slide projectors. If so, what do they associate with slide carousels and projectors? Talk about how, for many years, these tools were used to share family vacation photographs or to illustrate classroom lectures. Discuss the choice of an outdated technology and the use of a popular tool (used to display snapshots) in a "high art" context. How do students think the installation would be changed by the introduction of a high-tech or fine-art display strategy?

EXPLORATIONS

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Fischli and Weiss explore many different types of questions in their work. In the beginning, they were attracted to the juxtaposition of questions big and small. Later, in their *Question Pots*, the questions seemed to fall into three categories: personal, observational, and theoretical. Fischli has also cited an art critic's theory that there are two kinds of questions: one is straightforward ("What is the diameter of the Earth?"), while the other ("Why is the Earth not a cube?") causes you to wonder about the person who asked it.[17]

  For this activity, first challenge students to work in pairs to list 50 questions. They can be about everyday things or deep concerns. Second, ask them to sort their questions into categories of their own creation. Finally, ask each pair to choose ten questions from their list and write them on individual strips of paper. They should then work with the whole class to create categories for the remaining questions and to sort them.

  What types of questions did people ask? How did the categories change as they moved from pairs to the whole class? What functions did the questions have, if any?

- As an extension of the above activity, ask students to select questions from their list or the list compiled by the whole class and display them for others to see. Ask them to think about how the medium they choose will affect the viewer. Students might choose to post the questions on social media, paint them on the backs of old T-shirts, or trace them in the layer of dust on a car. How does the mode of display affect the meaning? What are the reactions to their questions?

- For this challenge, ask students to imagine they are the person asking the questions in Fischli and Weiss's *Questions* and to write a memoir (in the first person). What sort of person would ask questions such as:

  - Should I go to another city and rent an apartment under a false name?
  - Should I eat chalk?
  - Will they blame me for everything?
  - What percent of me is animal?

  Ask students to share their writing. What characteristics did the narrators have? How were students inspired by the questions?

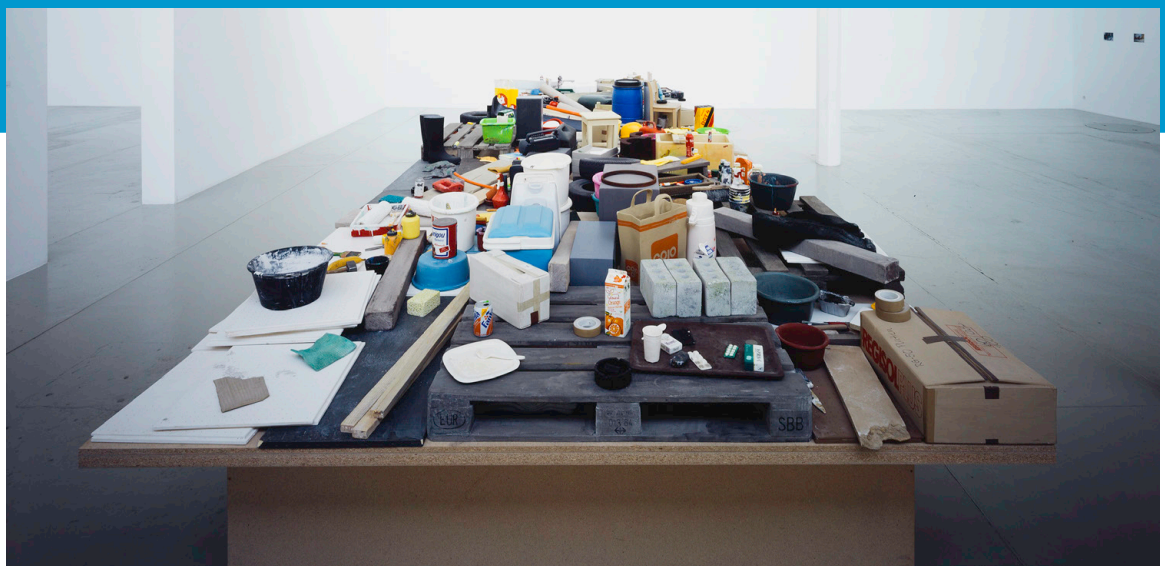
"Both clay and foam are cheap materials that you can easily buy. You can use the foam for constructions, it's easy to handle. And it comes also out of the hobby market, people need it for making model airplanes or they use it in the film industry for set production, or they use it in restaurants for decorations. It's the contrary of bronze and marble." —Peter Fischli [18]

‹ MATERIALS AND PROCESS ›

Fischli and Weiss made their first sculptures with clay, a material that allowed them to be flexible and spontaneous but limited their options in terms of scale. They discovered a new material that could solve the latter problem while working on set design for a low-budget horror film in Los Angeles in 1979–80. The movie industry uses polyurethane foam to make props (like the gravestone the artists created for the film). It is cheap and readily available like clay. Also like clay, it is an art material not usually associated with fine art. But the two materials differ in other ways: clay is organic and earthen; polyurethane foam is toxic and artificial. Polyurethane is ubiquitous in modern life, appearing in everything from sponges to car interiors. The type the artists used is a building material, usually used for insulation. While it looks sturdy, it is light and brittle. For the artists' first creations with polyurethane, they mixed the component chemicals themselves.

In the 1990s, Fischli and Weiss returned to the material to create installations in which they meticulously re-created the everyday objects one might find in an artist's studio or behind the scenes in a gallery, such as cleaning supplies, furniture, paint cans, wooden pallets, and personal items left behind (including cassette tapes and a toothbrush). Encountering the scenes, gallery visitors had a tough time determining whether the objects were real or fake. There were no signs, and visitors could not get too close to the delicate works. If it were not for the occasional irregularity—a leather armchair of a different scale than a nearby pedestal and a brand-name object missing some usual details—visitors may not have realized the objects were art at all.

Table, 1992–93. Painted polyurethane, 750 parts, dimensions variable. Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel



VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: *Table*, 1992–93

- Look together at *Table*. Ask students what they notice about it. What kinds of objects do they see?

- Ask them to imagine encountering this collection of objects in a museum or gallery. What would they think or wonder?

- This collection of objects was meticulously hand-carved of polyurethane foam. One reviewer wrote of encountering an installation like this in the gallery: "There was no sign, no explanation, and only after a long pause did one realize that everything was patiently handmade—a laborious **homage** to the blindingly familiar."[19] What do students think might give away the handmade nature of the objects? How would it feel to make this realization "after a long pause"?

- What do students think about the choice of objects? How would the installation be different if the artists had re-created rare or special objects instead? How would it be different if they had placed the actual manufactured objects in the gallery? Would it still be art? Why or why not?

- An art critic described these objects as those from a "rummage sale—not leftovers or rubbish, necessarily, but rather the kinds of things that just won't go away."[20] What do students think about this description?

- The artists have stripped the objects of their functions; here, their only function is to be viewed. But according to one art critic they have "new symbolic value: the object becomes mysterious, fraught with meaning, mythical."[21] Ask students what they think of this description. What happens to an object after it has lost its function?

EXPLORATIONS

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Fischli and Weiss were able to create objects with stunning **verisimilitude**. When they discussed some of the things they learned from the process, Fischli recommended looking at details rather than taking measurements, and Weiss said that one key is to make sure parallel elements stay parallel.[22] They also noted how difficult it is to create food objects that fool the visitor, because humans are more attuned to details when determining what is edible. For this project, challenge students to re-create an everyday object (using a material such as modeling clay or, if possible, polyurethane foam) in a way that could trick the naked eye. Ask students what they learn from the sculpting process. What are the challenges and how did they address them?

- What other materials and processes do people use to represent real things? Ask students to be aware of the simulated objects they encounter over the course of a week. These could be props on television and movies, decorative objects in homes, or even materials such as fake wood. Ask them to record the encounters through writing or drawing. At the end of the week, have students share what they have found as a class. What techniques do people use? Do they always strive for verisimilitude? Why or why not? What functions do these replicas or representations serve?

- Traditional still life subjects tend to be beautiful, natural, precious, and carefully arranged. Fischli and Weiss's arrangements are like haphazard encounters with stuff that has been left around. Tell students to be on the lookout for these types of accumulations as they move through the day. When they come upon one, they should take a photograph or make a drawing. Tabletops, counters, chairs, corners, or closets may provide some examples. Analyze what makes the groupings convincingly casual and random. Using the principles they discovered, have the students create a new installation and photograph or sketch it. What did they learn about creating the appearance of randomness?

"We have the desire to attempt the encyclopedic and at the same time run it aground. We want in our encyclopedias to somehow suggest that there always is this longing to grasp the world—and you never manage it." —Peter Fischli David Weiss [23]

‹ TRAVEL AND TOURISM ›

In 1986, after working in the studio for an extended period, Fischli and Weiss decided that for their next project, they wanted to get out and into the world. They began to take photographs of landscapes around the globe—from the natural to the man-made, the monumental to the banal, and the wild to the domesticated. The result of this exploration is a vast archive of pictures called *Visible World* (1986–2012) that attempts to map the planet while recognizing the impossibility of doing so.

The first images from the series depicted popular tourist sites around the world, including Stonehenge, Mount Fuji, and Notre Dame. Fischli and Weiss did not seek to represent these familiar places in new ways; their images look like typical tourist snapshots. The photographs bring up questions: What moves us so much about certain sites, structures, or environments? Is it possible to see a famous monument in a fresh way or to have an unmediated experience with it? While photographing these sites, the artists also began to capture other things seen on their travels, such as an airport tarmac or a nearby forest. They have displayed the results in a number of ways; at the Guggenheim, the photographs are being shown in the form of three eight-hour videos.

Visible World spawned other projects, notably *Airports* (1987–2012). In this series, the artists photographed airports they passed through during nearly 25 years of international travel. The images focus on the mundane aspects of air travel: fuel vehicles, baggage trucks, airport workers, long hallways, and tarmacs surrounded by empty landscapes. Like *Visible World* (and other artworks), this series came from the artists' simultaneous "longing to grasp the world" and understanding that it could not be done.

Images from *Visible World*, 1986–2012. Image archive presented in multiple formats: color video (debuted in 1997), silent, 8 hours, edition of 6; transparencies on light tables (debuted in 2000), each 69 x 200 x 90 cm, overall dimensions variable, edition of 3; also published as artists' book in 2000 (2,800 images)

VIEW + DISCUSS

Show: Images from *Visible World*, 1986–2012

- Look together at the images from *Visible World*. Ask students what they notice. Ask them to think about not only the subject matter but also the choices the photographers made. What do they notice about lighting, composition, and point of view?

- How do the two images compare to each other? Explain that these are just two of over three thousand photographs in Fischli and Weiss's series *Visible World*, which they took while visiting places around the globe—including famous sites like the pyramids in Egypt and Stonehenge in the United Kingdom.

- Curators note that the photographic style of *Visible World* is similar to that of a tourist. What do students think about this? How would they describe the style of a tourist snapshot? How does it compare to these images?

- The artists were interested in investigating what makes these places so popular. Ask students why they think these sites attract so many tourists. What makes places like the Eiffel Tower, Mount Fuji, the Pyramids, and Stonehenge so moving to humans? What makes people want to visit and photograph them?

- The photographs that make up *Visible World* are displayed together, collecting in one place the wonders that so many tourists have sought out. Weiss said: "The place you're in isn't [always] so beautiful. Wanderlust is also a form of melancholy."[24] What do students think about this idea? What do they think motivates our desire to travel?

EXPLORATIONS

FURTHER EXPLORATIONS

- Through *Visible World*, Fischli and Weiss demonstrated their appreciation for the daily stroll as a source of inspiration. The series began with walks they took around their native city of Zürich. For this activity, encourage students to gather inspiration from a daily stroll through their community. Challenge them to take at least one aimless walk a day for a whole week. Ask them to take photographs of what they see and then edit the large group of images down to ten. Ask them to explain their choices. They can post their photographs digitally to be projected in class or they can print their images and display them on classroom walls. Compare the students' choices. Are there any common themes or motifs? What was it like to take a stroll each day? What did they notice, feel, or wonder? What else did the walks inspire, if anything?

- For this series, Fischli and Weiss took photographs in the same style as typical tourist snapshots. Ask students to bring in pictures they have taken as tourists. Have them talk in pairs about the aesthetic elements and subject matter of their photographs. Do they use the techniques associated with typical tourist snapshots? What do they choose to take pictures of? Finally, ask them to write individually about the aspects of their travels that the photographs cannot capture. As Fischli said: "When selecting a title for a work like *Visible World* one also refers to the invisible. We were interested in the uppermost layer of reality, how it offers only the visible, the surface."[25] Ask students to think about the "invisible" below their photographs. What was said, done, thought, or felt that these photographs cannot communicate?

- Fischli and Weiss chose subjects that have been photographed innumerable times. According to one writer, "The series asks whether it is possible to retrieve a way of seeing that has been co-opted by consumerism, mass tourism, and fully attacked and deconstructed in art discourse."[26] Or as the artists put it, "Can I restore my innocence?"[27] For this activity, challenge students to select one of the sites that the artists photographed and find ways it has been referenced in advertisements, artworks, movies, products, and television shows. What has it come to represent? How do students think the site's overrepresentation would affect their experience if they visited it?

VOCABULARY

(adapted from Merriam-Webster unless otherwise noted)

ALTER EGO
A different version of yourself

EGOCENTRIC
Caring too much about yourself and not about other people

EPHEMERALITY
The quality or state of lasting a very short time

EPIGRAPH
A quotation set at the beginning of a literary (or artistic) work

EQUILIBRIUM
A state in which opposing forces or actions are balanced so that one is not stronger or greater than the other

FALSE DICHOTOMY
An argument that presents two options and ignores other alternatives [adapted from various sources]

HOMAGE
Something that is done to honor someone or something

INTERROGATORY
Having the form of a question rather than a statement or command

KITSCH
Things (such as movies or works of art) that are of low quality and that many people find amusing and enjoyable

LEXICON
The words used in a language or by a person or group of people

OUTTAKES
Something that is taken out, or not used

POLYURETHANE
Any of various polymers that are used chiefly in making flexible and rigid foams, elastomers, and resins for coatings and adhesives

PROFANE
Serving to debase or defile what is holy

RUBE GOLDBERG MACHINE
A device accomplishing by extremely complex roundabout means what actually or seemingly could be done simply; named after an American cartoonist known for drawing ridiculously complicated mechanical contrivances

SUBJECTIVE
Characteristic of or belonging to reality as perceived rather than as independent of mind

VERISIMILITUDE
The quality of seeming real

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Curiger, Bice, Peter Fischli, and David Weiss, eds. *Fischli Weiss: Flowers & Questions; A Retrospective*. London: Tate Publishing, 2006.

Fleck, Robert, Beate Söntgen, and Arthur C. Danto. *Peter Fischli and David Weiss*. London and New York: Phaidon, 2005.

Peter Fischli David Weiss: Polyurethane Sculptures. New York: Matthew Marks Gallery; Cologne: Walther König, 2014.

Peter Fischli and David Weiss: Equilibres. Cologne: Walther König, 2006.

Spector, Nancy, and Nat Trotman, eds., *Peter Fischli and David Weiss: How to Work Better*. New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2015.

BOOKS FOR KIDS

ON QUESTIONS

Fischli, Peter, and David Weiss. *Will Happiness Find Me?* London: Alberta Press, 2003.

ON PHYSICS CONCEPTS

Bradley, Kimberly Brubaker. *Forces Make Things Move*. New York: Harper Collins, 2005.

Stille, Darlene R. *Motion: Push and Pull, Fast and Slow*. Minneapolis: Picture Window Books, 2004.

VIDEOS

Fischli and Weiss's *The Way Things Go* (1987): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXrRC3pfLnE

Fischli and Weiss's *The Least Resistance* (1981): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeRlFbWzzFU

WEBSITES

Matthew Marks Gallery: Peter Fischli David Weiss: http://www.matthewmarks.com/new-york/artists/peter-fischli-david-weiss/

Jörg Heiser, "The Odd Couple," *Frieze*, no. 102 (Oct. 2006): http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/the_odd_couple/

Hans Ulrich Obrist Interviews Peter Fischli, Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, London, 2012: https://vimeo.com/53933929

NOTES

1 Peter Fischli, interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist, unpublished transcript, Feb. 14, 2015, p. 19.

2 David Weiss, interviewed by Noëmi Landolt, Dora Imhof, and Philip Ursprung, oral history transcript, Kunsthistorisches Institut, Zürich, May 13, 2008, p. 8.

3 Ibid.

4 Fischli, interviewed by Hans Ulrich Obrist, p. 7.

5 Beate Söntgen, "Peter Fischli and David Weiss: In Conversation, January 2004, Zürich," in *PressPLAY* (London: Phaidon, 2005), p. 192.

6 Andrew Maerkle, "The Techne of Schadenfreude: Part I. Gentlemen Don't Work with Their Hands," *Art iT* (Nov. 2010), http://www.art-it.asia/u/.

7 Claire Bishop and Mark Godfrey, "Fischli and Weiss, Between Spectacular and Ordinary," *Flash Art International* 39 (Nov. 2006), p. 75.

8 Ibid.

9 Rainald Schumacher, "Salt and Pepper for Reality," in *Peter Fischli, David Weiss*, ed. Ingvild Goetz and Karsten Löckemann (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), p. 87.

10 Mark Godfrey, "Interview: A Contemporary Visionary Part 1: Peter Fischli on Sigmar Polke," *Tate Etc.*, no. 32 (Autumn 2014), http:// www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/contemporary-visionary-part-i.

11 Ibid.

12 Jörg Heiser, "The Odd Couple," *Frieze*, no. 102 (Oct. 2006), p. 202.

13 Nancy Spector and Nat Trotman, eds., *Peter Fischli and David Weiss: How to Work Better* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2015), p. 250.

14 Beate Söntgen, "Peter Fischli and David Weiss: In Conversation, January 2004, Zurich," in *Peter Fischli David Weiss* (London: Phaidon, 2005), p. 12.

15 Heiser, "The Odd Couple," p. 202.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Maerkle, "The Techne of Schadenfreude."

19 Collier Schorr, "Untitled (Polyurethane Objects and Real Objects)," *Artforum* 32, no. 6 (Feb. 1994), pp. 63–65.

20 Christy Lange, "Still Lifes: Objects from the Raft," in *Fischli Weiss: Flowers & Questions; A Retrospective*, ed. Bice Curiger, Peter Fischli, and David Weiss (London: Tate Publishing, 2006), pp. 138–40.

21 Boris Groys, "Simulated Readymades by Peter Fischli and David Weiss," *Parkett*, nos. 40–41 (June 1994), pp. 34–35.

22 Peter Fischli and David Weiss, interviewed by Jonathan Lewis et al., unpublished transcript, Tate Modern, London, Nov. 6, 2006, pp. 4–7.

23 Peter Fischli and David Weiss, interviewed by Wolfgang Kos (1991), in Renate Goldmann, *Peter Fischli David Weiss* (Cologne: Walther König, 2006), p. 574.

24 Söntgen, "Peter Fischli and David Weiss," p. 31.

25 Ibid., p. 29.

26 Mark Godfrey, "A Fine Balance," in *Peter Fischli David Weiss* (Potomac, Md.: Glenstone, 2013), p. 20.

27 Bishop and Godfrey, "Fischli and Weiss," p. 76.