

# Reviews

## ■ Fischli & Weiss

**Sprüth Magers Lee** London October 10 to November 29

Fischli & Weiss's work has trumped contemporary art. The work is often praised for its poetry and its banality – both at the same time – just as it is equally lauded for its everydayness and its unpredictability, for its humour and its boredom as well as for its craftsmanship and its ready-made genius. In this particular critical world, Fischli & Weiss cannot put a foot wrong. Their work comes in any media (photography, video, slide projection, text, film installation, sculpture – in rubber, clay, polyurethane, fibreglass), and covers any theme (airports, discothèques, vegetables, rock 'n' roll stars, sewers, topiary and guinea pigs, among others, have all made appearances since they first joined forces in 1979). Fischli & Weiss lend themselves to just about any art theory in circulation (and yet their works resist explanation?). The pair have invented an art practice seemingly immune to failure, from which they emerge ever victorious, ever younger. Even their recent prize-winning Venice Biennale installation *Will Happiness Find Me?*, 2003, awarded the Golden Lion for best work on exhibition, was a ludicrously simple construction, conjured literally out of nothing: the passing thoughts of an idle mind. Fischli & Weiss remain oblivious to the tides and fashions of contemporary art, toiling away contentedly, confidently, in their clean Zurich studio, busy creating the next masterpiece.

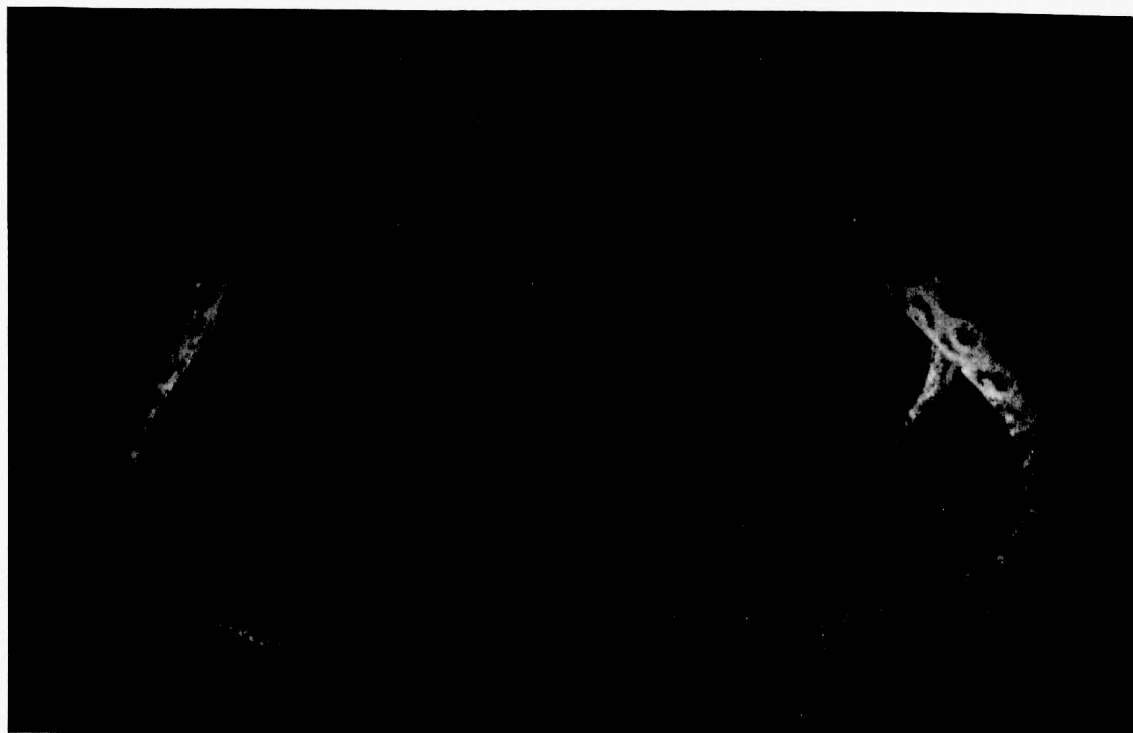
'Unsettled Work' features three main artworks produced since the mid 80s. *Boîte de Nuit*, 1984, (literally 'night-box', or a nightclub) is a free-standing foam sculpture related to the artists' early 'Fever' series. Confronting visitors at the very entrance, *Boîte de Nuit* looks like a blackened meteorite that crashed into the sea and was, for reasons unknown, dragged in chains to this elegant Mayfair gallery. With its styrofoam brick base and painted foam street lamp illuminating it from the interior, *Boîte de Nuit* will never be anybody's favourite

Fischli & Weiss, but still it works as the introduction to the show. The main gallery is darkened, with the work *Surrli*, a series of coloured slides looking like 3D Spirograph patterns, projected on the wall. Continuing from a 1986 series of slide photographs of the light patterns created by a home-made, spinning, lighted machine set up in the artists' studio, the images shown here are the rejects from that original series. These are the 'freaks', as Peter Fischli described them, the *Surrli* slides whose regular patterns are interrupted by random accidents spoiling otherwise perfect geometric configurations.

So far the show would seem to be a collection of Fischli & Weiss leftovers, reheated and served some 18 years later to a gullible London audience. However the exhibition is amply saved by *An Unsettled Work* (1986-2003), a highly labour-intensive, new piece that gives its name to the whole show. Here, 162 slides blur one into the next in an elaborate, continuous overlap, like some kind of endlessly morphing painting. Animals, theatre productions, night scenes and dolls, among many other images, loop in a carefully arranged, colourful dissolve. Like the wealth of cosy Swiss scenes that have adorned Bruno Bischofberger Gallery ads on the back of art magazines for years, Fischli & Weiss's limitless production of snapshots make that little country seem immense – infinitely large, in fact, when photographed virtually inch by inch, detail by tiresome detail.

With the final revelation that is *An Unsettled Work*, the show as a whole functions very satisfyingly together. Overall the feel is that of a high school disco: the art department's sixth-form collaborative junk sculpture at the entrance; a banal light show using a slide projector borrowed by the audio visual department on the main dance floor and images of somebody's family trip across Europe flashing in the chill-out room at the back. There is always in Fischli & Weiss's work the sense of energy conserved (yet abundantly wasted?). Here, for example, the artists recycle works – probably not the greatest example ever produced in their studio – from the past to great effect, and have even found an outlet for a few reject slides that have probably been sitting around the studio for years.

**Fischli & Weiss**  
*An Unsettled Work*  
1986-2003 detail



At the back, behind these three main works, almost incidentally installed on the stairs, are two videos, one of a cat (*Busi*, 2001), the other of a dog (*Hunde*, 2003). They are doing the unremarkable things such pets are prone to do: drinking milk, chasing to and fro, staring through a fence, just hanging about. 'What thinks my dog?' asked the artists among dozens of other questions in *Will Happiness Find Me?* Here cat and dog form a kind of ideal Fischli & Weiss audience: patient, absorbed in other thoughts, tirelessly present, they seem just like the rest of us, intrigued (yet baffled?) by Fischli & Weiss's irresistible nothingness. ■

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## ■ Incommunicado

**Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts** Norwich  
September 30 to December 14

Many academic conversations that are born in conflict are eventually retired, after a few years seminar room service, becoming polite, slightly redundant chatter. The debate over language problems is one of those – which is ironic given that whenever the subject of blocked communication surfaces in any other arena you can be sure a big fight isn't far away. Talking about talking is one of the last things desperate lovers do about before a split; it's what workers do before a strike and, once upon a time, it was also what world leaders did before they invaded other countries.

The latter, of course, may no longer apply, which makes Margot Heller's touring show 'Incommunicado' a potentially very interesting and timely one. Rational discussion, concession and consensus make up the motor oil of a liberal polity, but we have seen little of them of late, either at home or abroad. It may be just a temporary matter, down to a Texan cowboy treating the world as his own private rodeo; but there are plenty of contemporary thinkers who believe that the great liberal humanist project, safeguarded as it was at a political level by various national and international talking shops, is simply a busted flush.

'Incommunicado' has much to address; and given that the language problems have so many pressing consequences which go beyond the seminar room, it has much it needs to get right as well. Unfortunately it is relatively limited in detail, with only 15 artists contributing, but it makes up for this in some degree by setting its outer limits wide, over a range of modern and contemporary art. It has two central axes: *Comédie*, a film of the play by Samuel Beckett which was made in collaboration with the playwright by filmmaker Marin Karmitz in 1966, and various video pieces by Bruce Nauman. They're very strong axes, rich in ideas and arresting in execution, and around them are ranged a number of works addressing myriad aspects of personal, political and formal incommunication.

With such blackness on the political horizon, the inner disquiet of Beckett looks quite old fashioned, but it still has power. *Comédie*, which was initially dismissed by critics at its film première, and only latterly resurrected, is typical 50s *rive gauche*. Three talking heads, one man and two women, appear out of the darkness, their bodies encased in what resemble bulbous urns, and begin reciting their lines in French at a speed which would be

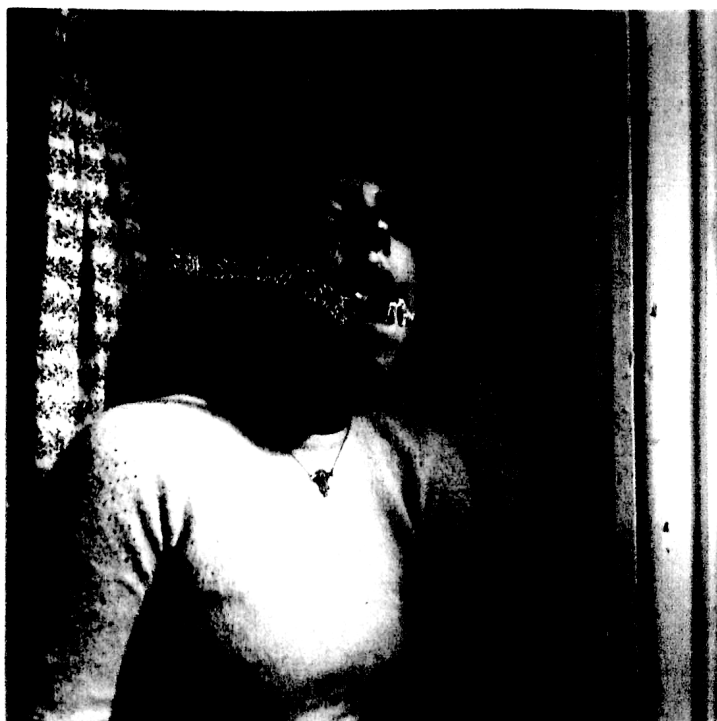


**Bruce Nauman**  
*Lip Sync* 1969

disorientating even to a native. The subject of their ceaseless chatter is an adulterous affair. A spotlight flits from one to another as they speak (game-show style) and occasionally a face occupies the whole screen, maybe burping or shouting. This is lonely humanity gesturing in darkness.

As is well known, Nauman was very drawn to Beckett's work, and his four videos in the show sit very well beside *Comédie*. They share the same sense of struggle, but the videos integrate this into their formal language in a way Karmitz's film, which retains a theatrical quality, does not. In *Gauze*, 1969, Nauman's head hangs upside down while the material, appearing in the slowed black and white film like a stringy gelatinous ectoplasm, pours from his mouth. In *Violent Incident: Man-Woman Segment*, 1986, two lovers theatrically brutalise each other after what looks like a failed dinner engagement. And in *World Peace – Day 2 (Brooke's Lips)*, 1995, a lipsticked mouth puffs a fag and talks unconvincingly about creating dialogue ('We'll talk, they'll listen', 'You'll talk, we'll listen'). In Nauman's work not only does the human animal not play well with others, but it doesn't live with itself all that well either.

**Francesca Woodman**  
*Self-portrait talking to Vince*, Providence, Rhode Island 1975-78



*Self-portrait talking to Vince*