

**40 YEARS  
KALDOR PUBLIC  
ART PROJECTS**

**2007  
URS  
FISCHER**



# 2007 URS FISCHER

## PROJECT

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Cockatoo Island installation  
20 April – 3 June 2007  
Cockatoo Island, Sydney

Each work begins with a quick sketch, but as soon as I start to work with materials, something goes wrong. For example, the thing won't stand up and my irritation about that leads to something else. My work never ends up looking the way I had intended. I don't consider those sculptures unsuccessful. Something just developed while I was working. It's a two way street. Your thoughts determine the images, and it is the images, in turn, which determine your thoughts.

Urs Fischer quoted in the exhibition brochure *Urs Fischer*, Kaldor Art Projects, Sydney 2007

URS FISCHER

View of the central courtyard of the  
old convict prison where visitors first  
encountered **Cockatoo Island installation**  
2007

Photo: Jenny Hare  
Courtesy Kaldor Public Art Projects



URS FISCHER

**Cockatoo Island installation** 2007 in  
the disused spaces of the old prison grounds  
on Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour

Photo: Adam Free  
Courtesy Kaldor Public Art Projects



# 2007 URS FISCHER

## INTRODUCTION

Urs Fischer, an enormous German with a densely tattooed left arm, makes works across a wide range of media – drawings, objects, sculptural assemblages – that, in the manner of the *arte povera* artists, employ poor or cast-off materials (fruit, sawdust, eggshells, polyurethane foam) or whatever may be at hand (tea sets, a ladder on springs, cigarette cartons, skeletons). His is an art committed more to the creative means than the ends, often revealing the process (shoe prints of paint, pencil marks, oozing glue in fixed-up furniture) in the production. Largely untrained, Fischer is unafraid of doing things with impromptu bravado. His sense of humour and wild mischievous imagination suggests the bad-boy of installation. For his Kaldor project in 2007, Fischer was let loose on Sydney's Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour, where that imagination was given legitimate exercise.

## ARTIST

### Urs Fischer

born 1973 in Zurich, Switzerland  
lives and works in New York, USA, and Zurich

Urs Fischer didn't have a lot of art training, although he did study photography at the Schule für Gestaltung, Zurich. It was while in Amsterdam looking at artists studios that the art bug hit. A great many people without formal training in the arts produce amazing visual works – grassroots art, serve-yourself art, amateur art, art brut etc – and they bring an unconscious, very intuitive approach to the problems of communication. Fischer is a bit like that, working ad hoc, bringing whatever materials are at hand to make his sculptural vignettes. He'll take an established genre – like still life, portraiture or landscape – and revitalise it using unstable materials and set them in motion, with their interaction over time being the work, not the immutable museum-ready art object. This interest in the ephemeral implies an understanding that all objects may enter the world as new, but they don't remain like that for long: everything dematerialises sooner or later.

In a series from 2000, Fischer screwed together half an onion and half an eggplant, half a cucumber and half a banana, and half a pear and half an apple. Each pair was hung from a nylon string and left to decay, the forces of nature alternately attracting or repelling within each coupling. In 2004, he made a life-size cabin out of loaves of sourdough bread, expandable foam, and wood. While art museums may try and keep objects on artificial life-support, *Bread house* was allowed to decay over time, shedding crumbs on the floor and emitting a noticeably yeasty odour. The same year, Fischer sculpted three life-size female nudes out of wax and then hand-painted them in vaguely sexual poses. Wicks were then set into them and set alight. Over the course of the exhibition, the figures melted away into puddles on the floor.

[Critic Jerry Saltz] argues that there is a desire in contemporary art to literally 'put the pieces back together again.' Artists, he writes, are 'trying to arrange the aftermath of a nihilistic, overeducated deconstruction into something – however awkward, simple, silly, or slight – that will play the song of art again.' By hilariously and deliberately failing to distinguish between creation and destruction, perhaps Urs Fischer offers a compelling conceptual challenge that can reaffirm faith in the creative act.

Michelle White, 'Urs Fischer: Mary Poppins', *Glasstire: online journal of visual art in Texas*, June 2006

Inside Gavin Brown's Enterprise gallery in New York in 2003, Fischer jackhammered a crater two-and-a-half metres deep, surrounded by a thin ledge of concrete floor about a half a metre wide, which allowed intrepid viewers to inch around the hole. The piece was called *You*. A sign at the door cautioned: THE INSTALLATION IS PHYSICALLY DANGEROUS AND INHERENTLY INVOLVES THE RISK OF SERIOUS INJURY OR DEATH.

Alongside his friends and collaborators Ugo Rondinone and Martin Boyce, Fischer's way of making art in the 21st century has emerged as a kind of punk reprise of the 1960s, a time that generated Fluxus and *arte povera*. With an unapologetically styleless art, Fischer, Rondinone and Boyce root around in the compost of banal everyday culture, trying to find a space somewhere between the devil of judgmental politics and the deep blue sea of commercial imperatives. One that – like the big hole called *You* – sets us on the edge, psychically, aesthetically and politically.

## PROJECT

You have to arrive by ferry to Sydney's Cockatoo Island, once a convict prison, then a reform school and later a shipyards. Bleak and windswept, it has a very dramatic character. Its unused spaces, and its former functions as a dumping ground for all the chain-snatchers, reckless dole-bandits, lost souls and doomed felons of the mid 19th century and as a place for sequestering delinquent and orphaned children, give it a haunted feel. Responding to the 'psychogeography' of the place – especially the sandstone prison buildings up on the hill – Urs Fischer's *Cockatoo Island installation* 2007 listened to what the stones have to say and addressed them with inscrutable and strangely redemptive sculptural works struggling for meaning: in the courtyard, a white fibreglass scribble seems to hover between a sort of intestinal muteness and a snaky expressive flourish, as if materials no longer have the strength to communicate.

Two plastercast hands of the artist were joined at the elbow, the piece hanging by wire – as so many of Fischer's vignettes do – and a pink head held by a hand hung upside-down. The effect is some kind of violent allusion to Auguste Rodin, as if the crisis in sculpture were being played out in the antipodes, where *The thinker* no longer knows what to think. Plastercasts of hands are standard repertoire in art schools and art history, lost here and oddly poignant in this ghostly context. Alignments of skeletons (doing yoga, napping, having a smoko) take the despair of the situation head on, in a spirit of no-future black comedy. Chairs and dressing tables and vases have been violently smashed and then lovingly reassembled. Everything seems precarious, except the fierce creative act.

## WORLD EVENTS: 2007

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- \_ Labor leader Kevin Rudd becomes Australian Prime Minister
- \_ Apple launches the iPhone
- \_ 'Residents' of Second Life now more than 6 million
- \_ Business and government in Estonia nearly shut down by a 'botnet' attack
- \_ First Earth Hour as Sydneysiders turn off their lights as part of an energy-efficiency campaign
- \_ Sydney covered in smoke after bushfires in the Blue Mountains, west of the city
- \_ *A cavalier (self portrait)* by Frans van Mieris I stolen from the Art Gallery of NSW
- \_ **15th Kaldor project:** Urs Fischer creates his *Cockatoo Island installation* on the site of an old convict prison on an island in Sydney Harbour
- \_ **16th Kaldor project:** Gregor Schneider creates *21 beach cells* on Sydney's iconic Bondi Beach, which in 2009, is recreated on Accadia Beach in Herzliya, Israel

## THEME

### Installation art

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There is a psychological, even moral, quality to inhabited space that philosopher Gaston Bachelard detailed so eloquently in his book, *The poetics of space*. The space we inhabit is never geometric, but oneiric (related to dreams). Space, he wrote, is compressed time. Think of the daydream-soaked house of childhood; the heady intellectual space of the attic; or the basement into whose subconscious levels we descend with a metaphorical candle, even in the age of electricity. They each conjure a super-sensory, even sub-sensory, dimension: centres of boredom or reverie or silent beholding.

In 1976, Brian O'Doherty wrote three articles in the journal *Artforum* that later became the book *Inside the white cube: the ideology of the gallery space*. O'Doherty was looking at the modern gallery and what a very controlled context it is. Its whiteness bleaches out the past, giving the artwork a sense of being out of time, beyond time. This kind of eternity of display became so overbearing, we now tend to see the space first. According to O'Doherty, the modern museum space derives its sepulchral force from painted caves, Egyptian tomb chambers and medieval churches. The secular modern gallery has lost some power, but it still has a sanctity that mixes the formality of the courtroom and the mystique of the experimental lab.

Decades earlier, in the 1920s and '30s, Russian constructivist Vladimir Tatlin had broken away from the ideal sculptural space on the pedestal, as traditionally offered by a gallery. Working from his sailor's knowledge of physical things, he set up his sculptural works, like his 1917 *Corner relief*, made from vernacular materials, in the angles between the walls themselves. This shift to the use of real materials in real space – interior corridors, ceilings, walls or floors, or even outdoor sites – announced the emergence of installation art.

Installation transforms the foursquare, stable cube designed by architects into an existential or actualised space produced by a reader or viewer. It also dismantles the tidy groups of spatial experiences we associate with museums – those neat rows of eye-level art – by forcing us to enter other spaces and take in other information.

Installations vary enormously: they can be small and intimate, or massive and theatrical, while each artist's efforts in this area are as intimate and revealing as handwriting. Photography, video, painting, sculpture, all the mediums of installation, shed their autonomy; the object itself is not the work but the system of relationships. All the tangled arteries of 20th-century art seem to lead to installation.

Installation art releases ways of thinking and feeling that have previously been marginalised by the pictorial and illusionistic orders of space. It can tap into the empowering forces of indigenous cultures, or make us aware of crippling forms of absent power (like dharma), while at the same time plugging into current metaphors of techno-immersion (like ambient music or omnidirectional acoustic space, interactivity, virtual reality). Installation is art finding new ways to go on despite frightening historical discontinuities.

Examples of other influential installation artists include Joseph Beuys, Louise Bourgeois, Daniel Buren, Christian Boltanski and Giuseppe Penone. Among the Kaldor project artists, Ugo Rondinone, Gregor Schneider, Martin Boyce, Tatzu Nishi, Richard Long, Barry McGee and Miralda all fit under the umbrella of installation art.

## COLLECTION CONNECTIONS

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Relevant works in the Art Gallery of NSW collection  
[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection)

• **Robert Rauschenberg** (USA, b1925, d2008)

*Cardbird VI* from the series *Cardbird* 1971

collage print with corrugated cardboard, tape, photo offset lithograph, and screenprint; 66 x 71.1 cm  
Anonymous gift 1973 19.1973

Reality meets artifice in this beguiling example of trompe-l'oeil. Rauschenberg has even added real packaging tape alongside the photographically screened tape on the simulation. What at first has the appearance of a rather uninspired found object becomes, on closer scrutiny, an elaborate and sustaining artwork.

• **Richard Deacon** (Wales; England, b1949)

*Listening to reason* 1986

laminated wood; 226 x 609 x 579 cm  
Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1988 156.1988.a-j

When asked how he had visualised this complex form in order to be able to make up the necessary jigs and formwork, Deacon acknowledged that he never visualised it as a whole. It seems that he had the twisting straight sections lying around waiting to become a star-shaped work.

• **Hany Armanious** (Egypt; Australia, b1962)

*Turns in Arabba* 2005

clay, wax, wick, pewter, plaster, polyurethane, wood, formply, silicone, peppercorns, ceramic, drums, speaker; 240 x 200 x 60 cm approx  
Contemporary Collection Benefactors 2006 8.2006

Armanious often creates his work through a form of semi-automatism, where he responds to the images and shapes that certain materials suggest to him, or through associations he traces between objects, words and images.

## SELECTED REFERENCES

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Websites

- Kaldor Public Art Projects  
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[www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor\\_projects](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/kaldor_projects)
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[www.sadiecoles.com/urs\\_fischer/index.html](http://www.sadiecoles.com/urs_fischer/index.html)

# ISSUES FOR DISCUSSION

Outline Urs Fischer's approach to the process of art-making. Is it ordered and methodical or open-ended and serendipitous? Cite examples from his work that confirm the approach you think he subscribes to. Research how Fischer settles on the materials to use in a given artwork. How does he locate them and what literal as well as symbolic meanings do they hold for him? Discuss Fischer's interest in process over the finished artwork. To what extend does he consider the process part of the artwork itself?

Investigate Fischer's body of work and create a list of the materials that he uses in his art. Why are many considered 'unstable'? What does this mean? How many would be considered 'traditional' art materials? Debate whether this term is even relevant in contemporary art practice. Define how Fischer's selection and use of materials throw challenges to the art system and its ability to assimilate his work. How is his practice particularly difficult for art museums that are charged with collecting and preserving artworks for future generations? Debate the idea that perhaps artworks should be 'born', have a life and then be allowed to die.

Fischer has had minimal formal art training. Is it necessary for an artist to be highly trained to produce great art? Consider the pros and cons of such training. Outline what the advantages may be of such a limited art background. Investigate how this has manifested in Fischer's practice. Surveying his work, would you consider he tries things that other artists might not? Research other artists or indeed art movements that are celebrated for this lack of high training. Examine their key characteristics and why they came to prominence.

Consider the concept of time as a key theme within Fischer's work. List the many ways this is evident in his Kaldor project on Cockatoo Island. Fischer's installations are quite site-specific. Consider the context of his Kaldor project and the process the audience went through to experience it. What meanings associated with the Cockatoo Island site have been incorporated into the work?

Fischer is friends with, and has collaborated with, Ugo Rondinone and Martin Boyce, who have both presented Kaldor projects. Compare all three artists' work and identify points of synergy either materially or conceptually between them. Elsewhere in this resource, their work has been noted as 'unapologetically styleless'. Would you agree with this? In what way has such an identification become a style in itself? Research this idea and propose what, if anything, Fischer and his cohort are responding to or reacting against in contemporary art or culture. In what ways is Fischer an example of the artist as both creator and destroyer?

Describe Fischer's Kaldor project for someone who has not seen it, considering carefully the words you use. Discuss the way the artist has used the spaces of the prison building and incorporated space itself into the work. Can spaces be embedded with memory or have a certain psychology that affects us? Can such things be felt intuitively rather than read logically? Investigate the history of Cockatoo Island and the layers of meaning that can be read. How does this contrast with a gallery space?

Viewers moved through *Cockatoo Island installation* and were activated into making associations as suggested by the strategically placed sculptural forms. Examine the role of the audience in a Fischer work as readers, participants, navigators and connectors.

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of the old convict prison where  
visitors first encountered Urs Fischer's  
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