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Urs Fischer Sent Nine Office Chairs Dancing at Gagosian—and Wants You to Join In

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Urs Fischer, "PLAY" with choreography by Madeline Hollander at Gagosian, New York, NY, 2018. © Urs Fischer. Photo by Chad Moore. Courtesy of Gagosian.

On a recent visit to Gagosian's West 21st Street outpost, an unusual choreography was underway. In the expanse of the central gallery space, brightly colored chairs swiveled and swirled, apparently of their own volition. This gentle spectacle, using office-appropriate furniture, is the latest project from Urs Fischer—a hard-to-categorize artist perhaps best known for his giant, candle-like wax sculptures, occasionally depicting his friends and peers (and, in at least one instance, himself).

"PLAY," as the show is called, requires extensive computer programming and a series of sensors. The movements of its nine chairs were scripted in collaboration with the choreographer Madeline Hollander. They respond to visitors—zooming around or away from anyone who gets close—and to one another, swarming in carefully coordinated packs from one side of the gallery to another. "If they interact with humans, then you become the choreographer," Fischer told Artsy. The seats all swivel and the wheels all roll, but the chairs have subtly different personalities. Some have arm rests or headrests, and their hues (magenta, red, aqua) distinguish them, as well. Fischer has transformed mundane objects into uncanny, mobile characters, an apt metaphor for a frenzied art world clattering back to life after a sleepy summer.

The artist, however, isn't geeking out over the nuts and bolts of his own installation. "The only reason why we need all this technology is because I want [the chairs] to move like this," Fischer said. "It's not 'oh cool, technology.' I don't care. It's like our phone. I don't care how it's made, I just want to use it." When a chair's battery runs low, it's programmed to head into a massive

machine in the gallery's alcove, which automatically replaces the seat (where the hardware is located). All of this coordination, of course, requires extensive and ongoing troubleshooting, coding, and engineering—and, likely, a massive amount of financial support. Yet the bulk of the hardware runs behind closed doors; Fischer would like to preserve some of the artwork's mystery and apparent magic.

The fantastical, interactive work fits neatly into Fischer's often-whimsical oeuvre. For other projects, the 45-year-old Swiss artist has created a house made out of bread; a giant aluminum sculpture of a rhinoceros with objects (table, laptop, vacuum) flying off its sides; and 23-feet-tall, brightly lacquered cast-bronze teddy bears. "'PLAY,'" Fischer said, "comes out of thinking of sculpture that responds to you in a spatial situation." The work inverts the tradition of placing an artwork in the gallery for humans to circle and view. Instead, the chairs swarm around the visitors.

"PLAY" also has a cynical side. "I'm a little bored with art, to tell you the truth," Fischer said. "This looks like figure skating, but I think a lot of art is figure skating." He likened contemporary artists to athletes on the ice, trying to perfect the next crowd-aweing triple axel. "I'm just trying to have a little fun." (Though the artist spoke about the work as a caprice, one of the technicians involved told me that professors from the nearby School of the Visual Arts may indeed be analyzing the data regarding how the chairs act, to undisclosed ends.)

So is "PLAY" a performance? A robotic dance? An experiment in so-called relational aesthetics, which considers the role of the viewer to the artwork? Fischer equivocated, uninterested in situating his art into a predetermined model. He noted that there's no beginning, middle, end, arc, or fixed narrative here. "You can look at this like you look at any contemporary artwork," Fischer said, comparing the work to appropriation art, sculpture, and the work of master mobile-maker Alexander Calder. "It's everything, you see. I think of it more as a not-so-complex species."