

## Urs Fischer

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February 1, 2015



I have just finished a long interview with [Urs Fischer](#) in his huge studio in Brooklyn, not far from the bridge that I am now crossing. Today the sky is very blue, as it sometimes is in New York in winter. This amazing view of the city, its bridges and skyscrapers, must make a strong impression on the artist as he goes home from work. Urs lives in [Manhattan](#) with his family, and daily travels to and from his Brooklyn studio. He says, "I try to have a normal family life and not to work during the weekend."

The interview takes place sitting around his desk, in the midst of the noise that his many assistants make. There are maybe ten or more, working at different tables in the very large industrial space we are in. Later we will move to a sort of mezzanine where there are more desks, a few secretaries and an open kitchen with a long table where everyone eats together. Today lunch is cooked by [Mina Stone](#), who is producing "[Cooking for Artists](#)" with Urs' publishing house [Kiito-San](#), which also publishes all his catalogues and other books. Urs loves books and



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reading. The recipes and the photographs in her book are Mina's and there are also some drawings by her artist friends. Her book is simple Greek cuisine, along with some other recipes; good food, easy to cook. Today's lunch is ceviche, spaghetti with tomato sauce and basil, and a green salad accompanied by San Pellegrino water, followed by espresso coffee. The atmosphere is happy and friendly.

I ask Urs: *After living in New York for eighteen years do you consider yourself a Swiss artist?*

When I am in Europe I don't see myself as a European artist. In America I am an immigrant artist.

*It makes a difference?*

I guess it makes a big difference. Recently I had the understanding that as a teenager I always liked the idea of America. That is the reason why I am here.

*Is it because of the market?*

It is the richness of the soil, the many layers. This is what is more attractive here, not the market. I tried to be in Berlin, in Amsterdam and London, but it came back to the concept of being an immigrant. In the Netherlands, Germany, England, you will never become 'one of them'. Here it is a more open society and you don't feel like a foreigner.



*Why did you leave Switzerland?*

It is very beautiful and very small. I still have my family there, my old friends, my memories. I know all the laws and how a cow bell sounds. I don't know any other country where the cows are so close to the homes. I like the people and the culture, but I am not attracted to be there in terms of art. There were no schools for art, and I studied photography. Switzerland is not a country with a nobility, there was never a court a system of Academies, there is more a peasant humour or understanding. There is a smallness of view and no culture of big ideas; beauty in a grand way is not part of the system. Of course, Swiss artists like Hodler, Vallotton and Tinguely have some beauty, but there are no cities with beautiful boulevards.

*But there are many important private art collections?*

Yes. Around Zurich people used to weave, then they started to build machines and they created industries and banks and insurance companies and food industries. I am thinking of Knorr and Maggi, and the chemical and pharmaceutical laboratories



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in Basel. All that generated a wealthy bourgeoisie and these people have created their own castles and collections. I have a lot of collectors there, but I have not done a show there in seven years. Instead for instance I had five shows in New York in the last year.

*How did you decide to become an artist?*

By deciding I did not want to be many other things. I wanted to be free. Even if it is an illusion, at least to feel free. Of course I liked art, and mine was not a rebellion against my parents.

*Since you left Switzerland eighteen years ago, has your work changed much?*

Hopefully! You should stay open to new influences in your life.



(He lights a cigarette, a Camel filter. Sometimes he smokes one of the new fake cigarettes.)

*Do you consider yourself an eclectic artist?*

At the end of the day you accomplish what you can. I don't go in one direction. You just do what you do and you are limited by yourself in making your oeuvre, it is the oeuvre of one person. So why limit it? Sometimes in the small there is more than in the big.

*What is your scale?*

Since the very beginning I wanted to be open to big and small scale. I don't think in terms of scale. If I make a mouse it is small; if I deal with a building, the building is big. If you think of an elephant, it is big in your apartment, but if you put it out of that space it is nothing. Unfortunately today we have very large galleries.

*And so, what?*

For the private encounter size matters, because stuff gets lost. Large galleries, big works limit the use.



*What about your sculptures, for instance the one big blue and two big yellow bears?*

They are for outside, and outside is big. But in your own house how many sculptures can you have?

*So are you now changing to small works?*

I always made small too. Morandi is a great example. In the opposite of what I do he can show the whole world.

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*Does this mean that for an artist there are no rules?*

There are many rules. Art is full of rules.

*Like what?*

If you decide to do this or that people react and they are very judgemental. For instance, a good example is an artist like Christo. Not much work, larger and larger, done for the public. He was pulled down, but I think that he is an excellent sculptor; it is just that he is very popular.



*What about an artist like Jeff Koons ? Is he to be taken seriously?*

Jeff is very serious biographically. He is a very serious artist. A good example of what I wanted to say about rules is Dali, who was not considered OK because of his going to parties or because he was too social. But why should you be like Carl Andre? It is not open-minded. If you work out of your field it can be seen as bad.

*Would you like to be more free?*

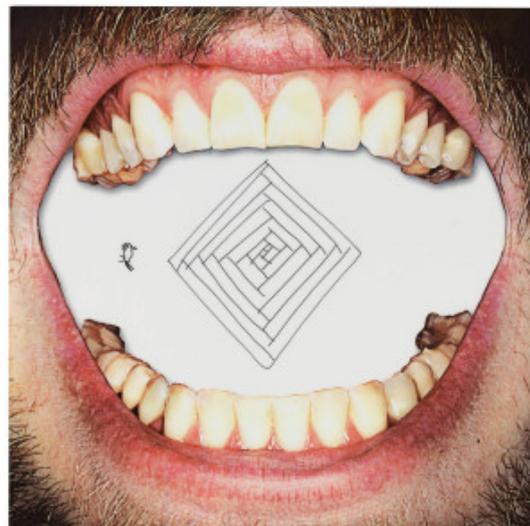
Sure, I am never free enough. But the real question is what you do as a human being. I think that what counts for an artist is how you grow.

*Where do you want to go?*

I don't know. I am not sure.

*Would you like to stop?*

No, I love what I do. I am not complaining. If I was a writer of serious novels and then wrote children's books I would not be considered serious anymore. That is what I meant before about rules. As Kafka you are not allowed to write Harry Potter.



*Would you like to break boundaries?*

No more than any other artist. Another good example of rules is Turner.

*Why?*

Because he was not accepted when he shifted to the inside and development as a human being.

*But most of the time art is hardly recognised by contemporaries?*

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Yes, definitely. You can do better and better and what you try to share is a synchronisation. Everyone else's artwork is how you feed your biographical energy. You don't make work out of nothing. Picasso for instance is a good case of biographical energy. He changed locations and women in order to find new energy.

*Do you feel the same?*

I try not to use other people and their lives for my work. For me to be a sensible human being is more important than anything else.

*Do you take notes?*

I have thousands of notes, but I don't look at them, ever. They are useful in the moment you make them.

*How do you work?*

I am more a sculptor, more than anything else. The life of a sculpture is different. It goes through many procedures and labour. A big part of sculpture is the metamorphosis of material. Somehow, as a material, working in clay is similar to oil painting. It is not stable in form, it is malleable and you can be very fast.



(Dogs are walking around the studio. They are very quiet.)

*As a sculptor do you like Giambologna?*

I liked a particular sculpture of his, but Bernini is a better example of what I like. He is shocking; he did amazing, unbelievable things.

*Who are the artists that you like?*

In life it changes, you keep discovering. Two years ago I started to look to what I thought I did not like, to understand what I don't like.

*What don't you like?*

I did not know what to do with Chagall, I never connected. Another one is Kandinsky. I still don't like them.



*Do you study a lot?*

I love art. If an artist does not love art who does? There is so much great art. I go to galleries and museums to see old things and new things. The easiest way to understand is through books, they are great!

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*You don't talk about the Internet?*

It is not good for art. It is very specific. If you look for instance at [Medardo Rosso](#), on the Internet there are a lot of things you don't see! Of course I am not against technology, I love it, and in order to have some control of my work I made my own website.

*What about your critics?*

I don't read critics. I don't care. I think that criticism is a bit passé, there are so many other ways today. Criticism anyway, it is not written for me. I am personally interested in the positive of an artwork, an artwork is what it is. I believe that criticism has lost a lot. If you have an opinion it should be done with great effort and I don't see much effort anymore. Criticism is lazy compared to the effort. I am not interested in an opinion that is just good or bad.

*What about curators?*

I believe in synergy. Everything you do is based on synergy. The curator has an important role.

*And the dealer?*

Every dealer I worked with has different qualities. I am my own boss by now and I have many dealers. It depends on the work and who is better for that particular work. I used to have one dealer and a main gallery and everything else filtered through him. I advise all artists to be independent for the same reason that you move out of your parents' house.

*Are you independent?*

I don't sell myself. Never. I don't like it. I don't care, I don't want to deal with the business side. A lot of dealers and collectors are business people. I see the nicer side of the people that collect and I leave the business side to dealers. I don't follow the auctions, but I like the auction catalogues because you can see pictures that you would never see elsewhere.



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*Are you aware of your prices?*

I don't particularly like it, but if you have a secondary market it changes your primary market. It forces you into another direction.

*Do you work hard?*

Not as hard as I should, you can always do more, better, rethink. Art is open, it can go on endlessly. I work hard, but sometimes you have to be a dad and help people, and it makes time smaller and smaller.

*Do you have vices?*

I don't drink anymore, or very little. No drugs, nothing. You lose a lot of time for a hangover.



*What are your future shows?*

This year I decided to do lots of smaller shows. One in April in Naples, one at the Modern Institute in Glasgow in May, one with Massimo De Carlo in Milano sometime in the summer, one small show maybe with Gagosian in LA, one with Bice Curiger in Arles where she runs the Fondation Vincent van Gogh in January...

*What about money?*

It is of great help, and I invest in my work and I buy art. I have a lot of different works from people I like and admire.



*Do you think it is a lively period for art?*

A great period, not dogmatic and more difficult to read if you apply old models. As for the quality of art, there is a lot of great art, there is a lot that is new. No more good art than in the past.

*Are you afraid of losing your talent?*

Whatever is, is. I was more afraid when I was young. Now you try your best. If it does not work, it does not.



New York

January 23, 2015.