



Olaf Breuning, *the army*, 2008, ceramics, light effects

## Rencontre avec Olaf Breuning

### PRESENTATION

Olaf Breuning (1970, CH ; vit à New York City, US) a suivi une formation de photographe et obtenu un diplôme postgrade à la Hochschule für Gestaltung de Zurich en 1996. Depuis le milieu des années 1990, son univers personnel déjanté s'exprime sous forme de photographies, de projections vidéos, de sculptures, de dessins ou d'installations. L'artiste s'inspire, entre autres, de la culture populaire : le dessin animé, la musique (pop, heavy metal, techno, etc.), le cinéma, la télévision, la publicité, les magazines de mode, le vidéo-clip, le jeu vidéo...

Olaf Breuning est membre d'honneur de NEAR ; nous le remercions de son aimable soutien.

[www.olafbreuning.com](http://www.olafbreuning.com)

Thierry Kupferschmid (1970, CH ; vit à Lausanne et New York) a pratiqué la peinture et la sculpture dans les années 1990, avant de se tourner vers l'art corporel, la photographie et la vidéo. Dès 2001, ses actions sont pour l'artiste des " fictions-événements " qui laissent une grande liberté d'interprétation, d'où le titre général des séries photographiques réalisées avec Ilaria Albisetti : *Another Type of Ambiguity*.

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L'entretien entre Olaf Breuning et Thierry Kupferschmid a eu lieu en anglais à New York le 7 janvier 2010.

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Olaf Breuning, *the gardeners*, 2008, garden tools, eyes

## ENTRETIEN

Thierry Kupferschmid : What was your first encounter with art ?

Olaf Breuning : It all started when my father gave me a camera. I was 16. At that time I was like a normal teenager, I didn't know what to do with my life. All of a sudden I had something to focus on. I couldn't stop taking pictures of everything around me. I took pictures and I developed them myself, it was a real passion, the first passion in my life. Suddenly I knew what to do with my life.

TK : Now your work changes form from show to show, taking on different mediums, from photography to film, from sculpture to installations, and drawings, of course. How did this happen?

OB : Using photography to talk about this world is like having only one point of view, it's like having a room with a single window. But the world is such a colorful place, so I tried to open more windows and talk about things differently. After 9 years of photography I probably became hungry for new things. Photography is still an incredible way to tell stories, it's still a big part of my work. I like to work with 2-dimensional images, and it will always be that way.

TK : Creativity and pleasure go hand in hand for you. It's a playful approach. Is it also an act of resistance?

OB : I know that there are many artists, friends of mine for example, who can only work when they are depressed. I am the complete opposite, I can only give my best when I'm in a good mood. A lot of my work I do in the mornings, when I wake up, it's a time for fresh ideas and inspiration. All my motivations in life come from very positive things, I don't dwell on negative thoughts. Having said that, there are artists or filmmakers, Woody Allen for example, who can tell serious stories, with a lot of gravity to them, but in very funny ways. My work too can be very sarcastic, even negative about life, but I keep a positive spirit to tell things. Otherwise I could just grab a gun and shoot myself. Life is a desperate thing, so it's really a question of what approach you take.



Olaf Breuning, *a group of unstable lemonpigs*, 2006, fake fruits

TK : The explosive force of the absurd, humor, eccentricity, a bit of provocation, modest means... I can't help but think of a relation to Dada? Tristan Tsara and Hugo Ball, who founded the cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, in 1916...

OB : When I was younger I was a big fan of Dada, I read books and everything I could find on Dadaism. One of the points of being an artist is to surprise people, to tell stories that no one has told before, and Dada did this. It was another time, and what they did was even sometimes offending to people; you could see tomatoes flying on stage.

The main difference today is that it's very difficult to surprise people, everything has been done, visually. These last ten years, fashion, music or art have been one big act of recycling. It's really rare nowadays that someone comes up with something that blows your mind away. It's like the *Avatar* movie by James Cameron: new technology but nothing new fundamentally. Visually, in photography, it's the same. What can you do in this little frame that hasn't been done a hundred years ago?

But you know, I don't care, because I really think that artists have to focus on stories and how they want to tell them. This is what is really important to me.

What remains of what I learned from Dada is the strangeness and the unexpected things I can use to tell a story.

TK : You said, " I get bored with something, and I move on. " Is boredom an energy?

OB : No, boredom is boredom, it's not an energy. Boredom is terrible, I don't like to be bored.



Olaf Breuning, *color drip 1*, 2009

TK : What's the meaning of colors?

OB : There was a show in Los Angeles where I only used yellow, green, blue and red. It was a pure pleasure to play around with these colors. I am not the first to make color drippings or use sprays, but I just wanted to play with a few ideas from the past and try to use them differently. I have always been interested in colors, as you can see in my photographic work called *Colors*. It's a game, colors are a pleasure.

TK : The way you convert one thing into another can be quite hilarious. " Humor opens up all the doors. " Is this still the case?

OB : Yes it's still the case, humor is a beautiful tool to communicate with. It's like person to person, when you meet someone and this person has a smile on his or her face, it's much easier to connect. It might be a bit stupid to say things like this, but life can be a bitch, there is a desperate quality to it, and humor is one way to get through. It's for sure a better way than bitterness for example.

TK : Drawings offer an approach as simple and immediate as the action in itself seems short. But on a closer look, some details appear to be more complex or melancholy, leaving room for fragility. Does this notion of fragility mean something in your work?

OB : I like the fragility of my drawings because all you need is paper and a pen. With a very simple drawing you can speak about big things. But better words to describe the fragility of my drawings would be innocent, cute, or naïve. Easy to understand at first sight, but dealing with real issues, life, the real world... Like in Lascaux, where the drawings in the caves were simple but exhaustive.



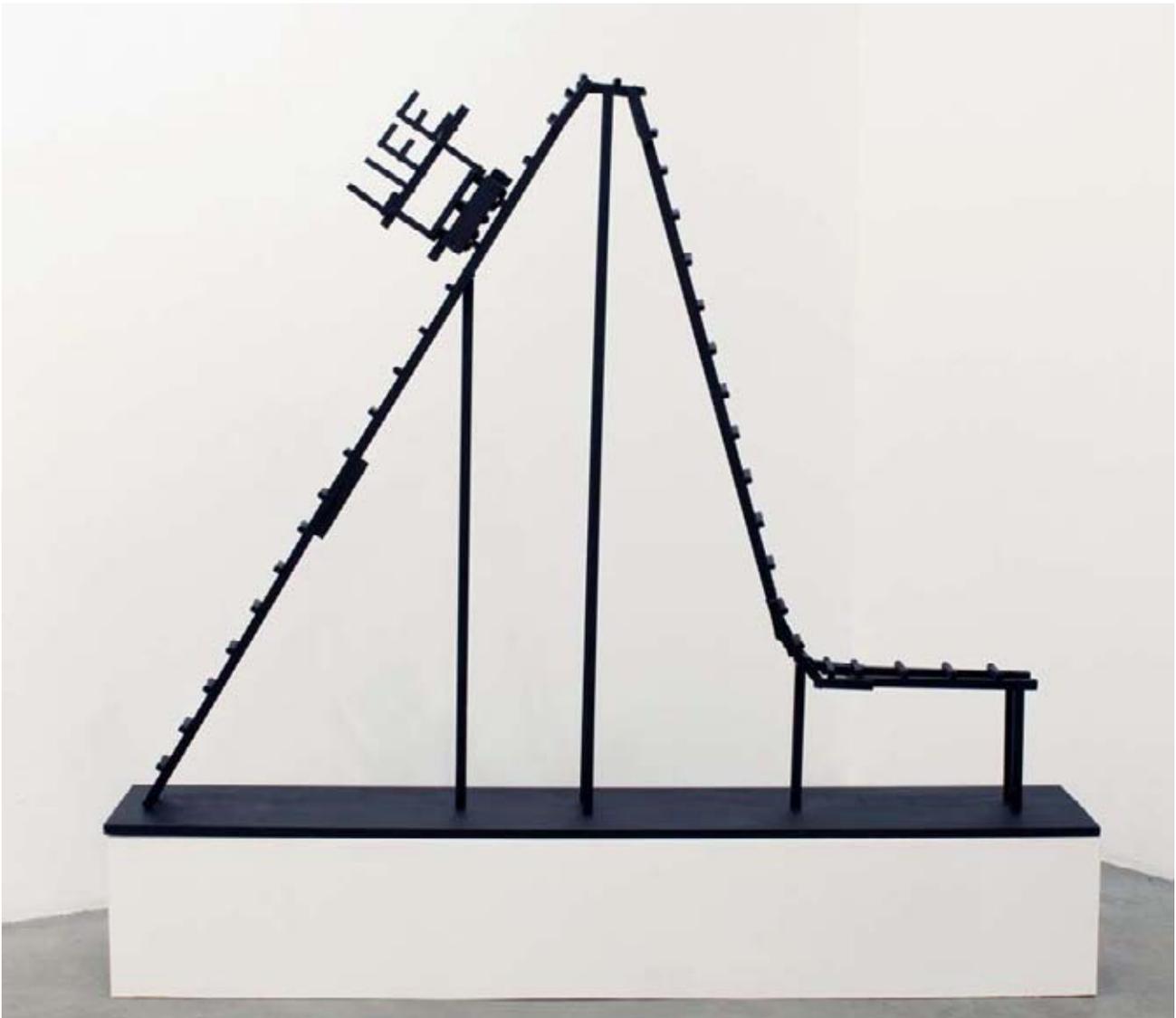
Olaf Breuning, *always the same stupid face*, drawing, 2009



Olaf Breuning, *boring but nice*, drawing, 2008



Olaf Breuning, *idiots*, drawing, 2009



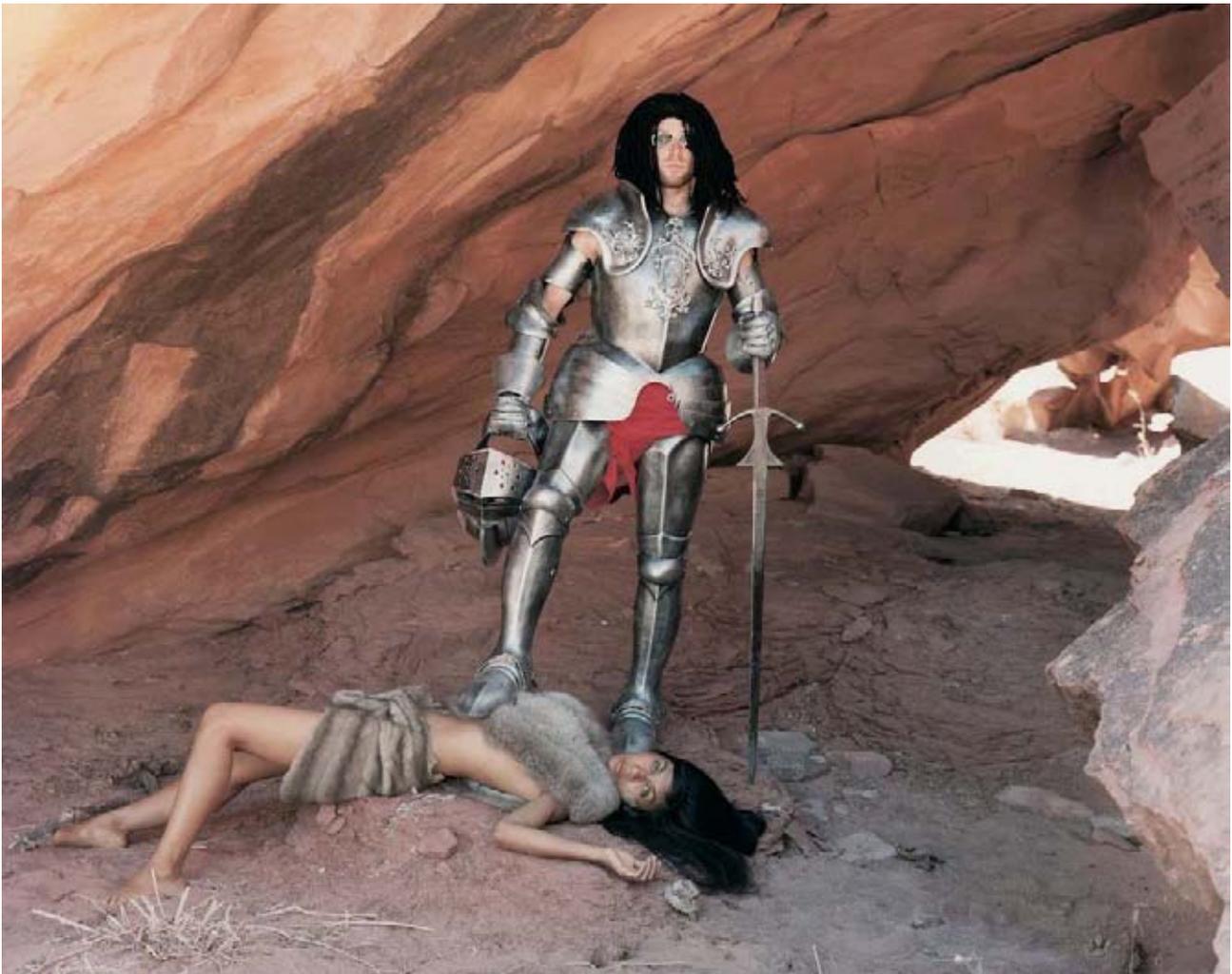
Olaf Breuning, *Life is a Rollercoaster*, 2009, wood, hardware, hot glue, acrylic paint, 139.7 x 182.9 x 35.6 cm

TK : You seem to manage to take everything to account. How do ideas come to you

OB : They come from life. As an artist, I just try to lead an average life, like everyone else, and tell about it. I am not an artist who focuses on the art world or who speaks about art history by repeating what has been done. There are a lot of critics who, when they talk about my work, just say: " Oh he is talking about pop culture... " But you know, pop culture doesn't exist, it's the fucking real world, it's what we have around us that I want to talk about. I want to talk about fundamental things in life, things that would interest my grand mother if she were still alive.

TK : Do you agree with the idea that your art is a wonderful " act of pirating "?

OB : Hmm, pirating.... I do what everyone is doing at the moment: I suck in the whole world, and I use what is around. Internet for example. If I see something that grabs my attention, I take it into my work, I incorporate it into my world. But it has been like this since I started. My work can be very different from one piece to another but it's like a big collection of what I am interested in. Sometimes the same things come back but I always try to reach new ground, to explore a new facet of the world trough my art.



Olaf Breuning, *cavewoman*, 2000

TK : Can you talk about the mythical elements often seen in your videos?

OB : Well what can I say.... You know, when I speak through my work I always try to use " power codes ": stereotypical images like a king, a sword, cavemen... But always in the idea of telling a story. We have to admit that my " king ", for example, with his beard and long hair, looks more like a caveman than a real king. It's because we live in a world where everything we want to know, every information is reachable in a few seconds. Everything can become confused, everything can be mixed up very easily.

I think it must be incredible to be the generation growing up these days. There's so much information, it's amazing.

TK : " Certain things trigger me and I follow them. " What is curiosity for you?

OB : Curiosity for me is probably the same as it is for you. Something I'm interested in. It's probably a pity that as you get older you lose your curiosity. Not only because you become lazy but also because of the amount of experience you've incorporated. This is a main concern for me as an artist, I have to be curious. It was much easier 10 years ago, when I started, because now I cross-check a lot of things. Sometimes I say to myself " oh I already did that and that and that " and I sit at my table bored and desperate, looking for new things that I can be interested in. Ideas sometimes come by pure coincidence, just one image on the internet and it's the right one to get you started. It's like a snowball. You can throw a snowball and create an avalanche. This is the perfect situation, but first, of course, you need the snowball in your hand.



Olaf Breuning, *knights*, 2001

TK : The way you divert, revisit, reread, recycle, and replay things, like a playful "guerilla", shows a few ingredients of "arte povera"...

OB : You know, I learned arte povera when I was at school, a long time ago, I don't really remember what it was... So I don't think so.

TK : What is art for you? Is it, like a famous fashion designer said, a need to reply?

OB : I could not think of another profession where I would be free to tell stories. To me, art comes down to that: freedom.

Even if the art world is just business, even if money, power and success rule this world, it is in this field that I find the most freedom to do what I want. It's a great job, you have the freedom to cross all the borders and say what you want. Borders you cannot cross if you are a commercial photographer or even a filmmaker.

For me, making art is a little like writing a diary, I do it to get through my life first, and if it appears that people are also interested, then that's just perfect. But if you were to tell me that you are not interested in what I do, I probably wouldn't care, I wouldn't feel concerned.

My main interest is to produce art, the rest, like showing or promoting the work, even if I do like it, is of no great importance to me. There is no comparison with the making, the process of creating art. The result, well the result is just the result. What if the only motivation to do art was just to be entertained, by you and yourself?



Olaf Breuning, *first*, video installation, 2003

TK : Among all the mediums you're using, video seems to stand out. There's a kind of strangeness, even a feeling of threat, something menacing in your films (*Home 1*, 2004; *King*, 2000). Do you think sound is the reason? Does it add something, like a new dimension to your work?

OB : You're right. It's like the first time I saw a John Carpenter movie, it looked like a Hollywood production, but the music was completely different from a " classic " Hollywood movie. John Carpenter is known to compose his own soundtrack for his films. It gives a unique color to the images. The sound is the first emotional contact when you go to a movie.

I do the same with my films, I have a little keyboard and I compose the music myself. The strangeness it adds, well it's also because I am not a professional of sound. This is probably to my advantage, since my goal is to bring a new dimension to the visual.

TK : Your work appears to be consciously railing against the " loud and proud " aesthetics of certain artists and shows. In a way, your approach is close to artisanship, it has a unique relationship to our time of economic changes. Are you working on a new project right now?

OB : I'm working on a new movie. This is the most uncomfortable time, when you have to think about stuff you want to do. Sometimes you sit there and you have an idea right away, it triggers something and it bursts in front of your eyes. But sometimes you can sit there for a month, just waiting for something to happen. I want to take time, enough time this year, to work on my new film. I already have ideas for this new project. I'm going to work with the same actor I use regularly, and I'm going to shoot in New York. It'll be a story that asks essential questions, questions that probe the deep issues confronting us, the complex and baffling matters that elude simple answers. I'll find my own way of talking about that, I'm sure.

Remerciements à Thierry Kupferschmid d'avoir effectué la transcription de l'entretien et à Gregory Wicky de ses précieuses corrections.



Olaf Breuning, *the greens*, 2007