

OLAF BREUNING, WE ONLY MOVE WEHEN SOMETHING CHANGES,
2002, production stills / Aufnahmen während der Produktion.



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IN SEARCH OF LOST PURPOSE

Olaf Breuning is often characterized as a master of citation. It is said that he finds his images in mass culture, and in so doing works somewhat like a director, focusing his attention on the visual archive of contemporary life. The interpretation of his work thus sometimes devolves to a mere naming of sources: American television shows, Hollywood films, fashion photography, and B-movies. But this says little about the artistic dimension of his work.

More important than the origin of the individual components is their plausible juxtaposition. The artistic *mise-en-scène* becomes a leveling context, a

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frame that first makes mutual reference possible. To erect this structure, it becomes necessary for Breuning to have a fine sense of his natural materials. It is here that he is aided by his love of the unnatural, the exaggerated, his gift of invention, as well as his penchant for mannerisms. He theatricalizes the world of everyday experience, mixing the vulgar with the existential, and giving us a lesson in good and bad taste. In so doing, he shows a certain ambition, a love of detail, and almost an obsession.

Olaf Breuning's pictures elude deeper interpretation by way of ambivalence. Upon first viewing, they would appear to be a purely aesthetic phenomenon. On closer inspection, however, one encounters various lines of meaning. The impasse between visual



OLAF BREUNING, WE ONLY MOVE WEHEN SOMETHING CHANGES, 2002, C-print, laminated and mounted on aluminum, 48 x 61" and 31 1/2 x 39 3/8" / laminiert, auf Aluminium aufgezogen, 122 x 155 cm und 80 x 100 cm.

seduction and interpretive dead-ends leaves the viewer, oscillating between meaning and nonsense, to perceive his compositions as puzzles. For example, the work *LADY G.* (2002) hangs in my dining room. In it a naked woman's bottom is covered with tiny planet stickers; the woman is on horseback, sitting before a landscape of reeds. The head of the horse is cropped by the margin of the image; the same is true of its rear. This leads to a strange link between the body of the woman and the body of the horse. An

even stranger relation links the planets to the woman's very round bottom. Surprisingly, in the last two years my reception of *LADY G.* has hardly changed at all. Each time I view the work I briefly examine the overall composition, empathize with this horse woman, and for a moment, ask myself whether the planets stand in any kind of meaningful relation to the female bottom. I immediately answer this question negatively, since there would be plenty of objections to raise (even if the female body in Western art is un-

doubtedly of universal significance). Nonetheless, in the future, I will probably keep barking up this interpretive wrong tree, for I can get myself neither to disapprove of the effect, nor to block my reflex.

The reception of Olaf Breuning's works is characterized by this fractured mode of interpretation, where individual citations play a subordinate role and are thus not of real importance. In one respect, this is reminiscent of the phenomenon that Susan Sontag described in her "Notes on 'Camp,'" where she located the origins of camp taste in the eighteenth century, as subsumed in horror stories, chinoiserie, caricature, and artificial ruins. All of these can be found in Breuning's work: Styrofoam stones, costume Vikings, Maoris, and Indians—scary effects, as well as a caricature-like, visual shorthand, are part of his basic formal vocabulary. But it is primarily the thematic structure of his work that reveals analogies to camp. Consider, for example, Sontag's "mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve," or the phenomenon of "a seriousness that fails."¹ Furthermore, there is the constant undermining of values: "Camp discloses innocence, but also, when it can, corrupts it." And finally, there is the instrumentalization of a second layer of meaning that, once divorced from the actual things named, takes on a life of its own. "Camp sees everything in quotation marks, not a lamp, but a 'lamp'; not a woman, but a 'woman.'" All of these techniques serve to produce an ambivalence: they cause "meaning" to drift off into a diffuse state of flux. Although meaning is somewhere present, it is not localized. Everything is suspected to mean something, to contain a special message that is, nonetheless, immediately rejected as improbable or naïve.

It might seem problematic that the work of a contemporary artist is being linked to an essay written forty years ago. This, on one hand, has to do with the fact that Sontag's "Notes" have retained a great deal of their freshness. Meanwhile, many artworks have emerged that directly refer to camp, in a way which constantly furthers the development of this art form—take the work of Andy Warhol, John Waters, Jeff Koons, Brice Dellsperger, Paul McCarthy, John Currin, or Fischerspooner, to name but a few. Furthermore, camp, as a "consistently aesthetic experi-

ence of the world," has taken on much greater dimensions, clearly extending beyond the field of the visual arts: the "victory of 'style' over 'content,' 'aesthetics' over 'morality,' of irony over tragedy" has become an important characteristic of media society. Eminem and Madonna are not the only ones to use methods of seduction and patterns of belief that structurally have a great deal to do with camp. Paris "Simple Life" Hilton and the metrosexual David Beckham are also media figures who tend towards the exaggerated and over-the-top, living out a totally depoliticized existence as part of a very successful mass culture that operates by using images. The "de-thron[ing of the] serious" has widely prevailed, establishing itself as a model of success. Susan Sontag already emphasized the direct link between hedonism and camp in the early sixties: "Camp taste is by its nature possible only in affluent societies, in societies or circles capable of experiencing the psychopathology of affluence."

Recently, a tendency became prevalent in the work of Olaf Breuning that consciously breaks with the hedonistic view of the world, even integrating questions of meaning. The previously unengaged stance of his figures is countered by the sudden presence of demands, questions, or realizations, often rooted in a sociopolitical dimension. Invited to participate in developing artistic national images for the Swiss National Exposition, Olaf Breuning reacted by creating a panorama of over thirty figures with the title *CAMP* (2002), which he meant to be taken quite literally. In it, a desert landscape is depicted, and the individual actors occupying it are dressed fashionably, wearing extravagant cowboy boots and four-fruit skirts. Long beards and messy hair give them an appearance of primeval wildness. Holding toy weapons, they stare out directly at the beholder.

It is not difficult for exhibition visitors to recognize the formal link to training camps the Americans attested to in Afghanistan; and some may be reminded of Ferdinand Hodler's Marignano warriors. Both are representations of bearded men with naked legs and a frightening sense of decisiveness. They are visions of war that emerge from artistic fantasy, showing more of male will and madness than any depiction of actual historical events. Written as a loose



OLAF BREUNING, *APES*, 2001, installation view,
Le Magasin, Grenoble, Oct. 2003 – Jan. 2004.

series of letters, a message is subtly transcribed in the rings on the protagonists' fingers. Translated, it reads, "We can do what we want, we are always the same idiots, we don't learn anything and don't get any more intelligent, we're just stupid and will stay like that forever," a melancholic commentary on the *condition humaine* that philosophically reflects on the world's political situation.

Shortly thereafter, Breuning made a photograph in Spain with the title *WE ONLY MOVE WEHEN SOMETHING CHANGES* (2002). This somewhat clumsy formulation is applied as graffiti on a section of wall. Dozens of figures are draped around it, underlining, through their frontal stasis, the slogan's lethargic message. Even when there is no invitation to take on the demanded change there still exists a pointed attitude of refusal. In their shabby outfits, the figures are more reminiscent of squatters than the Lara Crofts, film starlets, or MTV figures evoked in his earlier works. Breuning's artistic fantasy has overwritten media reality.

Breuning's most expansive work to date is his video *HOME* (2003), made during a twelve-month trip around the world. Divided into two projection surfaces (one color and the other black and white), our attention is split between the life of a young man, who at the same time provides, as a double, the narrative framework as a navigational aid: One recognizes a rustic hotel room with fireplace, bed covers with floral patterns, and a sumptuous bathroom. This domestic atmosphere becomes the site of narration and reflection. In the film on the left, images emerge as if from a magic lantern, evoked by the narrator's voice echoing from the darkness. An uncanny conspiracy results between the two sides; each is implied by the simultaneity of the other, often quite precisely, until the images on both screens short circuit—symbolizing an encounter of the split personality with itself.

The main actor in *HOME*, a kind of dandy of the digital age, represents a personified sense of homelessness. In a heightened state of boredom, he moves through all sorts of settings and continents, whiling away his time in New York, Las Vegas, Paris, and even Machu Picchu, without experiencing any kind of improvement. In so doing, he has all possible means and roles at his disposal: he is a cowboy, pimp, tourist, homebody, or dealer, and yet, he still remains a lost soul in search of the slightest sense of home. In the age of unlimited information and imitation, it seems surprising that one may travel so far only in order to establish that one does not belong there. The seriousness of the search for meaning that is strived for misses its goal and ends in quirky, one-man conversations and hotel-room loneliness.

HOME is Olaf Breuning's *Threepenny Opera*. Much of it is overdone, gaudy, and exaggerated, and nonetheless stands in direct relation to real life. There's a lot of singing, and a certain hopelessness is omnipresent. The beggars' chorus under the Brooklyn Bridge sings as if with one voice, "We can't believe that something changes," swaying their empty beer bottles to the beat.

(Translation: Brian Currid)

1) All quotations come from Susan Sontag's essay "Notes on 'Camp,'" first published in *Partisan Review*, XXXI, Fall 1964, pp. 515f., also in Sontag, *Against Interpretation and other essays* (London: Random House, Vintage Books 1994), pp. 275–292.



OLAF BREUNING, SKELETONS, 2002, installation view, "Tutto normale," Villa Medici, Roma.