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If I Were Steve Jobs or Jesus Christ

Tony Matelli and Olaf Breuning

Tony Matelli I hate email interviews, but it seems like this is the only way we can do it with the schedule. Have you ever tried to read one of those things?

Olaf Breuning I am not a big reader in general—especially not about art. I like to look at art more than read about it. And artists should do less talking and more working.

TM This interview is supposed to be about the subject of stupidity. When we were bouncing around ideas for artists to interview, everyone thought of you. What is your relationship with stupidity? Do you even agree with the premise?

OB Nice to hear that everyone thought of me while thinking about stupidity...what is my relationship with stupidity? Hmmmm, let me think...

TM You actually use the word “stupid” a lot when we talk, and it always seems like a kind of declaration. On the surface, your recent show at Metro Pictures puts very little faith in intellect and a lot of stock in basic human needs (food, sex, etc.). Is “stupid” actually code for something essential, or possibly universal?

OB Sure, all the drawings and sculptures at the Metro show are very simple, but that does not mean that they are not intellectual. Often, the simplest things turn you on, performing incredible acrobatics in your brain. But you are right, maybe “stupid,” in my point of view, is code for a perspective on humans in general...I really

think when it comes down to it, we all are stupid in a lot of ways. That has charm with a tragic side effect: there will never be a perfect world! More or less, the same human patterns define our history. And really, we have tried many ways to find good in the world, but it comes down to the fact that we have brains and atomic bombs at the same time. That is the kind of universal stupidity I like to talk about...and yes, sex belongs in this category also. For me, as an artist, such things are very inspiring.

TM Could stupidity be something of the mind yet inaccessible to the intellect? (I'm thinking of your piece *The Wheel of Death*.)

OB Maybe.

TM In your earlier work, there are all these cultural references thrown together in a way that suggests a kind of foreignness, an unfamiliarity with the signifiers. I have your piece *Sybille* on my wall, and every time I look at it I wonder, "Why the furry leg?" or "Why is the hand just like that?" Everything is obviously so *intentional* but seems so random. That generates a strangeness that keeps the work really fresh. How were you making decisions about the details in your work at that point?

OB I did have the idea to put a lot of references into this work. A lot of things in my photographs are rather random, but not in that one. I remember I first made a very accurate drawing of each detail in the photo. The hand, I remember. I guess it was a reference to one of Inez Van Lamsweerde's photos...

TM Your most recent work has a kind of childlike reduction. You have taken all these really big ideas about basic needs and desires and distilled them into

these really simple, sometimes illustrative gestures. Cartoonish wall drawings, glued wooden stick sculptures, all totally low-tech. Is there something about these kind of “deep thoughts” that need to be kept really simple, or even dumb?

OB Yes, in my opinion, more simple, more close to the origin of these questions. Here, a simple question: why are we here? We don't know. We can write a big book about it or, like in my case, just make a simple drawing. I really enjoy the uncomplicated way my sculptures and drawings try to speak about these questions...they give them a lot of space without taking away the unexplainable beauty. It opens doors for a confrontation—or not.

TM In your movies *Home 1* and *Home 2*, which are a kind of hallucinogenic travel log, it seems you treat those exotic locations the same way you treated all those cultural/consumer references in the earlier photographs. It has a neutralizing effect. Everything becomes an equivalent “other place” for the main character. He is a sort of cultural drifter, which I think is analogous to an artistic practice. How do you relate to that character?

OB I like your questions...they include my answers already, and I don't have to write so much with my undeveloped English! Yes, you are right. It is actually my position as an artist: I always want to see the world around me as “the other” place. That makes me curious. That makes me discover it and speak about it.

TM There are so many great Swiss artists right now, and I have noticed a similar kind of humor in the work. Is there something particular about Swiss humor? Do you ever think about humor, because I laugh at a lot of your work.

OB Yes, Swiss humor! “Swiss artists” grew up in the world’s biggest country club. It is such an unrealistic place, different than what most of the people experience in their childhood. We are rich and don’t have very big problems. Sure, a very high suicide rate, but that speaks maybe more about the fact that we have so much time on our hands to think about ourselves and what our next step has to be...in general, I use humor to go through my life. I am a big fan of Woody Allen. Humor makes you laugh but also can leave a bitter feeling. I guess the same I can see in your work too.

TM There is something really free about the Swiss way. Am I thinking too much about neutrality?

OB Yes neutral, ha ha. Neutral can also mean not taking part in things around you and trying to have always a special treatment. Switzerland is like a spoiled child who wants always the bigger piece of cake. Don’t misunderstand me. I love Switzerland, a very nice country! But maybe it is human nature not to share when you’d loose some comfort. And by the way, I wish my country would be more radical in being neutral. They could make an international gesture and get rid of that stupid army. No one really needs it, besides the idiots wasting tax money shooting around in the Swiss mountains in order to test the newest gadgets...but that, unfortunately, seems to be a worldwide problem.

TM It seems your work flows really well. Does it come easily?

OB I don’t know. I always think I am a very unproductive artist. I have so much time that I just waste. I could do more, but it is not the case that I can sit in my studio and ideas storm out of my brain. They come slowly and in small portions.

TM Did you have art in the house as a kid? What was your first exposure to “fine art”? What made you interested?

OB My family in general was always interested in art and music. My background is photography, and I guess when I saw a book of Henri Cartier-Bresson for the first time, it made me want to be an artist.

TM Is there a reason your work is art? Could it be something else just as well? I know you are a big opponent of cultural distinctions, but you make art. Why?

OB I really like to be an artist. The freedom is very nice. I can wake up in the morning and do whatever I want. I like people in the arts (like yourself)...I just feel comfortable here. I sometimes complain about it, but that is more because I am one of those notorious complainers. I would still complain if I were Steve Jobs or Jesus Christ.

TM Have you ever seen *The Far Side* cartoons?

OB No

TM You are currently in Zürich, what's the show? Tell me about the installation.

OB I am actually in Luzern, near Zürich. It's beautiful here. Like in a postcard. The show is up at the same time as part of a comic festival. It is a small version of the show I had in New York at Metro Pictures. I made some new sculptures and it really looks great. It is also about the big questions in life with simple drawings on the wall and simple sculptures in the room. Together it becomes a kind of three-dimensional drawing.

TM Daniel Gordon told me you were really into Die Antwoord. I gave it a listen and thought it was the worst thing I've heard all year. What do you like about it?

OB Well, have to say, I liked it the first few times I listened to it...but all of a sudden I been thinking, these guys are fake—just some art students who put on a fake show. I am still not 100% sure if that is the case: maybe I am wrong. But I like honest things...maybe Lady Gaga is more understandable to me, because she is just a commercial product with some artsy-fartsy influences, but somehow, I can put her in a category. Die Antwoord is too much to be true. They will soon be famous and all becomes just a game. The strangeness these guys from South Africa produce will soon be destroyed when I see them in fashion magazines, hanging around somewhere on the Lower East Side, photographed by Terry Richardson. But that is how the cookie crumbles, but as I wrote, maybe I am wrong.

TM I love your photo called *Why Can't You Be Nice With Nature*. You know that grammar is weird right? It is such a perfect detail. Or am I remembering it wrong?

OB Or maybe as you and all the readers of the interview can see, grammar is not my strongest horse.