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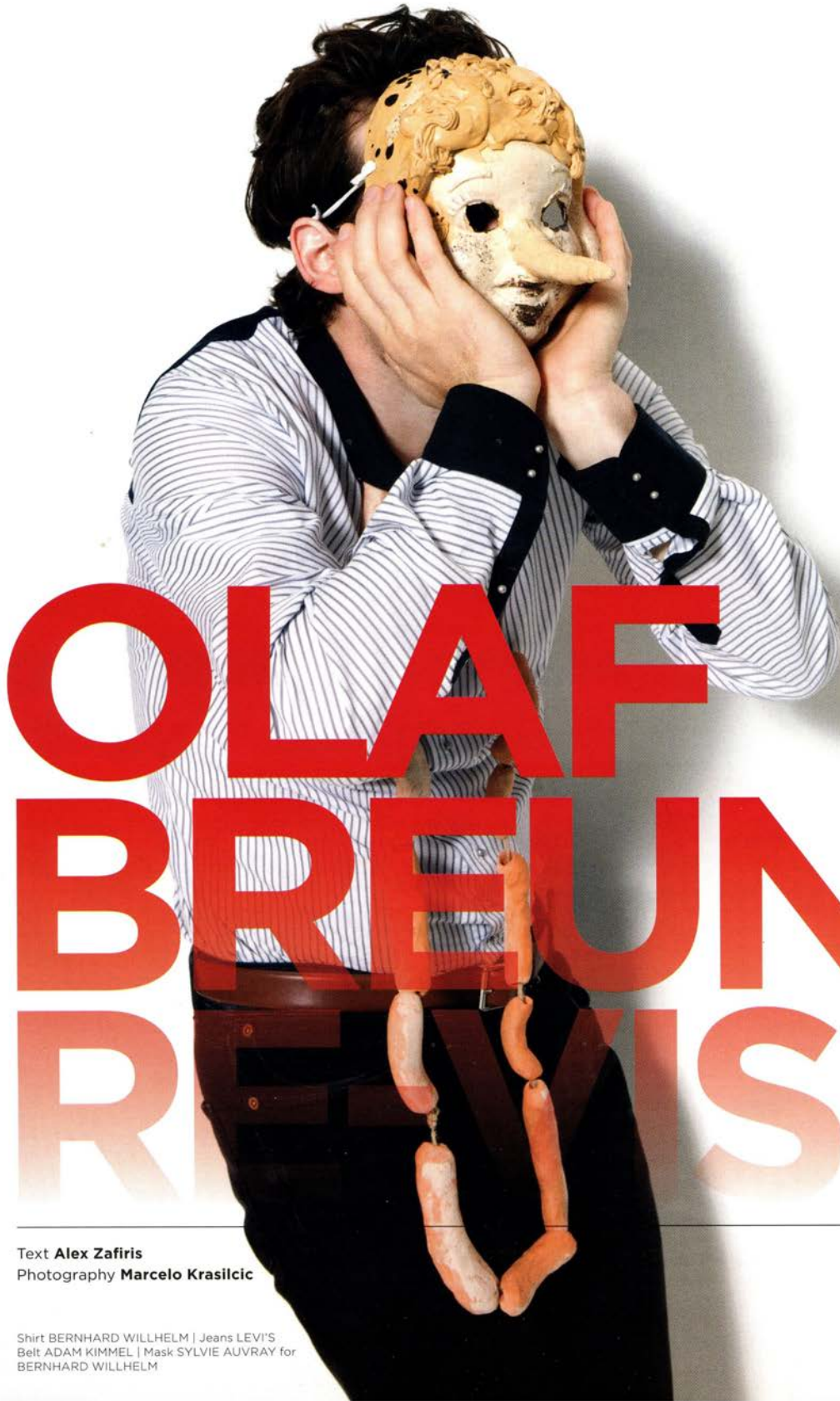
SMILE!
Olaf
Breuning
SEES YOU

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OLAF BREUNIN REVISIO

Text **Alex Zafiris**
Photography **Marcelo Krasilcic**

Shirt **BERNHARD WILLHELM** | Jeans **LEVI'S**
Belt **ADAM KIMMEL** | Mask **SYLVIE AUVRAY** for
BERNHARD WILLHELM

IG'S N



“I work with humor, I work with cultural criticism, but I don’t like being preachy. I don’t like being didactic.”

kind of occult magician type, and there has to be a chick in there somewhere, maybe a radical feminist.

What will you teach the children?

You know, real life. I’m going to put the weight of the world on their shoulders. It will be dark and horrifying, but it won’t be so dark. Ultimately it will be educational. It’s in the public lobby of the Whitney so they have script approval. *[laughs]* I like the idea of a dark master feeding the minds of youth. I’m not going to have children, so why not say what I have to say to the next generation?

When you were four years old you were on your mother’s show interviewing a monkey. How did that go?

It went really well. I got to spend a couple of hours with this live monkey that had a little stroller that I pushed around the studio. And *Captain Kangaroo* was just down the hall so it was awesome.

Have you heard that *The Electric Company* is being revived?

I liked *Zoom*, too. But they were way different from children’s television now. There’s nothing really meaty out there. You could say *Dora the Explorer* is ostensibly educational, but it’s not the same.

When you first showed “Fall ’95” at 303 Gallery over a decade ago, you installed a companion library of esoteric video clips for patrons to navigate. Combine that with your staged testimonials and you essentially have the DNA of YouTube.

I included pieces of interviews and performances, things that I thought were anomalies on television, like Public Image Limited on

American Bandstand, or Patti Smith on *Saturday Night Live*. You can watch hours and hours and hours of television and go brain dead, but every once in a while something magical happens. It’s amazing that people now want to share that.

On YouTube it’s usually someone’s niece in the living room dancing to a Janet Jackson remix.

That’s far more interesting to me than watching *Desperate Housewives*. Video is so accessible. Everyone has a video camera now and seems to know a thing or two about making their own entertainment. In the not too distant future I would like to make specific work for that context.

Just to add academic flavor to the interview, here’s a question I read online: “How does one mount a successful critique, when irony, satire and subversion have been enshrined by advertising and the popular imagination?”

I feel like I’m constantly up against that wall. It’s just such a fine line. People have used words like irony and sarcasm to describe my work, and it’s tricky because I like those things but I also fight against them. I work with humor, I work with cultural criticism, but I don’t like being preachy. I don’t like being didactic. Not to sound like a Pollyanna, but I like something more positive to be found in my work. Even suggesting something to just think about is better than dismissing everything outright. I have a lot of Aquarius in me. Maybe that’s why I feel like it’s a part of my responsibility, as an adult, to try and be hopeful, and find the good within the shit parameters that we live in. I don’t know if that’s an answer.



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An artist's double take on contemporanea

It is two weeks before the opening of Olaf Breuning's third solo show at Metro Pictures Gallery, and his basement-level studio is buzzing and cheery. The low-ceilinged space, small and inconspicuous, maintains a flavor of its former incarnation as a massage parlor. Breuning and his crew of interns are putting the finishing touches to some of the sculptures for the show: at the center of the room sits *Bird Dog*, a canine-like form seemingly made out of red and yellow rubber gloves; on a work desk is *The Big Challenge*, a large weight scale balancing a pile of books on one side and a container of disembodied, round pink breasts on the other. Colorful knickknacks, cartoon figures and clippings decorate the room. Breuning's desk is by the door, next to a hand-written sign that says, "Champagne dog / or am I drunk? Olaf Breuning." To the left of the entrance is an even smaller room, apparently once the setting of "happy endings." (Breuning kept the bright pink paint job and the paper-towel-holder affixed by the ceiling.) These walls are neatly

lined with his drawings, executed in pencil on letter-sized paper. One of my favorites: E.T., on a phone, saying, "I hate email." Another: the Mona Lisa, a Klee-esque figure and a borrowed Paul McCarthy character engaging in a threesome, called *The Art World Fucks Itself*.

Olaf Breuning's world is a reorganization of the regular coda. His works—photographs, installations, sculptures, films and drawings—are escapist investigations into commonplace imagery and narrative. Taking his cues from the media, mass culture and the Internet, his new world constructs explore the effects this imagery has upon us, eliciting a fresh, unguarded response. His work beguiles and discreetly plays on our reflexes and feelings. The handling of these ideas is attractive, absurd, and always funny; as are his materials, which range from Chinatown tchotchkes, fruit, tourists, gorilla costumes, whispers, sex dolls, Vegas hotel rooms, cowboy ranches, heavy-metal riffs, wigs, stereo speakers, red noses to diet Coke cans. Correspondingly, his themes center

around desire, reaction and perception.

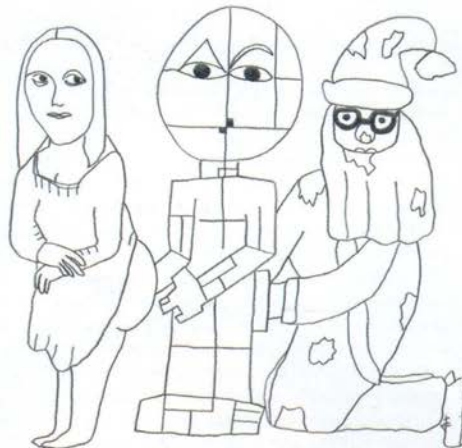
Over the past ten years, his ever-evolving tools have allowed Breuning to move and develop quickly, though one gets the sense that he has been making up for lost time. While he now has work in public collections and is represented by galleries in Europe and Japan, becoming an artist came as much as a surprise to him as to his family. Growing up in the town of Schaffhausen in the German-speaking part of Switzerland, he was never described as "arty"; directionless at 17, he even got a job working in a courthouse. Then his father gave him a camera, and taught him how to develop photographs in a dark room. "All of a sudden, I didn't stop making photographs, I was a maniac," he remembers. He quit the court job, followed a four-year apprenticeship under commercial photographers, and then enrolled in art school in Zurich. While he spent that time experimenting, he recalls that he was a little bull-headed and unreceptive to criticism. He still remembers the campus as being like a

“I wouldn’t need other artists to exist. For me to make art is a very private thing”

“doctor’s office.” That being said, it provided him with a contrast to his own impulses.

Interest in Breuning’s work really began when he exhibited what he calls his “bloody works,” informed mostly from his lifelong interest in horror films and Hollywood culture. (1997’s *Sibylle* is perhaps the most exemplary of that time: a photograph of his then-girlfriend, whom he seems to have attempted to render as sexless and grotesque as possible: one of her legs is sawn off, bits of hair are stuck all over her arm, bread rolls hang off her fingers and devil horns sprout from her forehead.) In 2000, he won three Swiss grants, which awarded him with about \$70,000 and a year’s residence in a New York loft on West Broadway and Spring. When he moved to the city, he was already represented in Paris, Berlin and Zurich, but he wasn’t too sure of who Helene Winer or Janelle Reiring of Metro Pictures Gallery were when they asked to stop by his studio. Innocently, he thought little of it. (A friend who worked at Christie’s had tipped them off.) At the time, Breuning had already been playing around with film, using it as part of his installation pieces (*Woodworld*, *Gum Glum Glee* and *Yelp*). Winer recalls being knocked out by what she saw, describing it as “of that time, incorporating ideas and information before they are digested.” He visited their space, and upon learning that they represented Cindy Sherman, realized the gravitas

of their interest. He had his first solo show with them in October 2001, “Primitiv,” which included *Apes*, an installation of apes with glowing eyes sitting around a constructed forest fire; he showed photographs of groups of people in branch loincloths, bodies painted brown but with white polka dots and modern



haircuts (*Primitives*); a film, *Group*; and a photograph of people standing, this time painted camouflage, wearing ape masks and cutoff denim shorts, all looking bored and smoking cigarettes (also named *Group*). Breuning went

straight towards the notion of personal and visual identity in a primal context, using both the gleam of a photographer’s studio to take the photographs, and a renowned Chelsea art gallery to throw dirt all over the floor.

Breuning is highly organized. It is predictable to accord his efficiency to his nationality, but Winer agrees: “He’s terribly Swiss. Other Swiss artists are like that too because personal behavior and general demeanor is very strict, very conservative—*seemingly*. But of course, those are the people who cover the most amazingly strange sensibility.” He designed his whole exhibition on SketchUp, the 3D computer modeling program. After our meeting in his studio, I visited him a week later at Metro Pictures for a preview. I expected to find him knee-deep in materials, but everything was finished, two days early. He walked me through the gallery cheerfully, if not speedily, explaining his choices and praising his team. The show has a little bit of everything, he said, except his films. He revealed that, because he gets a little nervous, he has a trick about surviving openings: just stand in one place and let people come to you. Working the whole room is just too tiring.

In many cases, it takes an outsider to tell the story. Talking about his life in art, Breuning is quick to remind you that the New York art world is something he is related to by default; he does not actively seek out its social possibilities. “I wish he [would], in a way,” says



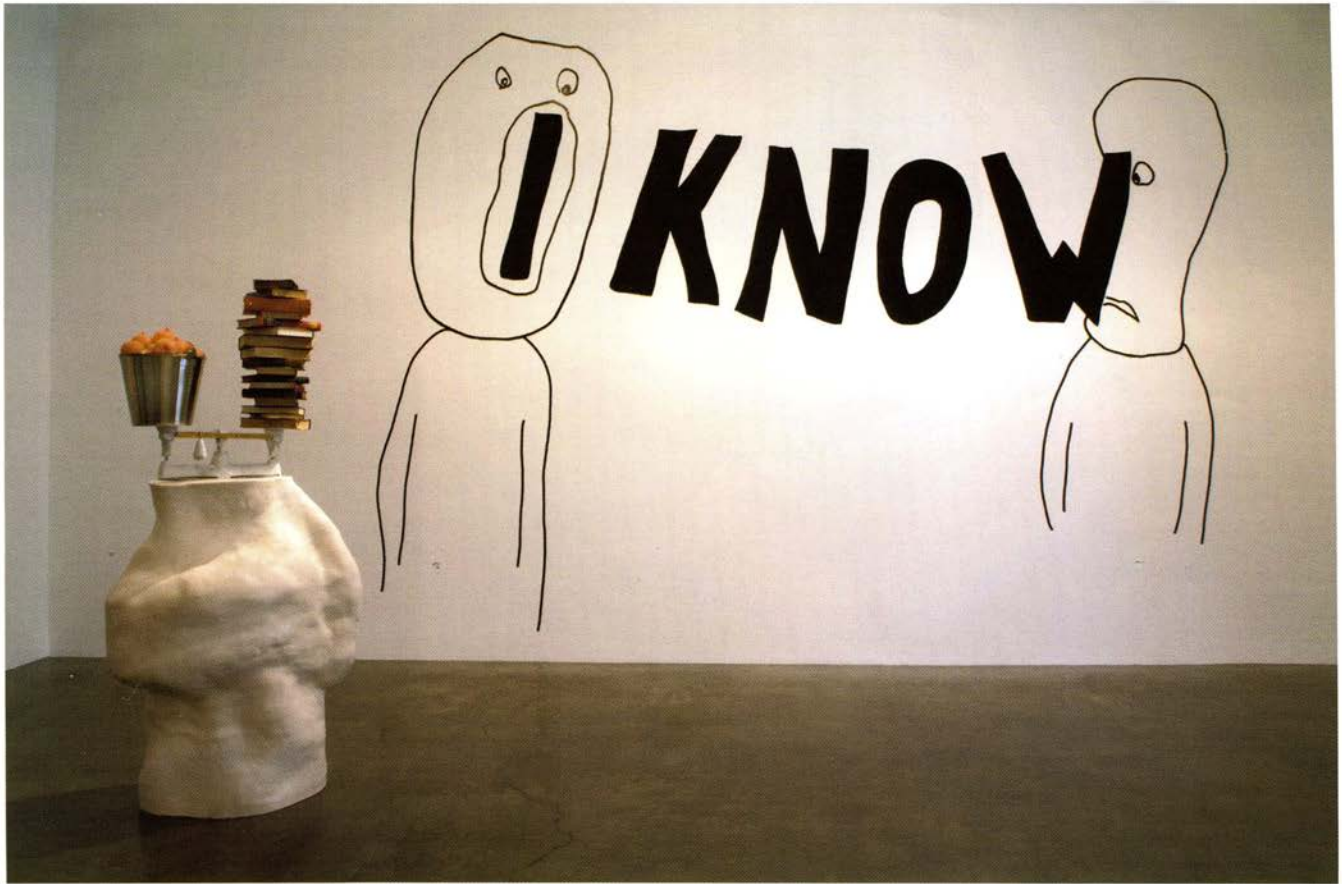
Winer, adding that the tradition is for artists to support and inform one another. "He feels more a part of the larger scope of culture and behavior in New York. He is an osmosis artist." I ask Breuning about this. "I'm not a show person," he says, "Just a social person. I like people." As far as an artists' community goes: "I wouldn't need other artists to exist. For me to make art is a very private thing." He is very lucid about the business. "Art is already in a special situation," he says. "People, when they go to art openings, they like to sip on a glass of champagne." He is very aware of his fickle industry. "That's, for me, the right place to have humor," he says. "I could not be serious in that environment. I could be serious and do research in a hospital. I was never someone who believed that culture or art could save human beings. The only thing I think it can do is make human beings sharper in seeing things in a different approach. That's the beauty of art for me." One of the drawings Breuning was

about to show at Metro Pictures is called *My Opening*: in a gallery space, life-size glasses of champagne chatter and mingle around mounted images of people shooting themselves in the head.

Breuning projects an image of laid-back receptiveness, perhaps even a relinquishing of control. This is enhanced by his personable manner. His gaze begins uncritically: he is interested in the now, and why. "If you focus on one thing, you compromise," he says. "I'm a child of post-modern thinking." He says that he downloads shows like *Gossip Girl*, *America's Next Top Model* and *Heroes* off iTunes and half-watches them as he draws. "I really want to know what people see today," he says. "Why do people make these things?" In terms of technology, he considers that platforms such as email and Facebook have reshaped people's perceptions, and that up until a decade ago, personality stereotypes were much easier to define. "We are not in

charge of things anymore. In our life it is no longer possible to be one character. You have to be a chameleon." In an earlier interview, he spoke of this characterization in terms of language: "I would not be an artist who would stay with my style, with my language, only because that's my language. So I try to adjust my language to the time. But it's rather difficult because change is so fast. The language is its own thing, but the stage where you play your language can be different."

This autonomy attracts the like-minded. His friendship with Bernard Willhelm began when he found out that the German designer had copied, down to the last detail, a white tracksuit emblazoned with lions heads and eyes that Breuning had designed and sewn for his *Princess* photograph in 2000. At first, the artist was surprised to have been so openly imitated, but when the two met, was very flattered and impressed by Willhelm. Willhelm remembers that seeing Breuning's work "was a



revelation, as it was not only about the aesthetic, but trying things out and giving ideas a chance." They shared many of the same ideologies. As Wilhelm says, "he keeps it unreal, too." They collaborated on a 'ghost film' for Wilhelm's women's collection, which was shown at the Palais de Tokyo in 2004 in Paris in lieu of a fashion show. (The scene later ended up in Breuning's film, *Home 1*.) Of their friendship, the designer says that Breuning taught him "to enjoy being bored. And now I love it! Also that German and Swiss people can care about culture."

Breuning has deeply trusted his own instincts for the past few years. As well as his intuitive observations on the everyday, he is also very self-aware. When asked about influences, he talks about them in the past tense, and how their work has given him a kind of reassurance; Paul McCarthy and Matthew Barney crop up as notables, though he points out that his earlier sensibility was "more whimsical and [had] different layers of understanding, more like

the illusion of a dream world, or something not real. Lately I guess the last few years I try more to be a part of this reality in a more direct way."

A way to see this evolution is to watch his last two films, *Home 1* (2004) and *Home 2* (2007). *Home 1* was first shown in double projection at Metro Pictures in 2004. One panel shows the protagonist, played by Brian Kerstetter, trapped in a Vegas hotel room talking to himself, or the camera, or the viewer; one's perception changes throughout. He smokes, takes a bath, jumps up and down on the bed, warms his hands on the fake fireplace; his shirt is stained, his look is manic. The right panel is the image of his spoken narrative, a visual stream of consciousness, which takes unexpected turns into absurdity. In one scene, a rich vacationer experiences an existential moment while sipping champagne with girls in an outside hot tub up in the snowy mountains. The moment he thinks he has swept the

thought away, he vomits the words "I EXIST" onto the sunny slopes before him. *Home 2*, first screened at the Migros Museum in Zurich, follows an American tourist (played again by Kerstetter) who visits Ghana, Japan and Papua New Guinea. At one point he exclaims: "It feels just like a remake of a Disney film. Is it real? I feel like I just want to go up and touch it!" His actions and observations come off as gauche, uninformed and disrespectful, but the character's enthusiasm belies any ill intent. As the tourist waits anxiously in a Ghanaian airport to get home, a feeling of alienation seeps from the film. Where, and what is home, exactly?

The films are what have given Breuning a popularity boost in the past few years. *Home 2* screened at the 2008 Whitney Biennial (Breuning's modest measure of success: he noticed that his fanmail has increased). A lot of this must be attributed to Kerstetter, an important figure in Breuning's work. Friends for over ten years, Kerstetter is quite shy in

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—Bernhard Willhelm



“We are not in charge of things anymore. In our life it is no longer possible to be one character. You have to be a chameleon.”

person, but in front of the camera, his energy and humor know no limits. You could say that they are each other's muses, that without this friendship, Kerstetter might not perform in the way that he does for Breuning, and that Breuning would not, in turn, have his medium. The film itself is just the vehicle. As they travel around filming, Kerstetter explains that he follows instructions, but not direction: "There's not a lot of discussion about any meaning, or, what does this mean, or anything we want to communicate," he says. "It's almost by intuition." The main thing is the friendship, and the humor. "That's definitely what drives the work. I would say he and I are both somewhat anti-anything that's too intellectual or too pretentious." For the introduction on Breuning's monograph, *Home*, Kerstetter wrote a series of travel vignettes, playfully describing the more hilarious episodes of their journeys. That

the films form organically is crucial to the end result: Breuning and Kerstetter are just reacting openly to their environment, and their years of accumulated thoughts and visuals. (This year, Breuning made a new photograph, an update of *Sibylle*. He used Kerstetter as the model.)

At the Metro Pictures opening, Breuning stood by the entrance of the show, and indeed, hardly moved. Everyone wanted his attention. He appeared a little nervous and tired. During the post-dinner at Bottino's, collectors and friends were anxious to sit with him. The mood was warm and celebratory: the evening was a great success. Talk of the economy flowed; opinions were voiced as to whether the art market would suffer, or that it might simply "trim the fat." I thought of something Breuning said to me earlier: "I never want to be Damien Hirst. I have a studio. I have nice people working for me. I make usually enough money to pay

my rent. I can choose the restaurants where I want to eat. I mean, what do I want more?" Two weeks later, his piece *Smoke Bombs*, an angular structure of bombs emitting colorful plumes of smoke, sold for \$15,000 at London's Frieze Art Fair.

The following week, Breuning was his normal energized self at the *Tokion* photo shoot. He arrived with a pocketful of plastic eyeballs. He happily donned the Bernhard Willhelm mask and clay sausage necklace offered to him, and picked out a very loud Adam Kimmel suit to wear. Later, he stood before the camera in a polo shirt and braces with a large cucumber in front of his groin, positioning two of the eyeballs over his own. After a few disjointed poses, he stuck the eyeballs into the cucumber, transforming it into a cute, childlike form. Instantly, the cucumber belonged to Olaf. He cradled it like a baby, and smiled.



ADAM KIMMEL