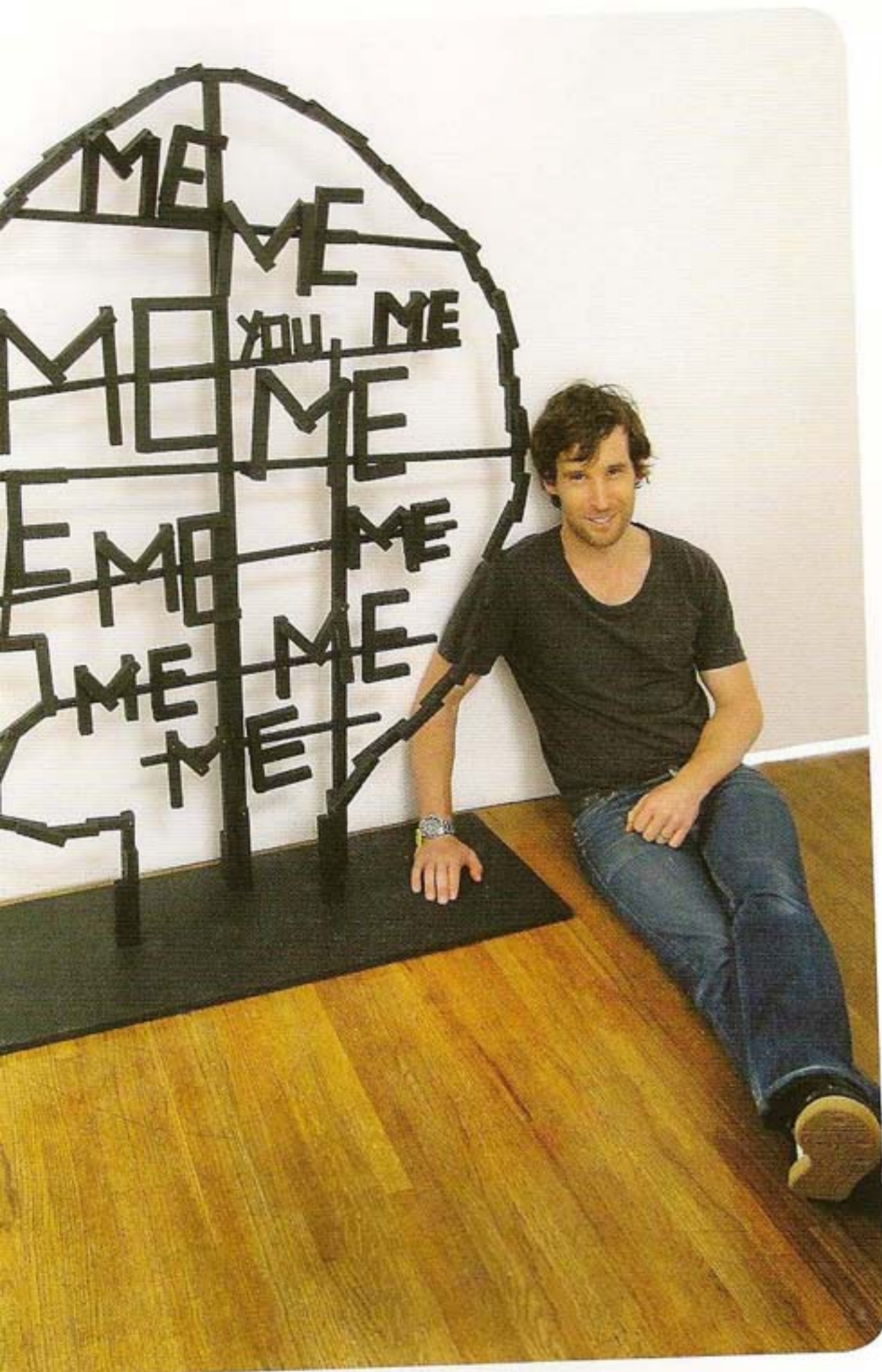


While attempting a systematic assessment of the entirety of **Olaf Breuning's** early to current oeuvre, I discovered that the significant media he has utilized over the period in which his works can be classed as contemporary art add up to a uniquely complex whole.



This brief article, then, can do no more than provide the merest glimpse of the phases in Breuning's odyssey to date – an odyssey that spans the worlds of painting, drawing, sculpture, video, film and photography. Whatever media he uses, however, one constant remains: In today's increasingly globalized and nomadic world, Breuning's underlying theme – interpersonal interaction, in a nutshell – is more relevant than ever.

A native of the medieval town of Schaffhausen in Switzerland, Breuning has adopted a choice of genres whose multilayered complexity is belied by an inherent and disarming simplicity. His art is never one-dimensional. On the contrary, it is socially partisan, often playful, almost childlike, to some extent, and always replete with subversive energy. It also mirrors the distinctly ironic glint in the artist's eye, as if it were born of a powerful craving for a life that offers rich rewards to anyone who embraces it. Breuning is one of the most important active protagonists of the pop-culture movement. In the sense used here, however, «pop» is by no means confined to art in the early 1960s. Indeed, it categorically defies all historic axiom. It focuses neither on Western or Eastern values, nor on historical or contemporary origins, but only on that which – from Breuning's point of view – is new and intrinsically valid. And for Breuning, most everything is an open platform on which to exhibit his perceptions of realities or non-realities.

The simple wall drawings and wood sculptures that form the core of his recent exhibition at the Metro Pictures in New York are based on his childlike miniscule pencil drawings. These drawings, coupled with humorous aphorisms, are produced after long periods of self confinement and are transposed directly onto white walls using broad black lines. One notable sculptured counterpart is three-dimensional. Made of blocks painted in black, it consists of the egocentric thoughts «Me, Me, Me, You and Me», depicting the profile of a human gnomonic head with a dozen «mes» and a single «you». What is the artist trying to tell us? This profound conundrum, dear reader, I leave to your esteemed imagination...

Although he only turns 40 on February 16 of this year, Breuning is anything but unknown in the industry. He has already brought forth a significant body of work and is still going strong, adding various components

as he, «finds» them. He does this because, in his own words, he «gets easily bored». In numerous international solo and group exhibitions both in the United States and Europe, he has repeatedly evidenced ongoing artistic development – while resolutely resisting all attempts at categorization. Breuning simply cannot be pinned down to one particular genre. He creates in the same way that he plays with reality, using a wide range of techniques and materials to lay bare an endless series of stages, the actors on which embody dispositions from the merely funny to the outright hilarious. His distinctive blend of art provides an in-depth introduction to a little known concept that Breuning is keen to impart to others, a concept that opens up a world full of surprises and fascination.

By way of formative influences, Olaf Breuning cites everything from the music of the Talking Heads, the Eurythmics and Grace Jones to the photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson and Cindy Sherman, not forgetting more than a dash of science fiction and horror. His photographs, installations and films speak the same language, picking up on a number of recurrent themes: face painting, eyeballs attached to inanimate objects, long cheap wigs and naked breasts, for instance. In one photo shoot, the subject's piercing gaze is an optical illusion: «The eyes are painted on the closed eyelids, as if to indicate that what one sees is of no importance to the end.» Typical of the artist's ingenious touches. Breuning's works often reveal themselves to be interrelated variations in which each successive step leads to another, keeping deeper interpretation elusively at arm's length. At a recent show in New York's Whitney Biennale, the artist took inspiration from the former armory building that housed the exhibition. He thus created thirty miniature metal soldiers with identical spherical bodies but different heads. The figures looked rather like robots heading off to war in

some science fiction film. As he later shared with me: «Knowing I would be exhibiting at the armory, I found it funny to have created something with a military theme.» Breuning has blended easily with the artistic universe not only in his native Switzerland, but also in New York, where he has lived for the past ten years – and where he is a towering figure alongside other well-known giants. He has also exhibited at the Langhans Gallery in Prague, Michael Benevento in Los Angeles, the Kodama Gallery in Tokyo, the Conduits Gallery in Milan, the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich and the Gallerie Nicola von Senger in Zurich, to name but a few. An exhaustive list would fill several pages!

To my mind, this meek and humble lad from Franklin Street in Soho is destined to move on to things higher and greater than he can ever imagine, extending far beyond the field of visual arts. Olaf Breuning is a modern day hunter – a hunter who has caught a scent. His work invites us to pick up the trail with him and follow wherever the elusive prey of meaning may lead...