

# Technician of the Sacred

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*Dreaming of islands—whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter—is dreaming of pulling away, of being already separate, far from any continent, of being lost and alone—or it is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew. Some islands drifted away from the continent, but the island is also that toward which one drifts; other islands originated in the ocean but the island is also the origin, radical and absolute.<sup>1)</sup>*

*The (mass) ornament is an end in itself.<sup>2)</sup>*

From beginning to end... To imagine a fictitious origin of the world and treat it as an artistic object, to designate its faraway-ness both in history and in place, in fantastic tableaux that steal their décor from the products of modern life. To stage creation myths, lost paradises, and lonely civilizations starting with nothing more than a laptop and a vague sensation of belonging to something out there—an abstract but still pulsating reflex. To forge a symbolic system that is in itself a desert island, estranged from any continent of meaning external to it. Then to populate this island as well, with characters that are desert islands in and of themselves: castaways, homeless bums and bag ladies, cowboys, gangsters, metalheads,

ghosts, and the trendy nubile girls whom they abduct. These *dramatis personae* without plot or clear direction—isolated, floating, and rootless in the world—are just as they appear in Olaf Breuning's video paradoxically titled HOME (2004).

Breuning's cast brings us into contact with nothing more than their own far-flung façades—to the garb they are costumed in, to the fact that they are nothing more than a front—in front of which communicability eventually stops short. In numerous Breuning photographs, hybrid beings stand erect in parallel lines striking frontal poses like a line-up of statues; he renders them flat while tempting us with recognizable elements (cars, sneakers, merchandise). Adorned in a jumble of signs pointing only to their abstraction, these beings are left stranded with no identifiable signifying order to latch onto. If with nothing more, they show up bearing none other than the story of their genesis—their evolution through the mass production that sent them drifting onto one of Breuning's sets. To suggest that these figures are immobile isn't to say they are incapable of physical motion, because as we see in HOME, they lead rather dynamic lives: deep sea diving to hunt for food, annoying tourists at Machu Picchu, ordering hookers in Las Vegas hotels, taunting Amish farm boys. Yet Breuning's beings are most resonantly

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OLAF BREUNING: HOME, 2004, video projection on two screens, stills / Bilder aus der Videoprojektion auf zwei Leinwände.





OLAF BREUNING, EASTER BUNNIES, 2004, C-print, laminated and mounted on aluminum, 48 x 61" and 31 1/2 x 39 7/8" / C-Print, laminiert, auf Aluminium aufgezogen, 122 x 155 cm und 80 x 100 cm.

immobile in their metaphorical force. They supplant storytelling (mythology) with blatant display (pornography/advertising), but are sophisticated enough (they've been around a while—since the beginning no doubt) to know that these means are becoming harder to tell apart. One could almost say that the movements of these beings take place in the vacuum of Breuning's frame, a window circumscribing an island from which they gaze back like extraterrestrials that have come to plant themselves as clownish effigies of the present on the shores of our collective unconscious. Breuning's work is often described as a plethora of limitless fictions that somehow regenerate even more comically strange stories of humans seeking forms of life on a media-controlled planet, but isn't it rather a crisis of fiction that his images are driving at? To a process of demythologizing what is

left over after market industries have emptied the contents from stories once vital to individual communities, by filtration through capitalist production? What kind of stories can one really tell with automats, with "the fabrication of a figure whose very principle is immobility, the immobility of he who only knows one movement, who cannot evolve, cannot be changed (by love or competition), who can do no more than disappear (it's actually quite touching) in the enigma of his own programming?"<sup>3)</sup>

Is it a manifestation of the artist's own cynicism, of a dark suspicion that a technocratic second nature seems to be surpassing its own fantasies, that he travels to exotic places only to intervene in the locale's sacred elements in a way that could easily have been done in an hour at home with graphics software? With a rudimentary metal armature contraption de-

signed to add rabbit ears and bucktoothed smiles to sacred monuments, Breuning embarked to Easter Island to shoot the photograph *EASTER BUNNIES* (2004). According to Breuning, it was a journey undertaken to experience “polarities of stupidity and holiness.”

By this same token, I too have traveled to Easter Island, via the Kevin Costner-produced Hollywood movie *Rapa Nui* (1994), titled after the island’s native name, somehow to trace Breuning’s ironic sentiment. Beyond the film’s ethnographic distortions—its import of Maori actors and costume, its campy

quarry, “That’s all there is—idiot statues—we make the Gods!” The Long Ear in charge retorts, “Just finish the Moai in time!”

“The mass ornament is the aesthetic reflex of the rationality to which the prevailing economic system aspires.”<sup>4)</sup> Siegfried Kracauer’s critique of mass spectacles of the early twentieth century resonates today. The mass ornament works “to train the broadest mass of people in order to create a pattern of undreamed dimensions.”<sup>5)</sup> Breuning’s work overflows with elements that display a cultish attraction to mechanic emissions, not for the products they are capa-



one-liners in British accents such as, “Pretty soon we’ll have nothing to eat but each other,” its enactment of a sacred rite in the style of a televised sports event, its soft eco-friendly didactics, and not least, the formulaic love triangle crossing caste lines that tries to hold it all together—*Rapa Nui* is essentially the story of Capital. The Protestant work ethic is crudely applied to the giddy South Seas as if a natural phenomenon intrinsic to human nature—a somehow inevitable fate, glossing the events of “way back then” with the here and now. Class struggle takes place around the Moai, the island’s monolithic totems for whose construction the Long Ears (the bourgeoisie) subjugate the Short Ears (the proletariat) into forced labor. With hackneyed Nietzschean renunciations of the oppressor’s sacred ornaments, the enslaved Short Ears exclaim from the dust of the

ble of producing, but for the sheer energy—lights, sounds, colors—of their effects. *WOODWORLD* (1998) is a video installation that displays a stationary Range Rover with zombie-like beings seated inside. Nothing happens except for a sequence of cheap stage devices—smoke, wind, snow, spotlights, and an electronic soundtrack, all together programmed to blink on and off in rhythmic and visual patterns. There is a cool ambivalence to this static image, which like Breuning’s installation *APES* (2001), employs special effects as an end in itself—effects whose uniform, and potentially hypnotic, features are a pretense masking the lived irrationality of the economic system. The ornaments spawned from an out-of-control second nature take refuge in synchronized abstractions (like an iTunes Visualizer), seeking some semblance of reason in the longing to connect to human de-

sires. Breuning animates his luxury vehicle and inert primates in artificial forests that are otherwise mute.

Soundtracks are an integral part of Breuning's work, with instrumentation composed entirely from the digital sound banks of recording software. He seems to take an individual sound almost literally, relating to its existence as an "aural object"<sup>6)</sup>—as the sound itself—and not the object or image of its source. Sometimes eerie noises are overlaid to collaborate with the eeriness of a visual scene, but in many instances, noises arise independently of the image to tickle us with their own emotional features. Quite apt for an artist who likes to feign an illiterate approach and prefers to convey ideas with onomatopoeic totalities such as "rumble, whirr, swish," by clicking buttons on sound loops.

Getting back to HOME, a different aural operation is at work in the series of vignettes strung together by its strung-out narrator. The split-screen video shows a pacing and ranting commentator confined to the right-hand frame, his voiceover dispelling the mysteries of his own and his friends' lives unfolding on the left. His monologue does not add a layer to the image, but doubles it, predicting and repeating what will or what just happened. Like an annoying movie date, the voice neutralizes the story before it has a chance to materialize. On the left screen a character stumbles out of a jacuzzi atop the Swiss Alps, sick from indulgence and too much champagne. Just as he is about to throw up, the narrator tells us that his vomit spells "I EXIST," dampening the suspense even before the drunken fellow's self-epiphany splatters on the snow. Is this redundancy the crisis of fiction laid bare? Redundancy becomes total in Breuning's photograph MR. HAND, MRS. ASS, MRS. KNEE AND MR. FOOT (2004), in which inane cartoon faces are drawn with magic marker on respective naked body parts. What these hapless little icons without substance seem to be reaching for is not some decoder that could give them a break, so to speak, but a breakdown of communicability as intrinsic value.

As Giorgio Agamben writes in *The Man Without Content*, "This space is the aesthetic space, but what is transmitted in it is precisely the impossibility of transmission, and its truth is the negation of the truth of its contents. A culture that in losing its trans-

missibility has lost the sole guarantee of its truth and become threatened by the incessant accumulation of its nonsense now relies on art for its guarantee; art is thus forced to guarantee something that can only be guaranteed if art loses its guarantees in turn."<sup>7)</sup>

The protesters on strike in Breuning's photograph WE ONLY MOVE WEHEN SOMETHING CHANGES (2002) seem marooned in this same ambivalence. How will contemporary art/life realize isles anew, second origins unwilling to forge the same deserted destiny of *Rapa Nui's* makeshift automatons in the drone of everyone keeping everyone else busy? Hello. Is anybody there?

Before submitting this text, I called Olaf on the telephone and of the art world he said: "Sometimes it's like being stuck on a little island. Each time you realize it, you want to vomit." So what is his art? "Sitting on an island and vomiting about my life."

What struck him most lucidly on Easter Island was relaxing on a volcano at sunset, getting drunk on Chilean wine and feeling lost in the sweeping vista, and an unbelievable feeling of solitude. From the mountainside he watched a gorgeous indigenous young man with a long flowing ponytail galloping on a horse along the shoreline, accompanied by a pack of dogs. He said this vision was like a real unspoiled dream. The young man spotted him as well, and galloped toward him calling out, "Hey! Aren't you from New York? Do you think you can get me a job? I'm totally bored with this place... I really got to get out of here!"

1) Gilles Deleuze, "Desert Islands" in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953–1974*, edited by David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), p. 10 (emphasis in the original).

2) Siegfried Kracauer, "The Mass Ornament" in *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 76.

3) Serge Daney, "From Movies to Moving" in *Documenta X, Documents 2*, trans. Brian Holmes (Kassel: Documenta GmbH, 1996), p. 79.

4) Kracauer, op. cit., p. 79.

5) Ibid., p. 77.

6) Christian Metz, "Aural Objects" in *Yale French Studies #60: Cinema/Sound*, trans. Georgia Gurrieri (New Haven: Yale French Studies, 1980).

7) Giorgio Agamben, "The Melancholy Angel" in *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 110.