

"Just look at them and shut up"

An Interview between Olaf Breuning and Brett Littman

BL: Olaf, when did you start to draw? Did you draw as a child?

OB: As a child, I would say I was a very normal child. I did not have any special artistic talent. My parents would say "oh, he is making very nice drawings." My sister on the other hand, she was very talented. Childhood drawing was not a big part of my life.

BL: So you would make your drawings, bring them home, your parents would put them on the refrigerator because they were proud, but not because you had any innate skills.

OB: Right. Artistically, I was just a very normal child.

BL: Early on did you have interest in art? Did you go to a lot of museums? Was that something that was part of your upbringing in Switzerland? Were your parents interested in art at all?

OB: My parents were musicians so they were more interested in music. , and I would, I guess, go to concerts than the museums. I would say that was also not a part of my life. I think it just came later, when I started to work for myself. I always had the interest, but the key point, my father actually gave me a camera when I was 17, a photo camera, and showed me how to develop in the darkroom. From that day on, I got kind of a different person, I got obsessed with it. I started to work for my projects, so I would develop all these projects from ... Then slowly, slowly, there just was no other option than to be an artist over the years.

BL: It is interesting because my father was also a photographer, and he was semi-professional. He named me after Brett Weston, after Edward Weston's son, and I grew up also with a lot of cameras in the house, and the darkroom, and we did a lot of going into the darkroom. So I would say that my background in art really starts with photography, with looking at photobooks. People like Robert Frank, you know. My Dad liked Ansel Adams to Edward Weston, to Frank, to Bruce Davidson, Wayne Michaels. So my whole frame of reference early on was photography as a form of art, which I also did a lot of photography myself. I think that really helped me to understand what it means to look at things. I think that is something that is important, which I think translates to a form of thinking about drawing, almost like a metaphor. Looking through a camera is organizing the world, sometimes drawing is doing that as well.

OB: Yes. I think the figurative moment ... Mostly photography does a lot of abstract photography in the whole 150 years of photography, but mostly it is kind of that you want to show something about the world with a camera, so you look in that world and you see the frame, and you want to tell a story. Maybe that is very close to drawings too, because in my case, my drawings, they are not abstract, so mostly they tell about

something, about facts of life. That is very close to photography. I trained my eye as a photographer what I also learned as a professional before I went to art school. I think there was a lot of this visual language that developed already there as a ... Kind of looking at something, making a clue out of it, bring it together in a two-dimensional image.

BL: Did you ever do photograms? Were you ever interested in cameraless photography?

OB: Sure, I went through all of the whole history of photography. There was a part of ... As young kid, I would try all that stuff. I was reading books about Man Ray, about all this, and was inspired. I think I ate the whole art history as a child and later. It started with black and white and slowly became color.

BL: Into color.

OB: Yes, it was like the history of photography in the small scale.

BL: Yeah, but I think in some ways, I mean for me too, I also had to start in black and white, and my father told me about what an aperture was and an f-stop, and today no one really knows about these things anymore, I do not think. I like taking pictures, but all I take are digital photos, so the idea of working with a manual camera and composing a camera and composing an image on celluloid, you know, on film, totally lost art. In a way. Maybe only in art schools are people doing that. In some ways too, it is the printing process as well which I actually thought was the most interesting part. I mean, you can have a shitty negative and still make a great photo.

OB: Yeah, it was just another sort of process. It was slower, it was more ... You had to make bigger decisions in the beginning of the process, whereas today it is all in the post-production. I think it was not what I understand, it is like we do not write with a typewriter anymore so much, or we do not ... Medias, they always change, and humans are always fast and take it to use. At the moment, it kind of does not make sense to use film any more. That is the sensibility of things, but I am also kind of happy that I had that background to actually be more ... That you first look at things and think what do you want to do and then you do it, and I think the generation of today is more likely to do it and then look after they did it, what it was.

BL: In a way, it is a very John Ruskin approach, in a way the idea of art being ... Better art being made from close observation. Drawing is of course one of these things in which you are supposed to get better the more that you observe the world, in terms of skill, hand skill. I do not know if I agree with that or not, obviously there are a lot of questions about the mechanics of drawing and skilled versus unskilled drawing, but it is interesting because I have come to drawing through the camera as well, so I have been thinking about that relationship, although I think they are two very distinct mediums. With not so much overlap except for maybe in the photogram and early photographic processes like the show that we did ocean flowers where you are basically trying to make a drawing, reproducing something in nature by using a photographic technique like a photogram.

- OB: Yeah.
- BL: Or cyanotype, or something like that. Those early practitioners were really thinking about ur-photography as a form of drawing, but a more truthful form of drawing because actually you could get scale proper, you could get a one-to-one scale.
- OB: Right, yes yes yes. That is something that photography has, that close, close relationship to drawing or painting is the photograms. I mean, that is funny. Each medium in art tries to go over the border because people, more than today in early days, they would like just focus on one medium. So someone would work his photographs, someone would work his drawing, some would be a painter. Today, it is all across, but in early days, I guess, painters tried to paint like a photograph, photographers tried to make photographs like painting. I do not miss drawing since I was never really a skilled drawer [laughs], I do not know. Maybe that was the reason that I used photography because I knew as a child I could never make a drawing of a horse or something, but the moment I had a camera, I knew the world is in front of me and I can just use it, and people understand it.
- BL: I may be making a stretch here, but maybe some of the ... I was looking at the emoji photographs, there has maybe been an implosion of drawing into your photography in maybe the last decade, where I feel in some ways even some of the group photos that you have done there is an idea of drawing that is now a mask, or something that someone is wearing. There is a kind of interplay there that maybe did not exist in the beginning, or maybe it always was there I do not know, but particularly that big emoji group photo because the emoticons are kind of drawn things, although they are computer factors. You still decided to represent the world with this idea of a drawing as part of the photograph itself.
- OB: The emojis, the first time I saw them I was so happy to see it, because the emojis are right up my alley. It is a very simple sign to explain an emotion or something, and I thought "sure, I want to work or take, at least, that into my work." I always try to take things that are important today into my work, but you are actually right. Even from my earlier photographs, when I put someone, for example, fake chest, muscular chest underneath long black hair, they are actually very simple ideas of something, but I show it in a very strong and powerful stereotypical language of making a muscle man, make this ...
- BL: Well it is almost a caricature, it is like pre-Photoshop. In a way, instead of manipulating the image once you have taken an image, you actually made, you actually constructed the image by using drawing or other types of techniques, costume, which is a way of drawing too, kind of a way of accentuating certain things that do not exist without actually manipulating it through the camera.
- OB: Through the camera, yes. What ties it together, even with the drawings I think the most, you see the most there, it is the simpleness that explains the figurative, easy way to explain something. I am not a complicated guy, I am not a complicated artist. I might be more complicated with the meaning, but the language I want to deliver is simple, and I

think most simple in the drawings for sure. The drawings are so simple, I want to make them so simple that people just look at it and just get it. A child, an old woman ...

BL: Okay, well let us pivot then to drawing. I would say the drawing practice that you are going to be documenting in this book begins about, you said 10-15 years ago? Do you feel it was a little more recently?

OB: 12 years maybe, 13 years.

BL: Okay. So your drawing practice is a very regimented practice, it is not like you are just sketching all the time, you seem to like ... Balthazar, this restaurant in SoHo is this place which you would go every morning for breakfast, you would have your sketchbook, you have a certain, what is it B2 pencil that you use, maybe a certain kind of paper or sketchbook, I do not know if you have all of these specific thing. So you needed some kind of regimentation, some system in which you could draw.

OB: Right.

BL: You also did the Queen Mary 1 and 2 books where you actually took a trip and you drew during the trip.

OB: Right.

BL: It is a little bit like ... I do not know if you have ever read Impressions of Africa, Raymond Roussel's book, where he goes to Africa in a carriage that is totally dark and he basically writes a novel about Africa without seeing it.

OB: Oh wow.

BL: So it is this idea of, could you write a novel without seeing the place? It is a little different from what you are doing, but I think in some ways this idea of restrictions. Why did you set up these parameters? Why do you think for you to begin a drawing practice that you needed those kinds of restrictions?

OB: Well, I think it was in the beginning when I did not take drawing as a medium for my art, I made all of these drawings, and I would make photographs. Actually, I look back and I made very complicated big photographs and I have scale drawing where it is really one-to-one. The drawing is practically the photograph. In order to organize the photographs I would make really detailed drawings of it, so that was where I started to make drawings. All of a sudden, I looked at the drawings, and I said, and people around me said also, that they are kind of cute, kind of good. Let us make more of those.

At that moment when I had been sitting on a table in front of blank canvas, a white canvas, the paper with a pen. I just realized "huh. I need more than just sitting there and having my brain and my pen and my paper," So I had to surround myself with a busy place like Balthazar, or like that Queen Mary boat where I could during the day be like a monk in a cabin, and at night you go out, and I go to one of the restaurants and there

are like 1,500 people in it. That kind of motivated me very much, and even still today I think I have to set my parameters to make new drawings.

BL: Right, you were saying you moved to the "country," you moved outside of New York, so now you are living in kind of a nature paradise in a way. You were saying that that does not necessarily motivated you to draw. This would be the typical kind of romantic idea of where the artist should be, that all of a sudden you would have all of this inspiration, but it is interesting that you need the vibration of human life in order to be inspired. Not necessarily directly inspired by any particular ... You are not observing people, you are not making little portraits of them while they are eating their croissants.

OB: Yes.

BL: So why that dichotomy? What do you think that means for you?

OB: I like people. I want to tell stories about humans and their tragedy of life. We all have ... I feel very often like I feel myself very ... When I watch a Woody Allen movie, I would be very close with his spirit, or Larry David. I am a very optimistic person, but at the same time I kind of realize the tragedy of life, that we all have to deal with certain things in life that are kind of sad. We all die, all these things. I do like to see the person in front of me, see people in front of me. When I see them in Balthazar and I see a waitress serving something, I might have an idea of just what that means, someone serving to someone in a French maid costume, then all of a sudden my brain starts to work. I set up a very beautiful table upstate where I live. I have a panoramic view of the Catskills, a nice table with a chair and thought that is the place to make drawings. I tried many times to sit there, and just nothing happens. I have to find that place of where I can focus on drawings.

BL: Do you think that your European background, I am thinking of two very specific things. One would be another Swiss artist. Do you think that because you were born in Europe and now you are in the States, does that give you some leverage in terms of interpreting these kinds of comic-tragic situations? I am thinking A of de Toqueville, the French writer who comes to America and writes this book which really becomes a very important book in the 19th century about ... Who really can kind of look at America from an objective standpoint from a European standpoint, and Robert Frank's Americans which of course was a book that was very controversial because his image of America was pretty desultory, it was not a particularly upbeat look at post-war America. Do you think that has any influence on the way that you see?

OB: Sure. You see this with a lot of Swiss artists, actually. A lot of Swiss artists actually have the same kind of humor for example ... [inaudible 00:16:24][crosstalk 00:16:24]

BL: In a way, yeah.

OB: I think that comes with our state is small as the country club of our planet, we grew up in a very wealthy country, we do not have any major problems besides maybe our psychological problems we could have. There are a lot of suicide in Switzerland, but

besides that we grow up in kind of a tower with a lot of windows. You can observe the whole world without any of our own problems really, and that makes kind of an artist free to just observe and sketch about what you see. I think it is different when you grow up somewhere in the poverty line in Rio de Janeiro. You might not have this freedom. You might make drawings about Favella, but it does not give you the option to observe the world in that way. Swiss people can do it because they are just not a part of anything, they are kind of in the middle of everything.

BL: Well, of course Switzerland, the idea of the totally neutral Switzerland being a sort of passage way between a lot of European cultures.

OB: Yes.

BL: French, maybe Italian, German, so you have a lot of nationalities coming together.

OB: They are also huge huge fans of Americans. These people, their American culture always is very welcome in the media, in the film, in the music, in art, so I guess I hoped when I came to the United States that I could be sharper in a way, that I could ... But then I came here and I realized that I actually felt more comfortable here than in Switzerland because that annoying Swiss perspective always kind of like thinking that the life that swiss people has is the normal life and not realizing that it is a very exclusive life. Not a lot of people can have on the planet.

BL: We all live on top of mountains, breathing beautiful fresh air, having these beautiful vistas. That is kind of what everyone has, no?

OB: Uh ...

BL: I am making a joke, I am saying it facetiously, of course. The idea of the Swiss living in the Swiss alps, having this ... It is a little bit of a fantasy world.

OB: I am not trying to say something bad about Switzerland, it is not that, but I just think sometimes I grew up in a fortunate neutral zone where I feel I can talk about a lot of things, but I think I am part of life, but nothing is something I can really ... But I do not have a knife on my throat, you know? Some artists, they have some [inaudible 00:19:09], I do not know. Maybe he makes it up, maybe it is real. But it is a reason to talk about something. What is this pressure, but as a Swiss person you just do not have that, you have a free passage to just talk about this world as it is and how you observe it.

BL: We do not have to belabor the point, but I do think in some ways it is interesting ... And I am not a big fan of this idea of nationalism, or this idea of any kind of a Swiss way of doing things, but it is interesting that the position of Switzerland is the position of an observer.

OB: Yeah.

- BL: You know, and I think that in some ways one of the great aesthetic issues is that somehow that position, both from an ethos, maybe from a kind of training standpoint, I would imagine that there is a very specific almost aesthetic frame, which is generally that Swiss people observe well.
- OB: Right. Yes, yes. I do not mean it in a bad way, it is actually fortunate that I could grow up in Switzerland. I have been reading a lot of [inaudible 00:20:20], I was a big fan when I was a teenager. I had already at that time this simple way to describe big human problems and to narrow it down to kind of a merely ironic way. I always liked his kind of language from an early point on.
- BL: So could you explain to me, and it may be impossible, but ... You are sitting at Balthazar, you have your notebook, your specific kind of pencil. How do drawings begin? What is that process like? Are you filtering through ... When you sit down are you thinking about an idea? Is it very much an unconscious experience, you just put the pencil to the paper and start making a drawing ... ?
- OB: The thing is that I fish for ideas. I look out there and I see certain things, and all of a sudden it pops one small idea in my head and I try to take that as a kind of snowball that makes the avalanche of the reaction of you know. Sometimes it happens ... Again, that is also something that is very interesting in general as an artist when you work. I am pretty sure that it has a lot to do in my case with my neuro-biological state of mind, you know? Sometimes I am just enthusiastic and stuff just floats out, and sometimes I just sit in Balthazar and try to make a drawing and make maybe a circle and nothing happens.
- BL: Nothing happens.
- OB: So I think it always has to do with the euphoric. In my case, I was never an artist who could work ... A lot of my artist friends they could work out of a painful situation, or I could always work best out of the most happy and euphoric situation, but I know that Balthazar sometimes, after like ...
- BL: 2 cups of coffee, 3 ...
- OB: Yes, the caffeine kicks in and the day starts and I am there and I have that moment of "Yes, that is interesting" Because maybe you needed the coffee, you needed the morning, you needed Balthazar, and then it kicks off. I tried to simulate that when I made drawings for a show, our friend Ron, he gave me some ... What is that focus drug? That a lot of kids have?
- BL: Ritalin?
- OB: Ritalin, yeah. He gave me some Ritalin. I tried this Ritalin, completely did not work. I was just there and I would make a drawing, and then I would look at the wall, and then I would see something wrong with the wall, and then something ... I could not really focus, because I saw it would actually be genius if I could simulate that with drugs. I

think a lot of artists do that. A lot of artists are alcoholics, or [inaudible 00:23:03], I do not know if he is still, probably not, but he used to be ...

BL: Yeah, he was probably on heroin.

OB: And I think that is for a lot of ... I understand that gives you, brings you in that world immediately, and that is why I need to build up that world with the surroundings because I do not want to be drunk in the morning.

BL: Maybe in a way it is interesting that your drawings are kind of ... I do not want to say metabolic, but if it is a kind of mixture of coffee and atmosphere, that there is a kind of interesting body position. Some people meditate for many hours, or like I worked with Morico [Murray 00:23:38] and Morico only draws in Okinawa in the morning when she can sit and she has a studio that looks out onto the water, and she makes drawings for 1 hour a day. [crosstalk 00:23:48] When she is in Okinawa. That is it, she does not make drawings anywhere else.

OB: That is so off. When you make, especially when you make drawings like me where it is really about simple things, you can not make 20 drawings of them a day. I am making 20 drawings in a few weeks. It sounds so stupid or so simple, but the ideas, they have to be just there and then ... I have tons of notebooks with probably bad ideas in it, and then a few of them I ...

BL: I am glad you mentioned that. I did not want to ask you if you sit down and you are drawing ... Let us say that you are at Balthazar. You might make, you are saying, one or two drawings in that section in that day. They are in your notebook. So you go back, and do you edit? Obviously you are editing out, and then do you take another piece of paper, are you re-drawing those? The ones that seem successful to you you then elaborate on a larger piece of paper, an 8.5x11, or A4 or whatever it is.

OB: A4, always A4. That is the thing. I would go through the book, I would see a good drawing, and then I would sit down and then have to like make the drawing. Maybe it takes 2 or 3 times to make it really perfect, because I can not use an eraser or something, so it has to be practically one line. Sometimes I need a few, sometimes it goes right away.

BL: Your finished drawings that are in the catalogue are basically copies of the quicker sketches that you are doing when you are sitting at Balthazar.

OB: Right.

BL: You may have to make several iterations of those drawings until you feel that it is perfect in a way that you are ready to present that.

OB: Right. Then when they are perfect I scan it, put it into the computer, and then they are accepted into my family of drawings. From then on, like I said, sometimes they get printed on t-shirts or whatever. Then the life starts at the moment we make them big,

you know, for shows we draw them very big as a unique piece because then it kind of ... It takes that moment that it is part. I have a lot of drawings that did not make it, that are just there, and they did not make it through the selection, so it is actually a longer process ... But also, I am never in a rush with that process, it is always beautiful with the drawings. It is not something where I say I have to make 20 drawings tomorrow. It is kind of an ongoing ...

BL: What is interesting to me is that aesthetically your drawings present themselves as immediate. I do not think that anyone would really understand that process of sketchbook ... The kind of restriction, the sketchbook, maybe now that 1 drawing in the sketchbook. 3 times you have to draw that in another place, and now you have scanned it in and you have accepted it into your world of drawings, but it is a much more ... I do not want to say refined, but it is something that now has gone through a couple of processes.

OB: Sure, yes, yes.

BL: The beauty of your drawings is that they look like you just simply ... That you just ripped a page out of your sketchbook and you scanned it. Do you like playing with that kind of ... It is a little bit of a secret dichotomy, because I am not sure that people really would view that. I think that again really the aesthetics of your drawings are that simplicity, that kind of quick-natured sketch. This is why my imagination would be that you can sit down and make a beautiful, perfectly rendered in your style drawing at any given time, but that is probably not the way that you work at all.

OB: Would I have now an idea, I could probably with a few tries I could do it, but it does not matter. Even after it goes through a few screening process, after a few ... Like the notebook, the paper. Even then, it is like a 1 minute drawing. It goes fast. It is not that I spend ... It is still ...

BL: You are not belaboring over it.

OB: Right.

BL: It is fast.

OB: It still remains as a fast drawing, but I just feel from the idea to the finished drawing until it is really right, it is very rare that I can just do it in a notebook and it is then ... Sometimes it happens that the drawing in the notebook is better, and then I try to do the other one exactly like the one in the notebook, put it on the window and try to like ...

BL: Trace it.

OB: Trace it and ... But it still remains a quick drawing, but I wish I could be so talented that I could just have blank pages and be like next next next, but obviously ... But I do like that process too, because you know, my notebooks are for me like ... I am like a squirrel who

collects nuts for the winter. I collect all of my ideas in the notebooks. Not only drawings, also other ideas, and sometimes I go through what I have and put a post-it in it when I like a drawing. Put it aside, and then I just spend a day and make these drawings and it is just ... I think for me, I need these different times to do things. The different process. The process does not stop, because now I make 12 big ones at home, so that is another process to make them big, you know on big paper.

BL: And then maybe they become wall drawings, and then they become sculpture or something, wooden sculpture or something.

OB: That is a kind of ... All starts as the same idea in the notebook. And sure, I do keep my notebooks because it is nice. I always buy them [inaudible 00:29:30], always the same black notebook, and I guess that might be nice to maybe in 20 years, 30 years make a show just with the notebooks.

BL: That is actually what I was going to ask you. Have you ever shown your notebooks? Have you ever actually published photos of some of the sketchier, kind of first iterations of the drawings?

OB: No, not so far.

BL: Not so far. And do you go back? How far back in your notebooks would you go? Sometimes when you are searching for ideas would go back to high school notebooks, to a notebook from the first time when you started to draw?

OB: Very far. I try as an artist to touch different ideas, but I do not like to retouch an idea that I have already had. That is why it gets very difficult for me. I am now 46, I have worked 20 years. It gets more and more difficult to produce new works because I always want to do something that I have never done before, and I could open just a drawer take an idea out, and do it, but especially the drawings ... When I once made a drawing of like a guy standing on a skyscraper, with the other side the people with the net who want to catch him, but he jumps out the other side. Once I had that idea I could not make a similar drawing with the same idea because this is an idea that I have had already and it is like done. I seek for new ideas, for new grounds to have thought about life, about things. That is why I go sometimes really far back and see ...

BL: So you kind of cancel that idea out?

OB: In a way, yeah.

BL: It is interesting. In a way your drawings are both ... A term I would use would be projective, meaning that you start with an idea, and then that idea can then be run out in other medium. You say that drawing is very foundational to everything you do, but at the same time drawing is a method of you cancelling out ideas in your head in the sense of bringing them to the physical world, but then not repeating them. So it is not like you are a person who is going to go back and then look at the drawing of the guy jumping off

the wrong side of the building, and look at that and see that from 25 different angles. The idea is there. It is done, and you can not really go back.

OB: Right, but that is maybe a big difference that a lot of my art is very particularist, I take a long long time with this one idea that I am very interested in, and I think that is beautiful, to be really focusing on something. I think I am very short focused, not in general, but on ideas. I try to kind of [inaudible 00:32:07]. I know I have to make something with emojis, they are so important today, so ... But that is done, I will never do another work with emojis. It is like this is definitely something you could describe my work from outside, that is why my work is also so different medias, so different things. Sure, things come back like sexuality, like death, violence. Stuff like that comes always back, and I have a lot of drawings that would have that as a part of them, but that is also a bigger issue, you know?

BL: Right. It is interesting because again, just in terms of the history of drawing as a medium, you can think of all of those Michelangelo studies of hands, or the deluge drawings where he is drawing water for 25 years because he wants to ...

OB: Catch.

BL: Yeah, capture the essence of something. This is what drawing ... A lot of people invest drawing with that poetics of the hand of the artist understanding the soul of the artist understanding the thing in and of itself through the medium of drawing, but in a way your drawings are an engine for creativity for your constant maneuvering to the next thing. So it is like I just see them as just like an X. You draw it, and then you put an X through it not because you are cancelling it, you may explore it in other ways, but then the idea is set, and you can not have that same idea again.

OB: I cannot have the same idea. And also I never focus on ... Lately I have kind of a language in my drawings, luckily I have a language in my whole work, but I would have to go to a shrink to explain why that is. But a lot of other people using drawing, they really care about how ... That is more a deeper conversation with the medium of drawing, for me the medium drawing is just a tool. It is like a way to explain myself very simple.

BL: Well let us go back to something that you said. I was going to ask you, do you feel that if you were to do an audit of your drawings, and you have already said that there do seem to be specific themes ... I think in the analysis of your drawings for me, and from looking at now the books Queen Mary 1 and 2 and the drawings that you sent to me for this catalogue ... You generally are looking at universal human conditions. Sex, violence, war, love, maybe art in ... Not in a way of aesthetic theory, but just art as a kind of signifier. Why for you would drawing be the best way to explore those deeper philosophical ideas? For many artists they would want to paint, or they would maybe use a photograph to deal with those kinds of ideas. For you, drawing seems to be a kind of a way to organize thematics.

OB: Yes. But I mean, I also do it with all the other mediums, especially films, photographs. That is probably the same, I try to explain something about the human condition very

simply with drawings, maybe that way is the most kind of ... I look so forward to that book, and I have 220 drawings that I can go through it. The fast version of going through that catalogue of thinking, of my own library in my head what I think about that world, and I think that would be reflected probably in that drawing book in itself. I would not need all my other mediums to like speak of these things.

The other thing, I guess, for example a drawing where the drunk shoots a person, the person shoots another person who tries to kill a fly. Confront the daily with the most violent story, you always try to use your intellect and your morality to explain certain things to explain certain things and you just can not. And it is just the same thing, you are just perplexed and you think "Why? Why did someone take an ax and went to a train and just killed people? Why? For what? Why" You can analyze it, but there is not so much to analyze. When I see that drawing for me, it kind of for myself just speaks about the human condition, that we will probably stay and always be there. And for me, I think, with the drawing, I have the feeling that I kind of ... Not that I explain anything, it is difficult to say. I do not explain nothing, but I get the feeling that I kind of put an anchor down, you know? For myself, I kind of ...

BL: It is funny, because I was once talking to Paul Oster, and there is a poet that we both like, an Egyptian-born, but ended up in Paris named Edmund Jabez[00:37:09], and Jabez wrote a lot of ... And Paul did a lot of interview with him which were really quite fantastic, he said one day they were walking in Paris and Edmund said "Clarity is the most radical thing you can achieve." I do not know why, but for some reason that has really stuck with me. When I started to write about art I would write in this totally ridiculous, kind of German philosophical way. No one could understand anything that I was saying.

I was thinking a lot in relationship looking at your drawings, clarity is a radical, political position to take when you are clear. I think your drawings are clear. There is not much ... You look at it, you see the bus with the kids dangling on the edge of the cliff ... It sits on that fulcrum of the binary of life and death. So you understand it and ... I do not think there could be anyone who could see that drawing who would not understand what the issue is, what the duality and the binary is that you are looking at.

OB: More so than other medias. When I make a photograph it is the same thing, when you work with a medium like photographs, you have colors, you have real people, you have so many things that you have to care about in your brain to process the information. The drawing is just so simple. It is very close to writing, too. Reading a book. You just imagine the story about those poor kids sitting on that bus, dangling on that cliff, and I think that is sometimes stronger for sure than explaining it more elaborate. That reduction is something I think I do. But then again, I have very elaborate movies where it just on top of aesthetical pain in your eye, and then these kind of ... I like that in my own body of work I have the drawings as ... I am the monk, and with all of the things I am kind of the maniac and I do other things.

BL: I would say that the wooden sculptures seem to share ... Although I think different ideation in terms of what the drawings are, but that kind of level of simplicity. When I first started following your work, your work seemed about an excessive accumulation,

that you were layering one thing on top of the other on top of the other to the breaking point of even whether it was watchable. In the Home 123 videos and some of the other works that I had seen early on. But then there is this other side, again this binary in your own way of thinking, because your photographs also tend to be accumulative. I would view them in that way. That is kind of a catch-all for a lot of cultural information. The drawings and the simple wooden sculptures seem to be that reductive aspect. There is something about them that is a kind of simplicity.

OB: Simplicity, yeah.

BL: A stripped away-ness that is quite interesting. I do not know if you see this in the same way that maybe film and photography for you are places where you can layer more things, maybe because they are better at doing that?

OB: Yes, you are completely right that by doing that, but then when I make the book now for example, like the Queen Mary book, it is actually just the same thing. It is one product that has so many things in it.

BL: So many layers.

OB: So many layers as a book or something, when I make a drawing show, the simple drawings are, like 20, 30 all of a sudden it becomes this ... I have right now at the moment the retrospective in Dusseldorf, and [inaudible 00:40:43], and the original, I show the originals of the drawings, maybe 50 or 60 in rows, and that is really cool. It goes in this row and it is really like this one idea after the other, it layers it there too, but I think that is something that I have always liked. You are completely right. In my art in general, I like to layer a lot of stuff together, put a lot of stuff together and make a mix, and then a kind of ... Yeah. That just makes me very comfortable as an artist, but it is very difficult to explain what that really means.

BL: Yeah. I do not want to make a bad metaphor, but maybe in a way the film and the photography could be like music sampling. A lot of different samples like a hip hop song, but the drawings might be one beat. It is a kind of, instead of trying to build up this whole larger narrative, it is just that simple attack in 4/4 timing. It is just something that exists in that way. Do you think that your drawings are political? Do you view yourself as an artist ... I mean, they are diuristic, so they become political because of the times that we live in, but do you feel that politics ... ? I mean are you trying to transform people's way of thinking, or do you just want to present?

OB: That is always the question of an artist, what an artist really has as a mission. We always would think as an artist. I mean, in the early days it was more extreme, an artist had a feeling that we had to educate people, that we have to talk about things, but today it is just so crazy. [inaudible 00:42:25] overall for me, it kind of does not matter anymore. There is so much around, who really gives a shit today? Who gives a shit who does what? It is, in a Biblical term, Babylon. I am not religious, do not worry. But it is kind of like this Babylonian language today. It seems to be ... I think the last thing I would want to do is to educate people with my art.

But, I would be political, I would say, for a campaign someone might say I want you to make a big drawing with that big drawing with the truck and with someone shooting, I would definitely be happy to support that, because I do think that my work is in a way political, because again it speaks about very simple human conditions, and politics are nothing more than that too. It is like the Trump situation with Hillary. That is kind of ... I probably could narrow it down to a drawing in a way. But, like I said, art is for me my own way to go through life. It is a kind of a tool I try to have, and I think without it I would have more difficulties. I think with it for me is the way to go. But it is really for me in a way.

BL: Is there a drawing that you have seen in your lifetime that you wish that you drew? Something where you thought [snaps] this is something that I am trying to do, or I can not do that, or something that expressed something so simple that ...

OB: Good. I see a lot of painters. I try to paint, but I can not paint. I am often jealous when I see painters and I look at the painting and I say "oh my God, I wish I could do that but I can not." For example, this one the [inaudible 00:44:14], I mean, that has ... This face always fascinated me, the simpleness of it, but that is not really accurate like the original, but I kind of ... That is why I took that a lot in my work, I felt these lines, but again, my background is really not ... Because, my background could be drawing, you probably know all of the Japanese ways to make the, how do you call it, the wave drawings that they made ...

BL: With Tsubi ink, or ... ?

OB: There is a long history of drawing, and I probably do not know so much because drawing is for me still kind of a new medium too. I use it since maybe 10 years, and ... In other words, I am maybe a little bit self-closed, personal. It is very me and the world, it is never really like "What is going on, I have to know, read all of these books to understand where I should go with drawing."

BL: There was an interview that you did with Jonathan Titi-Niell, and you know, Jonathan described your aesthetic as art equals life. I thought that was a good way of looking at things, and in some ways I think that the powerful thing about your drawings is that you kind of accumulate them over time, and now there are 220 or whatever number there is in your family of drawings that you feel comfortable with, and that you have kind of worked through your process ... That in many ways we can see probably your own psychological states, where things were, maybe happiness, sadness, annoyance. So they become this kind of interesting diaristic record of life.

OB: Of life, yeah.

BL: Beyond that, I do not know. Sure there are specific things. I might point to some drawings and say "Oh, I imagine I can bet what inspired that." There are somethings where the references seem to be a little broader to current events and you know ...

OB: Right, yes.

BL: They are almost biometric in the sense of ... The drawings are like if we put you to an EKG machine or some kind of machine that was registering emotional state. It is kind of funny in a way.

OB: Sure, that is ... But again, also like drawings like my other art, I mean it is always like I have my idea, but it is very personal and private that I do not necessarily have to share with anyone, because I make a visual product that should speak for itself, and then the stories that people can read into it that is often so interesting that they think of stuff that I would never have thought about.

In that moment, the artwork also fills itself with this new content, with this new thing, and all of the works like that. I have photographs from like 15 years ago that are so enriched with other people's stories in my head that it is really interesting. They are like batteries that load up more and more over time. Drawings, maybe at the same time, people have tattoos of my drawings, that is really really great, I feel the ... I look very forward to the afterlife of my drawings. Not afterlife as in dead, but what happens now if they are big in frames, or on t-shirts or political campaigns, that is something I ... Makes me, I guess, will make me very happy besides the fact that it makes me very happy to do it.

BL: It is funny, I wanted to show you the work of an artist, I do not know if you would know him, Les Levine [inaudible 00:48:14]? Les made these hand drawn signs in the '80s and '90s and then they turned into billboards which were a lot in Germany, also maybe in Austria. I have always kind of appreciated the simplicity of his using the kind of language of graphic design, and in a way of advertising to create these kinds of slogans like "Consume or Perish." I think the issue for him was that these were never photographs, they were always starting with drawings.

OB: Yes, see, but that was also kind of still the '80s, still the art had the mission like we want to do something else to change the world in a way, but today, it is kind of like, that is why we are [inaudible 00:49:03] in a small chamber and do it for themselves, because I feel even when I do it it is a kind of like ... If I make a billboard somewhere, who really cares? Who would ... You know how many ... ? He was probably one of the few people who did it, but meanwhile whole art institutions make shows, billboards, and it is already kind of ... This moment is a kind of, like over and you use other mediums like Instagram that is also a way to be political, do anything, because no one cares again. I think that is one of the big dilemmas today, and for me myself, in that way it at the moment does not matter because I am with myself, but the option to do it in another way later is still there. I can still ... You know what I mean a little bit.

BL: Yeah, I understand. The problem is that that kind of style of working has been almost institutionalized. There is really nothing more to really be said. There are surely many billboard projects, the high line billboard projects, I never understand them because I never see them in the same way. They are not surprising anymore. We have had a whole generation of billboard art, so that is what they are.

OB: Or think about t-shirts, the history of t-shirts, like in the '70s with a slogan or something. That was something you took to the streets, you could really protest with a t-shirt.

Today, just look at the t-shirts you can order online, and so you can practically write on it what you wish. People wear that thing, and it is just an overflow of information in general that the artist has to ... For myself, I often wonder what is my role as an artist besides to be an egomaniac who does it because I need to do it, you know? But again, with these drawings, I can say that I am really really happy when they reach out, when they come on t-shirts and back because it is still something that makes me at the end of the day happy that it reaches an audience that I think responds to it.

BL: Okay, so there are two last questions before we complete the interview that I want to go into, and we will see how much time we want to spend on them, but you mention this idea of communication. The drawings are really for you, you do not view ... An audience exists for your work, but you view yourself a little bit outside of the art world, so you are not making these to sell in galleries, you are not really ... You are interested in what they mean as part of your own process, your own investigation as an artist.

OB: But I am not that selfish, I am very happy when one sells a drawing. I have to pay my rent.

BL: Of course, obviously there is an element of that, there is the reality of being an artist, you do have to make a living from that. I am not saying that you have totally divorced yourself making unsellable work, but my point is that I do not think the genesis of these drawings was necessarily to like "Well, I can support my crazier projects by making a bunch of drawings, and I can sell those." Or maybe it was. Maybe it can be a Christo Jean-Claude idea, I've got all this stuff I want to do, so maybe I will make these drawings. But the point that I really wanted to make, though, was about communication. A lot of people talk about humor in your work, and a lot of people look at that both in a simple and in a more complex way. We talked a little bit about how humor operates, and I think that humor in your work is a very complex issue, because I think it is tied up with slapstick and Vaudeville, and maybe collapsing taboos and approaching stereotypes. I think that the drawings are very funny, but you are not Trigly, there is a difference between your work and Trigly's work.

OB: I think so too.

BL: You are also not Dan Petrovik. Dan's work has a different, more political edge because he is coming out of maybe being an illustrator and a political milieu that you are not, an Eastern European milieu that you do not have.

OB: Yes.

BL: But I do think that humor is one of your methods of communication, and I guess that I am interested in this idea of a general theory of the communication of images, because you seem to be saying that one of the things that makes you happy is seeing your images on bags and t-shirts because that means the message is out in the world.

OB: Actually, to take it back, it leaves me kind of emotionless to see it on a t-shirt or a bag. I think often I see ... As an artist I probably could exist, I would be rich, I have enough

money, I could easily build a wall around my property and do art, just do art, and do not really care so much about ... Maybe also I got tired after 20 years of working as a professional artist of shows, of this whole meshing of things, you get pulled in as an artist and then they decide from outside whether you are a successful artist or not. If your things are on auction or not. Who really gives a shit?

I want to produce art, and often you get this [inaudible 00:54:32] from the outside world to really do it, and I feel the closer I get to these drawings, the more I want to like I said before, make my own library and build my own language where I really feel myself, my existence, explain certain things. Not why I am here, but while I am here, I can kind of explain myself, and this is definitely more important than the other thing ... Simple or universal language. The problem is I want to speak about violence, speak about all the big themes. The universal language is for me that the simplest way to ... huh. I like to use stereotypical and powerful languages and themes, and try to make it with a very powerful, simple language. That for me is two equals. The balance is on the same level with a film or with photographs.

BL: Keep on going.

OB: Maybe just, it is not something so much to talk about, it is just kind of like look at it and shut up. Not shut up, think about it. When I make confusing products like films, there is just so much stuff that I want to put into the pool, but the drawings, they stay so simple, and the brain can focus on really one thing, and that is a universal understanding about the universal theme. I do not know if that elevates it to somewhere, or you learn anything but you just stop a second and think "What does that mean, those poor kids?"

BL: That seems to be the place where drawing begins and maybe where drawing ends? Maybe you could kill drawing and you could be the last one to make drawings?

OB: That is the thing, I do not know. For me it is really, I really like honesty and to be real in a way, and often those stupid hip hoppers, they sing about how it will be real, but I feel I want to be real. I want to be straightforward and honest. I feel that this is a very straight way for me to make a product. Sure I could build it in cave in my studio room, I could put it on cave. I could do that too, but with drawings, I would ask myself why, for what? It has to stay that simple thing. The frame does elevate it to a new level of importance, for sure. It has something, you look at it and you take it a little more serious than when you have it on a small paper.