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THIS ARTIST'S INSTAGRAM IS BRINGING A SMILE TO YOUR FOOD'S FACE

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Scrolling through our social feeds, it's clear that certain subjects consistently attract attention. But mixed in with the braggadocious vacation shots, gratuitous selfies, tired memes and cat videos, an image of a smirking mustard bottle stands out.

Artist Olaf Breuning's Instagram account takes food out of a familiar cooking or dining setting and challenges viewers to stretch their idea of what food art can be. He'll post an eggshell cracking a smile or a sugar snap pea strategically placed on his cat's backside one week, and candy eyes on his pregnant wife's stomach the next. But this isn't just a collection of funny faces on onions and banana peels. The Schaffhausen-born, Zurich-trained artist is using social media as an artistic experiment.

Breuning describes social media as just one "garden" that he maintains alongside his other practices of drawing, painting, video and sculpture. Not-so-hidden faces have long been a theme in his work, and they've proved a fruitful strategy on Instagram since he started posting them in 2013. Yet, talking with Breuning, I get the impression he's messing with me. Over breakfast, he tells me that museum exhibits incorporating interactivity are "so annoying," and then posts on Instagram the next afternoon.

Cultural satire has driven Breuning's work since the early '90s. First there was a series of films called *Home* that follows an ignorant tourist through incendiary situations. Next came *The Art Freaks*, a photography collection of naked bodies Breuning had painted in the style of masterpieces. And then came a 35-foot aluminum cloud sculpture installed with cranes and cherry pickers. There was also the time he filled a pool with plastic flowers and stress release balls shaped like breasts.

To fully appreciate Breuning's work, "you have to know that the Swiss sense of humor tends to be more wacky and absurd and the jokes more subtle and less vicious," writes Alain Bieber in the introduction to *Olaf Breuning (2016)*, a hardcover collection of photo-collages, sculptures, paintings and comics. Breuning's accounts provide a fun peek into the art world by someone who doesn't take himself too seriously.

The serious art world clearly appreciates that wit. Breuning has shown at Art Basel in Switzerland and Miami consistently since 1999. This year, his collection of sketches — aptly titled *Random Thoughts About Life* — will be on display Art Basel Switzerland, which he describes as "the model for all other art fairs."

His personified airplanes, buildings and wine bottles will likely capture attention as attendees wander through the barrage of exhibits, much like Breuning's food faces stand out in a crowded social feed.

Art Basel isn't the only reason he returns home. "Whenever I have a chance, I go back" whether for shows — including a photography exhibit in conjunction with hometown friend and fellow multimedia artist Yves Netzhammer at Galerie Mera last summer — or familial visits, Breuning says. Hopefully, he'll post some 'grams using Swiss staples like chocolate and cheese when he's back next.

Breuning is not the first person to play with their food for an online audience. There's Lauren Purnell (@culinary_canvas), who makes edible characters and scenes on a plain white plate; Gretchen Röehrs (@groehrs), who designs ingredient ensembles over fashion sketches; and Danielle Evans (@foodtypography), who animates words using food.

What Breuning's 67,000 followers may not realize — and what sets him apart — is that he's subtly deriding today's information overload with his own account. Every like he receives further validates his experiment, proving that social media success boils down to a formula.

"My ambitions have been very low from the beginning. I just post when I see something," he says. "The increase in followers motivated me to make more, but it has not become a pressure to produce." Accounts like his stretch the definition of what contemporary art is.

Even if it doesn't have the highest number of followers or likes, Breuning's account has undoubtedly made an impact on the international circuit. Australia's National Gallery of Victoria featured a selection of his food faces in its triennial, in 2017. The Public Art Fund, a nonprofit opened in 1977 that helps bring contemporary art to public spaces in New York City, followed suit by featuring the re-creation of some of his funniest posts at its 2019 spring benefit. Publishers Silent Sound and VfmK are working with the artist on a book containing 500 of his found face photos. His account has also led to commercial opportunities with brands like Gucci and Apple.

Instagram isn't a surefire platform for everyone, though. "It's a muscle you have to develop," says Mark Rosen, associate director of marketing at digital marketplace Artsy. Followed by just under 43,000 fans of his own at @markatthemuseum, Rosen also points out that social media is complementary to certain artists' practices and not complementary to others'. For Breuning, we'd say it's the former.