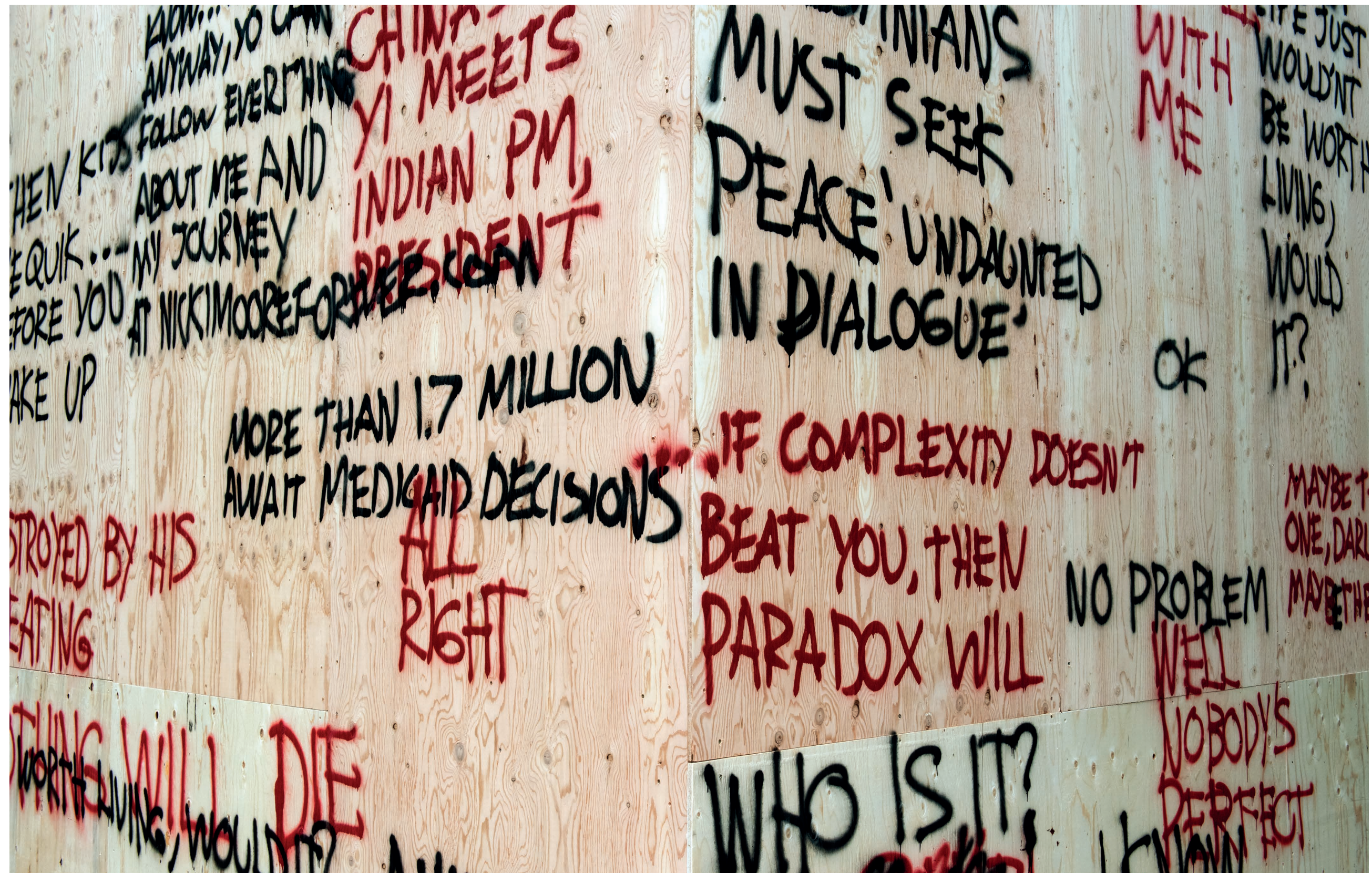


art

stefan brüggemann

INTERVIEW BY OLIVIER ZAHM AND JÉRÔME SANS
PORTRAIT BY FABIOLA QUIROZ

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN, *HEADLINES AND LAST LINES IN THE MOVIES (PROTEST)*, INSTALLATION VIEW AT THE CONTEMPORARY ART GALLERY, VANCOUVER, CANADA, 2014, COPYRIGHT STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN, PHOTO SITE PHOTOGRAPHY



london-based mexican artist stefan brüggemann revisits the fading history of minimalist and conceptual art through a street

filter, combining muralism, graffiti, protest, and a cynical post-marxist critique of capitalism

JÉRÔME SANS — How would you define your work? Conceptual, working with language, or maybe political?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — If I had to put a label on it, I would say conceptual pop or pop minimalism. Obviously, I'm influenced by the conceptual strategies of the 1960s and '70s, but in my case, it's different because I'm not a Marxist — I'm a capitalist. I like to play the game of the capitalist structure that we play today. I really like the idea of how language resonates very fast in this society. Also, conceptual pop and pop minimalism don't make sense, so I like that.

OLIVIER ZAHM — I find your answer provocative. Are you saying that capitalism is the structure of language today? The universal language? Is that the only language when we place this question in the context of art as a market, artwork as the ultimate merchandise? STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — We live in the century of the self, the “me generation” or “self generation.” Capitalism is a structure because you always want to be different from the person next to you. It's always about creating difference and new value.

OLIVIER ZAHM — This difference is a source of value? STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Yes. Not necessarily financial, but ideological. There's not an ideology that we all believe in the same way. We all believe differently. That's the eternal race, and that's how I feel: part of a generation that is lost in the self.

OLIVIER ZAHM — This idea that art equals money or the art market equals capitalism — is that why you call yourself a capitalist? STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Yes, I have a text piece that says, “Thoughts are products.” Even poetry becomes a product. The poetic can become a solid or a currency.

JÉRÔME SANS — Everything in the art market is a currency. STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — In this part of the world, yes.

JÉRÔME SANS — As a Mexican artist, how has your native

country and its culture influenced your artistic practice?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — It has influenced me in different ways. In my way of escaping it, and of having certain attachments and taking those attachments into another universal world. I grew up during a specific political moment in Mexico, when they were doing something called the TLC [Tratado de Libre Comercio (North American Free Trade Agreement)] between Canada, Mexico, and the US. This idea of being universal — and globalization and being part of a global market — was important for me. As a Mexican, I would never want to export Mexico as something exotic, but more as something that is part of globalization, with a specific identity.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Is Mexico both poetic and political?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Yeah, for sure. Mexico is the concept of the Baroque, of contrasts, shadows, and excess. If you walk in the street, you can see different types of architecture in one building. Politically speaking, there's a big difference between one person and another, different realities, but all mixed in the same square meter. It's unique. Mexico is not homogeneous at all, but very mixed and contradictory. It has a lot of tension. It's black and white, the contrast with the colors is very vibrant, the noise, the vegetation blends with concrete. Two things are fighting all the time. You're in a city that's very high, in the middle of a lake. It has volcanoes around it. It's very intense. But it works. When you try to imagine how that city can function, you can't explain it, where the water goes... The subway overpass collapsed — those types of things just happen here. André Breton said that the most Surrealist city in the world was Mexico City, with its poetry of Surrealism and contradiction.

OLIVIER ZAHM — You quickly have to forget about rationalism in Mexico and accept something, let's say, magical, surreal, or enigmatic — that not everything can be explained.



STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Yeah. It's also a place that looks peaceful but that has a lot of earthquakes. It's always unpredictable. It has that element of danger that I both like and try to escape. You're always on the edge. It's not like being in a war zone — everything looks safe and harmonious — but it's one of the most violent places in the world.

JÉRÔME SANS — I've never seen so many bulletproof cars as when I was in Mexico. STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Exactly, but I kind of like that. All the great nightclubs have to have an element of danger. A place where everything's safe is boring. You have to have this unpredictability all the time. New York in the '80s: it had that edge. Then it became something different... It's a very fine line.

JÉRÔME SANS — Why did you decide to leave Mexico and its edge?

OLIVIER ZAHM — When you invited me to your show in 1999 at the Programa [Art Center], you were already an emerging artist, with a beautiful house in Condesa. The artistic context was stimulating. You were a bit

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN, 19/JAN/2021 AMERICAN CARNAGE, 2021, SPRAY PAINT AND GOLD LEAF ON CANVAS, 68 7/8 X 57 1/8 INCHES, COURTESY OF HAUSER & WIRTH GALLERY

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN, 15/JAN/2021 WASHINGTON D.C. ON ALERT, 2021, SPRAY PAINT AND GOLD LEAF ON CANVAS, 68 7/8 X 53 1/8 INCHES, COURTESY OF HAUSER & WIRTH GALLERY

younger than the '90s generation, but it was a very exciting emerging scene in Mexico in the late '90s. Why did you run away? STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Artists from this generation were rich kids who studied outside of Mexico and then just imported some lifestyle to the city. It was more challenging to take my own discourse outside. It's like if you want to play soccer in the Champions League and not for your local team.

OLIVIER ZAHM — It wasn't a rejection of Mexican culture. It was about playing a bigger game?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Exactly. Not a rejection of Mexican culture at all, but this idea of playing in the big leagues being a bigger challenge. When you're local and you become exotic, you're in a safe zone. I already controlled that edge — I needed a new danger zone, to be more vulnerable. Going away was like starting from zero or taking it further. It made it exciting.

JÉRÔME SANS — But you left for London, which is not a very dangerous city.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Yes, but in London, I was nobody. I sold my car, and I went there.

JÉRÔME SANS — Was it a choice between New York or London? STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Yes. I liked London because I was also very influenced by all the punk music that I listened to when I was younger. London, for me, was more about music, politics, and fashion than art.

JÉRÔME SANS — It has the smell of an edge — you can smell the underground, somehow. STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Yes. At one point, I got to hang out with one of my heroes, Malcolm McLaren, who was my mentor. It was like doing a PhD. It was a way of entering another world that Mexico was not able to offer me. What I have always found interesting about London is that it's a big amplifier of anything. It was like switching on to the best sound equipment. That was an attraction. But always thinking of the duality. It's not like leaving something and never coming back. In the world we live in, we're a collage, and you need to be a little bit everywhere. That's what constructs a more interesting individual.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Regarding your artwork, do you think that conceptual art is still valid today? It was huge in the beginning of the '90s, and now there's a sort of blur. It seems to have been forgotten, not only by institutions but also by collectors, galleries. For our generation, it was the essence or ground zero for art.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — I like to be a misfit and not follow trends. That puts you in an uncomfortable place because I'm not blaming or judging. My work is throwing out existential questions: how would we handle this? Coming back to the question of conceptual art, it's natural that it's no longer a trend because the moment it became a style, it was a failure — because it was about the anti-form, the anti-style, the anti-object.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Yes, it became an object or a product.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — And a style. But, for me, what was interesting is that they pushed certain limits about what you can do in art, and I think that's always important. You can always come back to painting, and that's okay, but you can also get out of it. Art can be anything. To have that thing that even a thought is an artwork — it's a great liberation.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Would you say that, in the context of art constantly questioning identity and being part of identity politics, post-conceptual art is a way to transcend identity, a way for you to be universal, if that's possible? STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Totally. The idea of being universal and invisible at the same time is quite a challenge. How to make the self disappear is also a challenge. Maybe it will never happen. But this idea of trying to be invisible is poetic. It can also be very romantic to disappear. It's important to really question the existence of things.

JÉRÔME SANS — Your work is more inclusive than exclusive. Why do you use only English and no Spanish?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Because if not, we wouldn't be talking together. The dominant capitalist language is English, unfortunately or fortunately. I'm neither for or against. When I was young, it was the language that would open the world for you. If you wanted to do anything in the world, first you needed to speak English. All the music I heard, when I was young, was in English, and I like this concept of laconism in language. Something laconic has a lot of meaning in a few words. English has that: when you see advertisements, music, messages, they follow through faster. In my case, it was that and also a choice.

OLIVIER ZAHM — English for someone like you, who works with language, is a very visual language.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Yes. And also the sound, how it resonates. Every language has its own virtues, but I also think English has been used very effectively in advertising.

JÉRÔME SANS – English is the vocabulary for the global economy – all the markets are in English.

OLIVIER ZAHM – But there’s no conceptual art or post-conceptual art rooted in Mexico, right?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – Luis Barragán is a conceptual artist. It’s very conceptual, the way he translates all his ideas. The architecture is just the final product, the final construction, the idea of the space. The empty spaces, the voids, are more important than the actual space, and that’s where it becomes very poetic also.

JÉRÔME SANS – Your last exhibition, entitled “Hyper-Conscious,” was a duo show with On Kawara at the Maruani Mercier Gallery in Brussels. Kawara, who died in 2004, is known for his ritualistic autobiographical works on temporality, which act almost as “time capsules.” Why does his work interest you and resonate with your own work?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – He was one of the first conceptual artists whose work interested me. It really captured my attention that you could just write the date of the painting you painted that day. It really gave me the keys to understand another way of entering conceptual art and the possibilities. And the great coincidence that we both went to the same art school – it’s a very traditional academy.

JÉRÔME SANS – You both attended the Antigua Academia de San Carlos in Mexico, but at different times?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – On Kawara studied there because his father was the CEO of a company who came to work in Mexico and brought all his family over. He studied in the late ’50s until ’61, then he came back again later from New York. At one point, he was living between Mexico and New York. He started all his conceptual work in Mexico. He was writing the names of people he met that day on a typewriter. He was also writing on a map all the walks he did from one point to another. He came up with that idea, being in a country where the narrative was something different. Josef

Albers also produced for the first time his famous *Homage to the Square* painting (three squares, one inside the other) in Mexico, when he went to see the pyramids. This kind of minimalism – I don’t know how it affects certain artists like Barragán, Josef Albers, On Kawara, and myself. You wouldn’t expect this to come out of Mexico City or Mexico, the country.

JÉRÔME SANS – With On Kawara, you seem to share a different way of approaching time.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – Yes. On Kawara was trying to register time in a horizontal line – how we’re used to understanding time, that it’s in a calendar, and it’s progressive. We’re going so fast in time that time is now fractured, and it’s more of a rhizomatic element. It’s lost in fragments, and it’s so fast that it’s not a horizontal line anymore, but maybe a vertical line. I like to think of how to break that line of time, which we are thinking of always as progressive. But time now is so fast that you lose time in thinking of it as a horizontal line. My generation, we’re pushing the limits more and more every day. It’s like pressing the accelerator to see how fast we can go until we break. We’re breaking the speed limit.

OLIVIER ZAHM – Since the conquistador, since the discovery, capitalism has used and exploited all the surfaces on this planet. We are destroying the Amazon. We will eventually destroy everything, and sooner or later we will be at the end of our natural resources. The next limit is not space but time.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – Completely. Poetry, art, and music break that line. They’re able to take you into different areas. It’s like dreaming: you enter another zone.

OLIVIER ZAHM – That could be, in an abstract way, a direction for a different economic model or a different kind of capitalism. When you see how much we need drugs now to escape this space, but also time...

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – And anxiety. This feeling is the biggest disease: the anxiety that time produces.

OLIVIER ZAHM – The anxiety of the end.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – It’s a challenge we have to confront.

JÉRÔME SANS – You frequently react to current events and play with headlines. For you, is art political? And can it have a political impact?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – For sure. Any work has to be political, poetic, conceptual, intellectual, and also have a lot of feelings, to have a real expression. The work of an artist absorbs its context and surroundings and then expresses it, leaving no footprints, but making that resonance. Everyone can speculate with my practice. It’s about speculation and freedom. It doesn’t have to be tested or proven. That space of freedom is very challenging and rewarding. It’s escapism also.

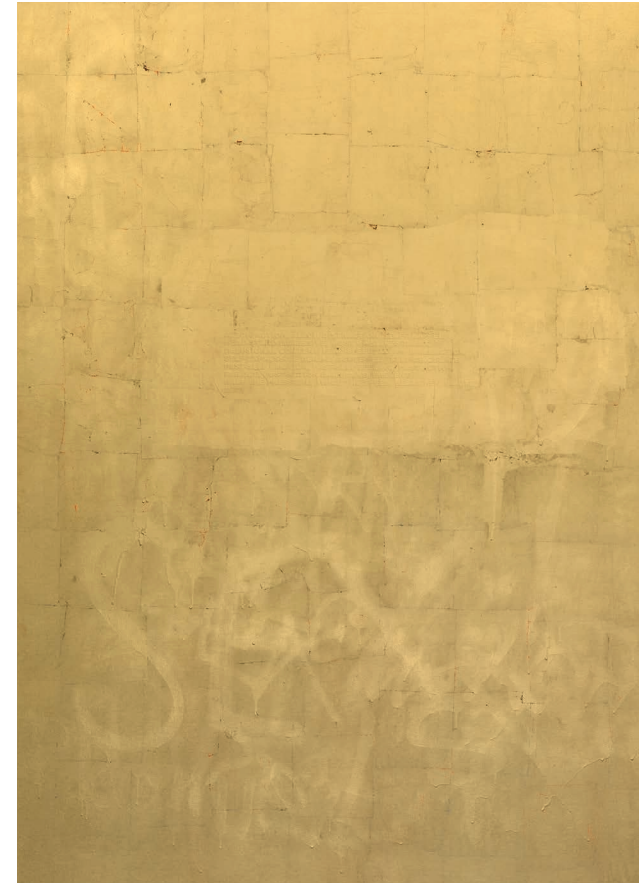
OLIVIER ZAHM – Very few people today would continue to believe that art can have a political impact. Is that in any way related to your Mexican background and the history of anarchism in Mexico since the revolution? People in Mexico still have this romantic idea of a revolution, right?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – It’s political in the sense of being able to question whatever is in front of you. But not with this romanticism of Che Guevara – that we’re going to transform society all together. That’s activism. If I wanted to do that, I would be an activist or a politician and try to change political aspects.

JÉRÔME SANS – Are there any other Mexican artists whom you feel close to, regarding questioning the world and pushing limits?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN – I have more in common with artists from Japan, London, or elsewhere. It’s complicated to think of a movement today – everybody’s running in their own direction. Merchandising makes movements, but people think differently. That’s what I like about intersections with different people.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN, *HYPER-PALIMPSEST GOLD*, 2019, VINYL LETTERING, SPRAY PAINT, AND GOLD LEAF ON CANVAS, 66 7/8 X 53 1/8 INCHES, COURTESY OF HAUSER & WIRTH GALLERY



MY WIFE. I TELL YA MY WIFE LIKES TO TALK DURING SEX. LAST NIGHT SHE CALLED ME FROM A MOTEL.

im-age (im’äj), *n.* [OF. F. *image*, < L. *imago* (*imagin-*), copy, likeness, image, semblance, apparition, conception, idea, akin to *imitari*, E. *imitate*.] A likeness or similitude of something, esp. a representation in the solid form, as a statue or effigy; also, an optical counterpart of an object as produced by reflection, refraction, etc. (see phrases below); also, form, appearance, or semblance (as, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him” [Gen. 1:27]), also, an illusion or apparition (archaic), also, a counterfeit or copy (as, the child in the image of its mother), also, an emblem, considered as representing something else; a symbol or emblem; also, a type or embodiment (as, “An awful *image* of calm power . . . now thou sittest”: Shelley’s “Prometheus Unbound,” i. 296); also, a mental picture or representation, as formed by the memory or imagination; an idea or conception; also, a description of something in speech or writing; in *rhet.*, a figure of speech, esp. a metaphor or a simile. — **real image.**

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN, *UNTITLED (JOKE AND DEFINITION PAINTING)*, 2017, ARCHIVAL INKJET PRINT ON CANVAS, UNIQUE, 52 3/8 X 77 1/2 INCHES, COURTESY OF HAUSER & WIRTH GALLERY



STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN,
EXIT DOOR, 2017, STAINLESS
 STEEL, 107 1/2 X 78 3/4
 INCHES, COURTESY OF HAUSER
 & WIRTH GALLERY

OLIVIER ZAHM — I really liked the exhibition you did outside a gallery by putting graffiti on wooden panels, so that you created ambiguity between street graffiti, political graffiti, and artwork. In Mexico, there's a huge tradition of muralist painters, and there's also a lot of advertising on the walls.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — I did that piece from the series *Headlines and Last Lines in the Movies* at Vancouver's Contemporary Art Gallery. In Vancouver, there is no graffiti; it's very clean and organized. I thought it would have a bigger impact if I closed the whole gallery with wooden panels and then spray-painted on them. Everybody was shocked because they thought there was a demonstration or a strike. The most important element in my work is that the work creates doubt. When I spray-paint, I do so many layers that, again, you see just some words, and it becomes abstract, but then it's in-between reading and abstraction.

OLIVIER ZAHM — Did you keep the wooden panels as the final art object?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — I wanted to keep them, but when they took down the work, it got damaged, so I lost it.

JÉRÔME SANS — You also did a project on a building in Tijuana, at the border between Mexico and the United States, a very intense place.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — I did the work *Truth/Lie*, a neon that on one side said, "Truth," and on the other, "Lie." It was talking about how, in these last few years, the media, truth, and lies have become blended. You have too much information, and it gives you disinformation — the more you know, the less you know. I wanted to place it on a border. This idea of the conflict that already exists between Mexico and the US, and all the immigration and all that — it was more about having the work placed in a limit, where everything was diffused between truth and lies. It was a work about language, not a political statement, but obviously it created a lot of debates. I like to create provocations, so that

people recognize that the work makes you think.

OLIVIER ZAHM — On the connection between Mexico and the US, people forget that basically the US and Mexico are the extension of the same land. Los Angeles is so close to the border of Mexico, and Texas used to belong to Mexico.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Exactly. It was sold for nothing. There's a tradition of corruption in Mexico regarding politics and all that. It's just an extension of land, the same place.

OLIVIER ZAHM — The frontier is very artificial, politically constructed, and of course unstable. As a Mexican, how do you see this mix of conflict and attraction, love and hate between the US and Mexico?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — I hope that everybody takes the best of both parts, but it's always the other way around. They take the worst of Mexico over there, and we bring the worst of the US to Mexico. For instance, you see it with food. The quality of street food in Mexico is totally different from the street food that gets exported to Los Angeles. They're taking the worst part of it and transforming it. It's the same in Mexico, with all these malls being constructed or all these warehouse stores... I wish it was the other way around.

OLIVIER ZAHM — How do you see the future of Mexico? Right now, Mexico City is booming. There's a new energy, an artistic scene, much bigger than the one in the '90s, and also an explosion in architecture and music.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Mexico City, specifically, has been very prolific in architecture, literature, and art for decades because it's a country that's constantly in crisis, and when there's a crisis, everybody brings out their best. As soon as Mexico becomes a first-world country and stabilizes, that's when it's going to become... But if it's in crisis, earthquakes, violence, and all that create problems...

OLIVIER ZAHM — And corruption.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — Corruption brings opportunities.

Crises are good. The only thing about crises is that they trigger artistic expression. It's a way to survive.

JÉRÔME SANS — Do you think it will play a major role globally?

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — It will, to a certain extent, because when you see Mexico City in terms of creative individuals, the quality is very high. When you see Mexico City in terms of an audience, it's very low. Basically, there is no audience, even if it's full of people, but individuality can be found anywhere. The level of construction or of content is very high. It's always going to be fluctuating.

OLIVIER ZAHM — There's an energy, but there's also an ambition. Young people want to change the image of Mexico.

STEFAN BRÜGGEMANN — When you walk in the mornings in Mexico, you can see lots of people outside their homes, sweeping the pavement. They're not waiting for the government to come and clean it. You clean it yourself. That's an attitude of trying to make your place better, of not abandoning yourself in decadence. It's fascinating. Where do you see that in other countries? Mexico is going to always be a permanent underground, with all these fluctuations of crises. It will never be mainstream. It's never going to disappear. That's why people from around the world are always excited about Mexico.

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