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**KURT ANDERSEN**

The next speaker, Christoph "Madman" Niemann he's called ... not really, but he is a ... he is ... he grew up in ... in Germany, he is ... came to New York from Stuttgart in 1997. He is an illustrator, he is an animator, a designer. He has done covers and illustrations for the "New York Times" Magazine, for the "New Yorker", "Rolling Stone", "Entertainment Weekly", "Business Week".

His clients include CitiBank, Amtrack, Nike. He also publishes the great artist book series, "100%", whose motto is, "Editorial illustration without an editor." As a former editor, that is, as a former editor, I'm all for that. His latest is called "100% Evil". He also is the ... has just now produced two children's books, one written by Stephen Dubner, the other his own, called "The Police Cloud". Ladies and gentlemen, Christoph Niemann.

(CHEERING) / (APPLAUSE)

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Hello. My name is Christoph and I'm an illustrator. In the morning I tell my family, "daddy has to go to work". I dress up like any respectful person, sometimes I actually do wear a tie, go to the studio and I make drawings about fried chicken.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

I have a ... I have a real education, I ... I ... I studied graphic design and I'm an illustrator, and that, uh, still ... it informs the way I make my drawings.

When I ... when I make these drawings, this one was on gun culture in America, I really tried to come up with the idea first, and then think of how to execute it. In this case, I was playing around, and ended up with this fairly representational, straightforward style. There's other, uh, drawings like this one, on kids having too much homework, where obviously I needed something much different, and it's really like me being art director, calling up me the illustrator, to then execute my ideas.

Uh, I have absolutely no inhibitions whatsoever to pillage art history, advertising history, whatever serves to communicate my message, like this one for a Style issue of the "New Yorker" that focused on Japan. Or this one, which does the same trick with the Olympics in Greece. You may appreciate the pattern of peanuts, pretzels and beer cans.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

Or in this one, where it was actually fairly difficult and I ended up looking at old advertising art, and because all outlines that we do work on this fall theme for the "New Yorker", with all the post-its falling from the screen.

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This piece ran for tax day this year, April 15th, and I ... I felt it needed to be really executed very dry and personal. Uh, for ... for these ideas I try to really take away all my drawing vanity, where there's other pieces, like this one for "Wired" magazine, where it's really ten percent idea and 90 percent execution. This one was on whether it's dangerous to send e-mails to people in China with political content.

And even though most of my work is very conceptual I ... I work on ... really more visual execution, at the time, this one Bill Drenttel assigned for Stora Enzo, and so on the topic of sustainability, and I have like all sorts of philosophies why I am more comfortable doing conceptual work rather than more visual work, after just seeing Marian's talk, I think I just don't have the balls to, uh, do things that people don't laugh at.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

What I enjoy most, and 90 percent of what I do really is editorial, is work with the Art Director and incorporate typography and the low ... and really the whole format to create one whole piece of design that incorporates the ... the entire page and not just have the illustration that sits in the box. Uh, Nicholas Blechman, who's the Art Director of the "Book Review" now, we colla- ... collaborate a lot and you'll see some more works later on. So in order to kind of illustrate by my approach to style, I came up with the abstract meter here.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

So every idea that I have, there's a certain way of how to draw it. Some things need to be more realistic, some things need to be more abstract, so let's say you want, uh, illustrate the idea of love. If you make it too real, people freak out, and if you make it too abstract, nobody gets it, so there's always like there's one perfect amount of realism.

Like most designers, I'm really freaked out about people not liking my work, which in my case often means people not getting my jokes.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

And so you know, as a designer, so often you sit there and you work on something, and you think, this is absolutely one hundred percent obvious ...

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

... only to realize that it isn't. And, uh, I've learned that like the ... the big secret that I try to work on very hard is really to know about the knowledge of my readers, and not so much trust my own knowledge, and really be able to anticipate how people are going to read, uh, my drawings. This piece here was done for the "Book of You" some time back, and it was a review on, uh, talking about the miracles that Jesus did, and giving like very plain physical explanations for them.

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(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

The reader never heard of Jesus, or that Jesus walked on water, they are not going to get this illustration, which is a risk that I'm willing to take.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

Uh, and you know, images change constantly. Twenty years ago, nobody would have understood this illustration, which was for "Wired" magazine, telling parents how to keep their kids from spending all day in like chat rooms and text messaging. And my mom probably wouldn't still understand it, uh, then again, she doesn't have to keep me from text messaging too much all the time. Uh, this one was on the topic, men don't like to dance.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

Which I can sympathize with a lot. And I mean, I realize that this kind of like taking two elements and put them together in a funny way doesn't really work with every story, and I have in fact come up with a rule that, the more newsworthy a story is, the less ... the less it really lends itself for an intriguing illustration. I, you know, I made up a couple of headlines here. That like the worst possible stories that you could get as an illustrator, is like, "scientists cure all diseases". Like you can do a smiley face?

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

Or "aliens have landed in Washington, D.C.", the last thing that I as a reader would want to see if like some stupid E.T. pun, you just want to see a photo of the friggin' alien.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

"Five great mutual funds from Switzerland?" Or, "what to feed your obese pet?" I tell you, these are the best possible stories for somebody like me.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

I ...

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

Usually I get like an article and people have a certain expectation of what they want from me. If ... if I'm giving utter ... utter freedom, I'm totally screwed. So when "American Illustration" called me to do a drawing for the cover of the annual, I was just totally lost, and I was working on it for weeks until they finally called and said, oh you know, by the way, it's our 20th issue, we want to call it "American Illustration XX", so we were thinking something X-rated, and sexual, and then I had some piece of advice than I then could ignore.

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(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

For my drawings, I ... I really require, I ... I need a reader who really engages with my drawings, and you know, even though it might take you a couple of minutes at some point, this shows a person picking their nose, seeing from the inside of the head.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

And again, like one of the reasons why I like to work with humor is ... humor is just like you're looking for this punch line that really is a good tool to I think to engage the viewer, for some topics. Uh ... and another piece for the "New Yorker" that ran last year for the Independence Day cover, and the problem with "New Yorker" covers is, you don't have a headline, you don't have an article to go with it, so all the reader gets really is the visual. So you have to give them enough clues to really put together the pieces in order to understand the idea.

This was a review of CHRISTOPHER Hitchens' book, "God is Not Great", that was reviewed in the Book Review, and ideally I always try to make a very simple image that then hopefully has additional layers of meanings, and obviously the first meaning here is Hitchens' saying that religion is not only, uh, trash, but also harmful, and ... but then the second layer, as you may now, Hitchens really being for the last convinced chain smoker out there, I was really trying to kind of like add this kind of like personal bit to the drawing. And I was told he liked ... he liked it.

Ahhh... those evil clients. I mean, as ... perhaps some of you have experienced when you present these kind of ideas, every once in a while there's a certain amount of discussion, and in order to kind of show you how this works, I've come up with this handy little diagram here.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)/ (APPLAUSE)

And believe it or not, I really ... I believe in this process, and I honestly ...

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

... I think that, every once in a while, (Laughs), that, no, that really leads to like more profound and more like engaged work. And just imagine, if you take out the client, and if you take out the feedback, all you're left with is this.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

And nobody wants to see that either.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

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Uh, I do illustrate my fair share amount of political articles, which I enjoy a lot. This one here was for "Esquire" magazine. It was on how George W. Bush could really define his standing in history during his second term. I guess we all knew how that one went.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

Nonetheless, I really tried to illustrate the article, and you know, I obviously don't want to glorify Bush, but in fact I really ... I have a ... I don't really like art, I like political art that has an agenda, not so much because I think it's bad, but never in my life have I been convinced or changed an opinion because of a piece of art. Writing, yes. Art, never. And so I think it's like often self serving, and also, unfortunately, very often predictable.

Nonetheless, there was like ... every once in a while even I have to vent my anger. So there's this one piece of political art that I've done in the last ten years, where I just had to let it all out. It ran as a sort of like visual editorial in "Ozone" magazine, it's a couple of panels, which I'm just going to run through, and I'll ... I'm just going to read it out.

"The United States on the morning of September 11th, 2001. Al Qaeda terrorists flew airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Two-thousand, 965 innocent people died in the attacks. Misgiving towards U.S. economic power were put aside, as people globally showed their heartfelt support. Rather than capturing the people responsible for the terrorist attacks, the Republicans turned a new threat into an excuse to increase military spending, kick some ass, by starting a new war under false pretenses. With the silent approval of the Democrats, a bunch of arrogant politicians in Washington such as Dick Cheney tell the world to fuck off."

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

Now for some lighter fare, uh ...

(APPLAUSE)

The ... the problem with obsessing too much about readers is that at some point you become like preemptively self-censoring. You ... you start to get a little bit smart about anticipating what works and what a certain client will like or not, which in the long run really becomes a problem. So I try to take time and work on ... on projects on the side, my favorite one being a ... the book series called "100% Percent".

This one is from the latest installment, "100% Evil", that I did with Nicholas Blechman, and they are just, as Kurt mentioned, editorial illustrations without an editor, just to see really what would we do if nobody would kind of like make changes or give us any kind of direction. This is evil pasta.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

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In the middle we have this big chapter on ... on war and so we kind of went back to being 12 years old, and I started with a little drawing and then I would give it to Nicholas and he kind of rolled the tank over, and then I retaliated by like, I don't know, throwing Florida at him, or like some other wicked thing.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

And we ... we like sent the files back four ... back and forth about like 40 times, until the whole page was, uh, filled. So the question what's next? I ... I know that unfortunately I won't be able to kind of run my visual one liners all the way to my retirement, so I have to come up with something else, and the I guess natural next step is really taking my drawings into a ... a ... like more sequential stories, and I came up with this book, called "The Police Cloud", which we had developed over the ... it's a good night story, and it is about a little cloud that, like a lot of kids, wants to become a police officer.

So, you know, how do you go about that? He asked his friend, the police helicopter. Hey, if a helicopter can work for the police, a cloud should be able to do the same. And he sets him up for an interview, and the Police, uh, Commissioner gives him a ... a chance, and says, okay, you can be the first police cloud. The problem is, that the police cloud is really shockingly untalented at ... at police work and ...

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

... and after a number of very unfortunate mishaps, uh, the cloud like realizes that it just doesn't work out, resigns and does what all of us would do if our big dreams get crushed, starts just wailing, unstoppable. There's this little house that's burning, and while the cloud is crying he, without even realizing, extinguishes the fire of the house, which makes the house very happy, and the fire fighters come a little bit too late, but they're of course mightily impressed with what the cloud has done, and to conclude everything, offer him a job.

(APPLAUSE) / (LAUGHTER)

And I've also ... I've been trying to do more sequential work for other jobs. I was invited by the wonderful Ann Field, who is sitting here somewhere, to work for a project that Art Center in Pasadena started, to raise awareness about the ... the peril of earthquakes in ... in ... in Los Angeles and we like boost the preparedness, that Stefan Sagmeister's going to design, and then I was also asked to do my own set of contributions, it's a set of four drawings that run over Spreads. (Pause) That's how we're all going to end up.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

And so now for my latest project, I went to Asia last year and I learned some very ... very, very basic, but very curious, like interesting things about Chinese letters. So not only are ... like some very ... there is a number of Chinese letters that are really beautiful iconographs of the

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things that they represent, like the person, where you can see the person walking, or it's also not too hard to imagine how the ... the tree with the branch and the roots, uh, came about.

But what I loved even more was how the more complex ones are also derived from these simple ones. Like the person who is stretching out the arm, means big, and you put the person in the box and it means prison, or like the ... the trees, you put tree ... three trees together and you have a forest. And there are some books out there that kind of teach you Chinese or Japanese congee that way, uh, but I hadn't really seen an appealing children's book that ... that would work with that, uh, premise, and gives you a very, very basic introduction to Chinese.

So I ... it's like very much pro- ... a work in progress still, the book will be called "The Pet Dragon", and the premise here is that there's a little kid called Lee, and for his birthday he gets a little pet dragon, and they become best friends and cause all sorts of trouble. And at some point the father has had enough of it, and says, like here, the dragon has to go into a cage. I didn't know, by the way, that the ... the character for father definitely comes not from a guy with a moustache, but I take a lot of liberties there.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

The dragon of course escapes, Lee sees that and is all, uh, freaking out, and spends then the rest of the book running around China trying to find his dragon. If you want to find out how it ends, you have to wait until next spring when the book's coming out, and then I'll hopefully have a good conclusion.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

And last project in I'm going to share you ... with you is my first venture into architecture, which may or may not happen. The client this time are my kids, who are probably the greatest fans of the New York City subway system. They spend a lot of time in the subways, especially in winter, so since we are renovating a house right now, I decided that one of the bathrooms I want to design a kind of like three dimensional New York City subway map, with four by four inch bathroom tiles. And the little dots indicate all the places that we've lived in New York, and this is ... the end. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Well done.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Thank you.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

So, as you get older, does your inclination to be playful and child like in your work change? Are you holding on to the 16 year old boy within?

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

I ... I ... I do hold on to the 16 year old boy. It's just that it's too much pleasure, and I ... I guess is maybe comes out of just like an utter insecurity. Once that goes away, I might be able to do more serious work, but of course it's always gratifying when you get this chuckle of people and reaction to work, which of ... as a graphic designer is always a problem. Like, how do you know what people think of your stuff?

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Yeah.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Cheap jokes or ...

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

And do ... I mean, you're ... you are ... the "New Yorker" covers in particular, are so amazingly smart, the Jesus walking on water not only was a funny but so whittle ... visually witty that you only see his feet there and not the whole body of Christ. Do you have, without ... without a- ... assignments, without an Art Director calling up, an Editor, are ... are you a font of ideas that are waiting to have assignments?

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Unfortunately, that's never worked.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

No?

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Sometimes I do something, or I have like, you know, thick books of killed stuff, or you think something at one point should come along, that I can just like take that thing and the drop it on it, but it's, uh, I ... I ... I find actually working really excruciating, and especially working on ideas, it's ... it's like doing push ups. It's not a lot of fun.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Um- Hmm.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

I mean, at some point you get used to it, but, uh, not that I can do push ups.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

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But, uh, it's really more like doing a big Soduko. You come ... you have put certain elements in there and you just cut away and you add little things until it works, because when this ... that's the advantage of, uh, conceptual design, you have a pretty object- ... objective sense of when it's done. If I show it to somebody and they say, oh, these are your ... your tax forms and they're folded in two tanks and airplanes, then I know, oh, and this is probably something about the Iraq war, then I know that I'm done and I don't have to add anything else, whereas ... (Overlap)

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Well, but you have this, what is to me a very attractive, uh, kind of addiction to clarity. I mean, there's no ... there's ... there's never going to be anybody debating after you're dead and they're looking at your work, what did he mean by that? You ... you really want to be clear.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

I mean, right ... maybe at some point, I just say, like, screw it all, I'm just going to m- ... make absolutely obscure, weird drawings, and maybe I can enjoy a ... I enjoy ... I enjoy like working my sketch books on something that only please me, but it's really my ... my idea of a designer is really a communicator, where you have an idea that's your own, or maybe even somebody else's product, and really brings it out to the reader. That's my purpose, and in a way that, for better or worse, something that I really enjoy.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Unambiguousness.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Unambiguousness, yes.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Yes. Not to engage in national stereotyping, but does that have anything to do with being German?

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Well, you know, it's like, oh you're German. You're funny. That's unusual.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

I ... I mean, when I ... when I ... especially when I read German books now, they feel a lot more ambiguous and weird than a lot of the American books I read, so I don't know. I mean, the Germans have a good ... they ... they have a very good talent for like thinking too much and putting like 20 layers of stuff on top of each other to just not really ... like ... like come out and really like make a very clear statement. Whi- ... which probably is like the ... that would make it un- German, but what do I know?

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

How German is it, as somebody once said? Uh, did that ... I mean, what ... what made you come as a ... as a very young man, sort of, I'm going to America? Well, what ... what made you decide that?

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Well, I always knew that I wanted to be abroad, just because I ... I studied fair- ... fairly close to my hometown, it was like the best university for me, but I needed ... I knew I had to like go out and London in the '90s would be the place to go, there was like a ... there was a lot of interesting stuff happening. Then I realized the flights to New York were as cheap as the ones to London, and once I actually started looking at the books, I realized that the work that really interested me was in New York.

So I really went with my little portfolio and I got on a plane and I rang up people and, uh, Brad Holland had whiskey with me. It was like the greatest moment of my life. It was really ... it was really fantastic, and then I started doing internships for the ... there is something about New York, where people actually read the paper, people actually look at the drawings, and New York maybe is the only place that I know where you don't have to explain what you when you're an illustrator. Everybody else is like, I'm an illustrator. Oh, comics!

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

And in New York, they'd say, oh, it's like the thing that's on the op-ed page, or it's like the thing that is in the "New Yorker", and then people have a sense and like strangely enough, even non-designers have ... actually have an opinion on it. They say, like, oh I ... I don't like these things, oh but these ones I really like, and the little drawings that Tom Paktel(?) in the "New Yorker" like are really great, and ... and then it's just enjoyable when you have an audience that actually cares, and not only the Art Director, who approves and the Editor kills.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Yeah. Is that how it works?

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Well, unfortunately ... yeah, like in 95 percent of the time, you hear the Editor doesn't like it. But you never hear whether they do like something ...

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Yeah, yeah. (Overlap)

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

... because somehow it doesn't make it through. But yeah, eventually.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Yeah, but that's because Art Directors like to blame somebody else ...

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Yeah. (Laughs)

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

... when they have to call you and kill it. Uh, the "New Yorker" is an interesting case. I mean, you know, when the "New Yorker" began of course there were all kinds of magazines with illustrations on the cover all the time. Now there's one, pretty much. Do ... do you ever feel as though you missed the Golden Age? That there's just one magazine that will put illustration on its cover essentially?

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

I mean, on the one ... "New Yorker" really is strange, because in a way it's ... it's actually not illustration, it is cartoon, because it's such a self standing piece, and illustration usually ... I guess you have to define by really being connection to a piece of design or writing and ... (Overlap)

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Which us why it's perfect for what you do.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Which is ... yeah, but ... (Overlap)

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

A grand cartoon.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

The ... the weird thing is there is always, you know, as an illustrator, there's your self interest, I want work, I want money, I want recognition. But also there is, you know, me as a consumer. What do I like? And do I want 20 magazines with like an illustration on it, really as a reader? Is that the kind of thing that I expect? And you know, like that's the point with the aliens landed in Washington. A lot of stuff that I read and that I'm interested in, shouldn't be illustrated, because that's just not what I want to see.

And I'm the same. If there is like ... if you have a ... if Paris Hilton walks out of prison, I don't want to see that drawn, I want ... if I want to see that, then I want to see the ... the photograph of it.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Yeah.

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(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

And, uh, and ... (Overlap)

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Really, I'd kind of like ... that, I mean, as important as that event was, I ... I'd sort of like to see your take on it.

(AUDIENCE LAUGHTER)

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Well, I ... yeah, I think it's foolish(?), just to ... (Overlap)

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Yeah.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

... eventually I'll ... (Overlap)

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Do ... but do ... do you worry, though, that sort of you are consigning yourself to ... to the playground, rather than the main stage?

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

I mean, honestly maybe I'm just too busy or too stupid to worry about it, but ...

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Too young.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

... or too young.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Yeah.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

But ... but ultimately I know that, you know, like Chris Ware, who does these fantastic comics, in a way the comics are extremely conservative, like from ... like there's nothing new in it, but then again they're like the new ...

(OVERLAPPING VOICES)

... didn't get to where he is because he thought, hmm, comics, is that really the thing of the future? But he, you know, he does his thing, and he really worries about doing the right thing

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within his art form, and all I worry about is really trying to make some art that makes sense in whatever context I'm working, and hopefully, if that works, then, uh, I'm going to get a job, if I can convince somebody of it.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

I wonder. I was ... I was thinking of people like Chris Ware, and ... and how you conceive of yourself in ... in ... in relation to that kind of graphic novel work, because certainly there is, in much of that work, a lot more obscurity of intent than in your ... you always know what it means kind of work.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Well, the ... the thing that probably define me is, I studied with Heinz Edelmann, the ... who did "Yellow Submarine" and some other really fantastic pieces of design and illustration, and perhaps ... the thing that he just really beat out of us was vanity. And you know, like Michael earlier said we are not judging the ... the designers, we're judging the work. And I guess in a way it's really helpful when as a designer you separate yourself from ... from your work, maybe at some point I'm going to change, but right now I just have my work, and when I do a drawing I don't, you know, I act as when I was 17, I was putting highlights on everything, and I really have to prove everybody how incredibly well I can draw.

And right now I feel if ... if it takes a bad drawing, it has to be a bad drawing, so I can't ... like obscurity is this thing where I really have to put myself in there, and I have to put myself on the line and say, okay, this is what I think, and you just have to come to me and like start questioning my motives, which, yeah, I don't have the balls at this point, but maybe at some point I will.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Well, if ... if this is the ... the CHRISTOPH NIEMANN without balls, I enjoy it, it makes me wish I had a magazine to run you in.

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**CHRISTOPH NIEMANN**

Thank you.

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**KURT ANDERSEN**

Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)