

## Vito Schnabel in conversation with Bob Colacello

March 4, 2017

**BC:** When did you decide or realize that you wanted to be a curator or gallerist, a presenter of art?

**VS:** When I was twelve years old, I was going to the Met with an artist friend of mine, Stefan Bondell, and I started to get interested. And Lola, my sister who is a painter. They had been at Saint Ann's with me...

**BC:** I was going to ask where you went to school.

**VS:** Yeah. I went to school in Brooklyn. Saint Ann's was a very art-oriented school and my sister and her friends were there, I was around them a lot, and I kind of took more to their view on things rather than going with my mom or with my father to look at galleries or museums. This was a bit more fun. And I was realizing that I wanted to do something with them, you know.

**BC:** Did you ever think of making art yourself?

**VS:** No, I didn't. I thought about movies more than making art, like I thought maybe making movies was something that I'd been interested into.

**BC:** I mean growing up with your father who is an artist and your mother who is very creative and close family friends like Brice and Helen Marden and Francesco and Alba Clemente and Rene Ricard, that must have been kind of great.

**VS:** Yeah. Francesco and Alba's sons were my very close friends, they're still like family.

**BC:** Do you think that's given you an insight or just a natural instinct for how to deal with artists, because artists seem very comfortable with you, you know, whether it's Jeff Elrod or Sterling Ruby or Rashid Johnson.

**VS:** Yeah. There were lot of different characters around when I was younger, a lot of artists, a lot of writers.

**BC:** Wasn't Rene Ricard a big influence?

**VS:** Yeah, a huge influence. When I decided not to go to college, right after high school, I studied with him for about a year and a half, three days a week, whether it was visiting the museum at Yale, or one in DC, or the Met or MoMA or, you know, taking a trip to Cleveland, we were

always looking at things and we had an incredible bond, he was an artist that I worked with and.

**BC:** A poet?

**VS:** Yeah, a poet and he was a real art history buff and really knew his stuff.

**BC:** He was an art critic, you know, he wrote that famous essay on Basquiat.

**VS:** Yeah he wrote that famous essay on Basquiat entitled "The Radiant Child".

**BC:** Did you meet Basquiat back then?

**VS:** I met him when I was little but I don't remember that.

**BC:** Did you go to Switzerland with your father and meet Bruno Bischofberger then?

**VS:** Yeah, I had gone with him very early on. I went with my father a couple of times and then I kind of made it a tradition with my mom to go back there once a year and stay with them at the house. When Bruno would come to New York I would always see him, he was very good at checking in and spending time. Bruno likes kids so he was always, you know...

**BC:** Yeah he's a young spirit. I mean, I know Bruno because he was Andy's dealer. And he liked to have his artists come and actually work in St. Moritz, make works there. At Saint Ann's did you study art history as well as studio art?

**VS:** No, we had art classes but we never really had art history classes. I took a sculpture class.

**BC:** And you did go to Columbia University for a year.

**VS:** Yes, I went to Columbia for a bit and stayed in New York because I thought I had to be here.

**B.C.** Because you were already.

**VS:** Yeah, I put on my first show when I was 16, you know, that was fourteen years ago. It was a group show called Incubator. It was all kind of obscure artists who I had

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grown up around that I wanted to show together and I found a space. From Luigi Ontani, an Italian artist, to Jorge Galindo to McDermott and McGough to my sister, to Vahakn Arslanian who I ended up having many shows with... And then about nine months later I had a show for Ron Gorchov which was the first solo show.

**BC:** Why did you choose Ron Gorchov? How did that happen?

**VS:** I met Ron Gorchov at the Incubator show with an artist named Ray Smith, who I met through my father, and then he thought it might be interesting for me to see his paintings. I went to his studio in Brooklyn and I was really blown away and I had never seen anything quite like his paintings, his sculptural paintings or shields.

**BC:** Explain a little who Ron Gorchov was and why you thought he was important.

**VS:** Yes, he was a big deal in the Sixties and Seventies in New York and had a studio on Chambers Street, I think that's where he met my father because he had a studio there as well. He was one of the pioneers of the shaped canvas and he was a very serious painter from Chicago who was in all the major collections in New York, whether it was at the MoMA, the Whitney or the Guggenheim.

**BC:** But when you showed him he was kind of in a lull in his career or...

**VS:** I wouldn't say a lull but he was taking time to teach and making paintings for himself. And I guess it was some sort of a choice he also made not to show his paintings. He said he was always looking for a young dealer and he was waiting for that person to come around and then I showed up.

**BC:** It was destiny.

**VS:** Yeah. And we got to spend some time together, I wasn't in school at that moment, I was spending a lot of time learning with Rene. And then Ron was also a teacher and we would go see different shows and talk about art endlessly while drinking coffee. He loves coffee and makes very strong coffee. Finally I asked him if I could have a show of his work which he let me do. It was a huge opportunity that I didn't want to miss and I felt honored to be able to do that and so that was my first solo exhibition.

**BC:** How did you get involved with the Bruce High Quality Foundation and decided to the three Brucennials or four?

**VS:** Yeah, through my sister Lola who went to Cooper Union and told me she had met somebody there who she thought that was really talented. It was Rhys Gaetano. And then I met him and I thought he was really talented too. And he ended up working at the bar on the corner of my apartment and so I'd see him four nights a week randomly and we started become close friends and I went to his studio and I wanted to show his work. He said I'm really interested in showing Bruce's work. And I was like: who the hell is Bruce? And he said: Bruce High Quality is an artist who jumped off the World Trade Center right before the planes hit. I said: what are you talking about?

**BC:** Before the planes hit.

**VS:** Yeah, and he started going into the mythology of Bruce High Quality Foundation and it sounded very interesting to me and again, unlike anything I'd never heard of, and then I met his partners in crime and we got involved with those guys and girls.

**BC:** I think one of the first shows I saw of yours was the Brucennial down on West Broadway in a building that Aby Rosen had just built and had not rented out yet to commercial space.

**VS:** Yeah, they had done a Brucennial before in Brooklyn which was really cool and then when they got in the Whitney Biennial they wanted to do it again and we thought it should be in New York City coinciding with...

**BC:** It was the same night... as the opening of the Whitney and it was a blizzard seven thousand kids showed up. There was a line several block long and they blocked Aby Rosen and Samantha Boardman and me in, it was like trying to get into Studio 54 and the fire department said it was overcrowded and then Aby goes: "I own the building. Bob's from Vanity Fair" and finally one of your people saw us and got us in.

**VS:** Yeah. There were thousands of people it was an amazing turnout.

**BC:** There were like three hundred or four hundred thousand dollars in the show

**VS:** Yeah and on the second floor there was a big concert that was organized and at the end of it there was a huge snow ball fight outside of the show. It was a great night and a few days later, on the cover of the Times there was an article "Brucennial or Biennial", and I think the Brucennial got a better review that year.

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**BC:** I think you're right, as I recall. What do you look for in an artist, I mean, in terms of how do you decide which artist you would like to show, you would like to work with? Do they have to be friends? How do you know them?

**VS:** No, but a lot of time they become friends or I meet them through artists who are friends of mine who tell me about someone who they think is interesting then I go check out the work. Most of the time that's how it works. I mean, for instance with Borna Sammak, my friend David Rimanelli introduced me to him. David taught at NYU and Borna a student there. David told me about him and I went to visit his studio and I think David's really smart and has a great eye and I was able to develop this relationship with him. Usually it comes through other people whose eye I respect or.

**BC:** But what criteria do you set for yourself in your decision to show an artist. I think you said sometimes, talking about different artists, that you saw something you'd never seen before.

**VS:** Yeah. So, I look for that or for something that I have seen before and they're taking to their own place and there can be a reference to different things throughout history that I find interesting which they're making.

**BC:** Who in historical terms, like who are the artists over the centuries that, if you could have a collection of all masters and modernist masters? Who would be on your dream list?

**VS:** I don't know, anywhere from Titian to Velázquez to Caravaggio. It would be cool to have an El Greco.

**BC:** Ellsworth Kelly is someone like a lot too?

**VS:** Yeah, I was thinking really classic but I love Ellsworth Kelly. I love Mark Rothko, I love Barnett Newman.

**BC:** Do you feel you prefer abstract art over figurative art in general?

**VS:** Lately, in contemporary art it's what I've been gravitating to more, but no I love figurative painting as well.

**BC:** Elizabeth Peyton?

**VS:** Yeah, Elizabeth Peyton, of course. Like in your show, this idea of these border lines between figurative and abstraction, abstract figuration either it's Elizabeth Peyton or Cecily Brown.

**BC:** Or Jacqueline Humphries or Rashid Johnson.

**VS:** Yeah, or Mark Grotjahn.

**BC:** Why did you decide to open a gallery in St. Moritz of all places?

**VS:** I was looking for a place where I could open a gallery outside of New York, I was in Basel for the Art Fair and Bruno asked me if I'd be interested in taking over his space in St. Moritz because he was going to no longer use so he could focus on his compound that he was building in a facility for housing his art in Zurich, which is incredible. I thought about it for a couple of hours and I said: yes. And I went there and I took it. And I've been going there for a long time and I like how it is close to Italy and to Zurich and it's a very international place. It's very charming and I like spending time there. It just made sense.

**BC:** What are your future plans for exhibitions in St. Moritz?

**VS:** Sterling Ruby is the next show, new painting and sculpture which I'm very excited about. That will open on March 11th and will be up for a couple of months.

**BC:** Will you do a summer show again?

**VS:** Yes.

**BC:** How did you decide that I should curate my first show?

**VS:** Because I think you are as qualified as any curator. You've been looking at art all your life, and been around some of the greatest artists of our time and you always have interesting things to say about exhibitions or put me on to different shows and I thought it made perfect sense. And it would be fun. I think you did a great job and everybody else thought so too.

**BC:** It was fun. Especially hanging it in four hours straight with no food or sleep.

**Bob Colacello at Vito Schnabel's gallery:**

Village Voice film critic, Interview magazine editor, OUT party photographer, Warhol and Reagan biographer, Vanity Fair special correspondent curator? In my long accidental career I was trained to be a diplomat at the Georgetown School of Foreign Service I have never sought any job. Things just came to me or didn't. And as my Italian-American mother always told me, «When opportunity knocks, be sure to open the door». So when Vito Schnabel asked me to curate a group exhibition at his new gallery in St. Moritz, I opened the door, and embarked on yet another unexpected and exciting new adventure. I had some doubts, but Vito reassured me, pointing out, «You worked with Andy Warhol for 13 years, you have a good eye, and all the artists love you». (They mainly love me because I tell good Warhol stories, and Andy is more or less God to so many artists working today.) The first step was to come up with a unifying theme and a title that expressed it. In going to galleries and visiting artists around New York, it seemed to me that many of the paintings and sculptures being made blurred the lines between abstraction and figuration. I was reminded of a question that Andy was always asking: «How can I make abstract art that isn't really abstract?». He successfully answered his own question with the Oxidation paintings in 1977, the Shadows series of the following year, and the Camouflage paintings in the 1980s. A rare neon yellow and orange example of the last ended up being the centerpiece of my show. I was originally going to call the show "Blurred Lines", and even thought of having the hit song of that title blaring from speakers as people arrived at the gallery. (Vito nixed that idea.) Then, driving

into the city one day from my home on Long Island, a new title popped into my head "The Age of Ambiguity". I liked it because it had a sociological twist, and it seems to me that truly important art, even the most purely abstract, in one way or another, is a response to or a reflection of the times in which it is made. If contemporary American artists have for some time now moved beyond the absolutisms of realism on one side and minimalism on the other into an ambiguous, hard to define inbetween zone, perhaps it has something to do with the fact that everything our culture, our politics, our genders has become indefinite, confused, even chaotic. Fortunately, when I went to see the artists I hoped would be in the show, they liked my idea and thought it was relevant to what they were doing. Several, including Rashid Johnson, Jacqueline Humphries, Borna Sammak, and Jeff Elrod, made new works specifically for this exhibition. Also in the show: Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bruce High Quality Foundation, Jeff Koons, Adam McEwen, Sterling Ruby, Julian Schnabel, Jonas Wood. For me, the most satisfying part of the process was hanging all of this great work and seeing the show come together. Vito and I had arrived in St. Moritz late on Wednesday afternoon from Paris, where we saw the beautiful Twombly exhibition at the Pompidou Center, and celebrated our friend Alexia Niedzielski's birthday at the Ritz until the early morning hours. We went straight to the gallery, skipping lunch, and got to work. Six hours later we were done. And my newest career was on its way. Vito already has me thinking about the next one.