

AUTRE

Haute Bricolage: Tom Sachs in conversation
with Vito Schnabel and Oliver Maxwell Kupper

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Haute Bricolage

Tom Sachs

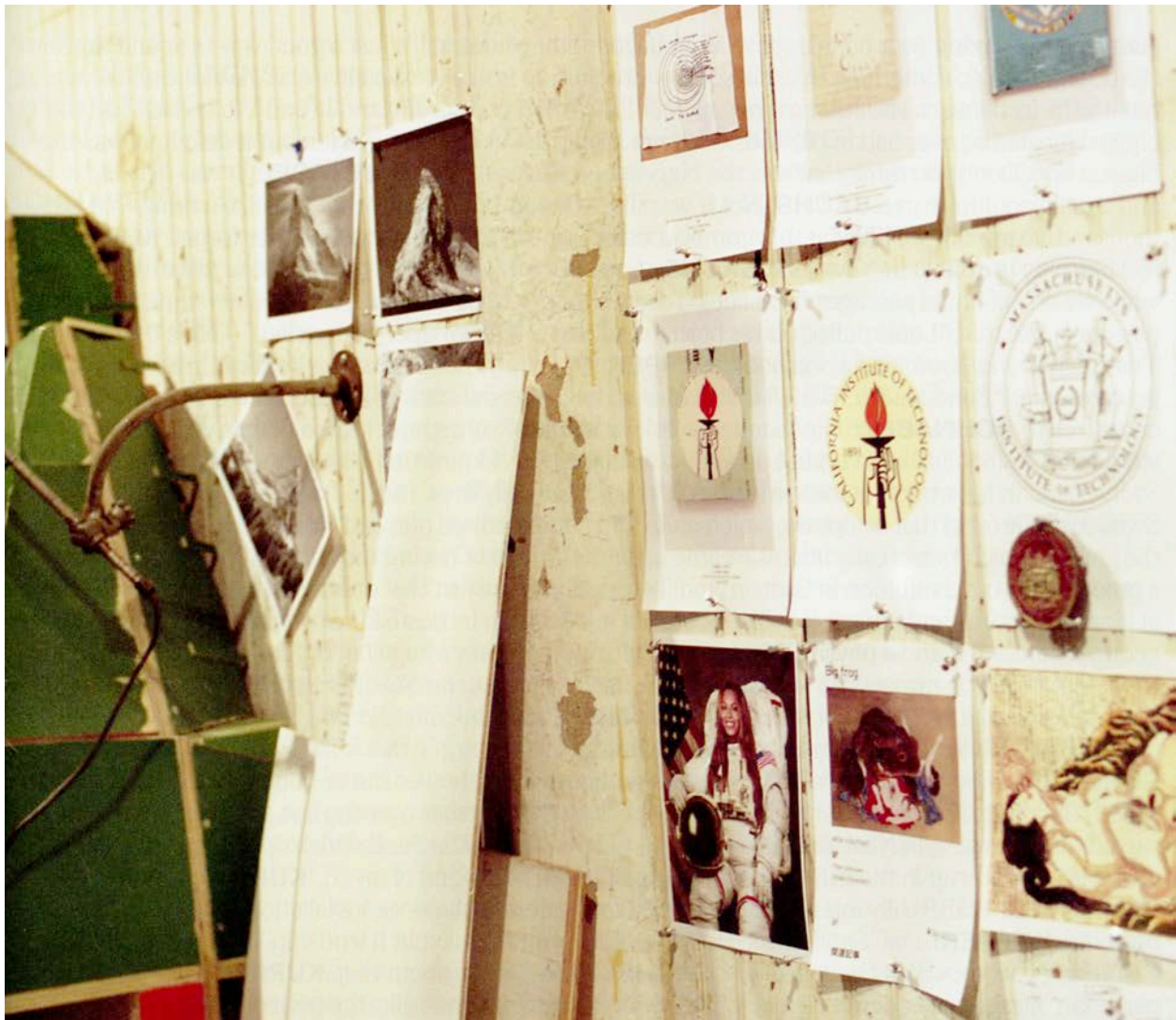
In conversation with Vito Schnabel and Oliver Maxwell Kupper
Photographs by Remy Holwick

Tom Sachs is a Space Age pragmatist, the Bob Dylan of bricolage, a satanic ceramicist and master of tea ceremonies. Somewhere between a post-apocalyptic carpenter and a charming rocket scientist waiting for a rover to land on some distant star, Sachs invents and reinvents the world in which he lives. His studio is a monastic, near sovereign state where plywood and foamcore are the chief export, and work and pleasure are prescribed in regimented doses according to strict philosophical codes or “bullets.” Sachs, who originally studied architecture and spent one year working in Frank Gehry’s Los Angeles studio, has spent his career remixing and sampling objects of our modern and contemporary landscape. From works, like “Chanel Guillotine Breakfast Nook” (1998), which exemplifies the quotidian nature of furniture and makes the prospect of a public beheading more banal than brunch, to fully functioning rifles made out of recycled materials, to a Chevy Caprice police car decked out with burglary tools, Sachs highlights our obsequious obsession with luxury, sex and violence. Lately, Sachs has been exploring themes of national identity and surfing with gallerist, Vito Schnabel. We got a chance to catch up with them in New York.





OLIVER MAXWELL KUPPER: Tom, I met the Caprice a couple weeks ago, before meeting you. **SACHS:** Nice, excellent, I am so glad you got to see her. Did you get to go inside? **KUPPER:** Yeah, I went inside and got to admire the new upholstery. It's amazing! **SACHS:** They did a good job with the leather, right? **KUPPER:** It certainly has that Tom Sachs signature. Can you briefly talk about the Caprice? **SACHS:** The Caprice, the cop car, I've had since, I don't know, since 1999. It's the 1989 Chevy Caprice police package, and it's been one of the main millstones around my neck—albatross, bad luck, cursed vehicle—but, you know...I love it! **KUPPER:** So, you actually drove the car? **SACHS:** Yeah! I still drive it. **KUPPER:** And it was a police car from the Narcotics Division?



SACHS: Yeah, it is an LAPD NARC car. After my ex-girlfriend and I broke up, she went out with a cop. We all became friends and she gave me the car. **KUPPER:** Vito, have you been in the car before? **VITO SCHNABEL:** I have not yet. But, when we're in LA in a couple of weeks, we are going to go for a ride. **KUPPER:** So, maybe we can start with how you two met. You've been friends for a long time. **SACHS:** We met surfing, in Rockaway. **KUPPER:** And you've been friends for how long? **SACHS:** About sixteen years? **KUPPER:** And there's a ritual to surfing which, Tom, is a big part of your work. Where did your fascination with ritual come from? **SACHS:** The thing about surfing is that it's not so much about surfing as it is about driving to the surf with your friends, waiting for waves, catching them, and then

eating after. Waxing your board, complaining about other surfers. It's just a good way to spend time at the beach. It's also something that is a solitary art. Surfing is like life: you live and die alone on the waves, but it's the in-between stuff that makes up your life. And that day, Vito and I (and Vito's dad) had the biggest lobster we ever had in our lives. I am not saying it was the best lobster, but it definitely was the biggest one. Don't you think that was the biggest one you ever had? **SCHNABEL:** It was like a four-and-a-half-pound lobster. **SACHS:** No! It was like a fifteen-pound lobster...it was like a thing that was a thousand-years-old. We ate it at this gumbo lobster place in Coney Island. I'll never forget. **KUPPER:** I feel like only in do that in New York. **SACHS:** And I remember I was in the middle of a heartbreak, and while we drove, I read passages from Nick Tosches' *In the Hand of Dante*. I remember some of these passages, like this, "Louis pulled off his bronze and threw it down upon the casket." That's the opening. That's when you know it's a good book. **KUPPER:** Definitely! Leading up to the show in Switzerland, you presented "Sandcrawler," which is sort of a portable mezcal station. Where did the idea for this piece come from? **SCHNABEL:** The "Sandcrawler" was actually something I saw a couple years ago in the studio that he [Sachs] was working on and I was taken by it. I knew that he had been thinking about Switzerland in his work, but for some reason, this thing really drew me in. I wanted to base a show in Switzerland around that sculpture, which ended up getting edited out, and Tom had a different idea for the gallery, which I was really into. We came up with the idea of having the show in New York as kind of a precursor to our exhibition in Switzerland. I wanted to show just that one sculpture in my space. I look at it as a sculpture, and I guess it is like a bar...but it is such an intricate kind of work with such a strange geometry around it and a physical kind of weight around it. I am a huge fan of *Star Wars*. If I was a kid, I think that would be my favorite toy. **SACHS:** What is your favorite *Star Wars* movie? What's the ranking for you? Do you have a hierarchy? **SCHNABEL:** I think *The Empire Strikes Back* is up there for me. **SACHS:** Yeah, that is number one. Definitely. I would argue that it's the only really good one. **SCHNABEL:** You know, we built this dome together that we showed out of Long Island which was called "Building #3." That was the first project that we did together over the last six months. And then, we did "Sandcrawler" in New York...and then we did this show *The Pack*, which opened in December, which is currently up in the gallery in Switzerland. We've been kind of on a... **KUPPER:** On a roll? **SCHNABEL:** Yeah, really interesting dynamic...very different shows or installations that are all equally powerful. **KUPPER:** The "Sandcrawler" seems really symbolic of your friendship. It has elements of everything you know you need, in a way. **SACHS:** Tell me more about that. **KUPPER:** It is the perfect party-kit, in a way. It wouldn't be just for two people. It seems symbolic; the perfect prelude. **SCHNABEL:** It was around the holidays that we showed it, and it seemed like a good celebration of the work Tom had been doing. That particular work, it was beautiful. It just sat alone in that space, on the table he made. **SACHS:** I also think it is ironic because it is a symbol of decadence to have a mezcaleria. Mezcal is a drug that's used to loosen everyone up and inspire debauchery, and yet there are some errors in that. It was kind of ironic because Vito and I independently, and unrelatedly, have cut way, way, way back on our drug and alcohol consumption. Although for years, mezcal was the drug of choice in the studio. Now, I can have maybe a sip of wine at dinner, and that's my limit. For me, it represented the end of something. **SCHNABEL:** It was ironic. I haven't had a drink in four months. To show a bar at this moment of my life was funny. I ran the marathon, and I was gearing up for that, and then just continued trying to be healthy. I don't drink wine now. I will at some point...but I'm just taking a little break...first time since I was thirteen. (laughs) **KUPPER:** There is a tradition to mezcal, of course. Have you two been to Mexico together? **SCHNABEL:** Yes, we have been to Mexico quite a few times and we are going together next week. I am showing a couple works of Tom's in my booth at Zona Maco. And he

also has a little show of ceramics, and we will be there together in February. To continue our escapades, I guess. (laughs) **SACHS:** We are also working on a new building, called "Building #5." It's a larger version of "Building #3," a full surfing shack. **KUPPER:** Tom, you mentioned that mezcal is sort of the elixir of your forefathers, like Ed Ruscha. **SACHS:** Sol Lewitt too. **KUPPER:** It is a big ritual in your studio, but also tattooing is a big part of your ritual as well. And Vito, has Tom ever tattooed you? **SCHNABEL:** He has not tattooed me. He's tagged me. There is a clip that he can put onto your clothing, or if you have a necklace, or a bracelet, and that is how far he got. **SACHS:** We tag our sculptures with these industrial customs tags for our database, and sometimes we do it with people, and it can go through their clothes, or ear, or nose. And yeah, we do tattoos sometimes for holiday parties. That is kind of a ritual in the studio. **KUPPER:** I want to dive into your show. I want to talk about Switzerland and *The Pack*, which is centered on Swiss utopian mythology. When did you two decide to think about the show and these ideas of Swiss utopian mythology? **SACHS:** It is something I've been working on my whole life. I've been going to Switzerland since I was seventeen, and I was always interested in it, and I've made works about Switzerland, even in 1990. Mary Frey designed for the studio this "Nuke The Swiss" sticker. She's the official graphic designer in the studio. She is part of Satan Ceramics too. She just walked through the room, so I had to give her a shout out. (laughs) **KUPPER:** Exploring this Le Corbusier-like vision of utopia, what about this sort of utopian vision is so alluring? **SACHS:** The beauty of the Swiss land mixed with Swiss politics. So, everyone is really pissed off about Brexit, and for good reason, but the real issue is that Switzerland, which is in the geographic-political center of Europe, is not in the Union. We don't have a real chance for the EU to be meaningful, and a tremendous effort toward global peace is unifying Europe. But it doesn't really work without the place where everyone hides their money being involved. The idea of Switzerland being this incredible place with people as diverse as Lee "Scratch" Perry and Le Corbusier is kind of a panacea, or an illusion. You've got this incredible resource, and within this an unbelievably sophisticated mitigation of nature. Whether it is subsidized agriculture, which is unsurpassed in the world, or the amazing road systems. No one like Switzerland can handle or mitigate nature. To have that with issues going on in Greece or in Syria. Or back to World War II, when it was this idealized neutrality. Even though, there is no such thing as neutrality, because neutrality only favors the strong. You must choose a side. **KUPPER:** There is a dark side of that neutrality. All of that peace comes with trying to protect it at all costs, and it ended with them closing their borders. With one of your pieces, you replaced all twenty-six regions with African countries. Was there any controversy surrounding that? **SACHS:** I think the controversy is forever. You have a place like Switzerland with all these resources and then a place like Africa, which is so corrupt from five-hundred years of European intervention and extracting human and natural resources for gain in Europe. I think the controversy is profound and unchanging. **KUPPER:** But it seems like the Swiss have also been a model for modernism, democracy, medicine, and more. **SACHS:** Yes, so many great things. I think that's what this show is about. It's the cultural diversity of Switzerland, a place that could have done the Swiss Army Knife, LSD, and have had a successful (up until the 1990s) military to suit the needs of the people...but still being this place of corruption and wealth-hiding. **KUPPER:** And Vito, how long have you been going to Switzerland? What made you fall in love with the country? **SCHNABEL:** I have been going there since I was a kid. I started going back a lot more when I started spending a lot more time with Bruno Bischofberger, and I tried to soak up as much as I could from him. I was learning and looking at art in Europe, and I went to see him in St. Moritz. About five years ago, I was in Switzerland for Basel, and I visited him. He told me he was thinking about letting his St. Moritz gallery go. At the time, I was looking at a space in San Francisco, and he asked me if I would be

interested in taking over his space. I thought about it for a couple of hours and I told him I would take it.

KUPPER: Did you go skiing out there? **SCHNABEL:** I did not hit the mountain that time, no.

KUPPER: Tom, do you make your own skis? I'd imagine that you would make your own skis. **SACHS:** I've made sleds (sighs)...I just rent. I don't like owning stuff. The thing I hate most about skiing is skis. I just like doing it. I don't like all the equipment. **KUPPER:** Tom, your work has this dark eroticism to it like the Caprice and Heidi, the coffee making robot. **SACHS:** People always ask me, "Where do you get all these ideas for your sculpture?" And I get them from where everybody else does. Does it turn me on? Does it inspire me? And that 'turn on' may be the most primal sense. It's erotic, but it is really whatever inspires me. I think the sexual impulse is a universally inspiring thing for all people, whatever they may be doing. **KUPPER:** It's a visceral experience. **SACHS:** Yeah, baby. (laughs) **KUPPER:** Vito, what's next on your list in terms of your collaboration with Tom? **SCHNABEL:** As Tom said before, "Building #5" is probably next on our list. **KUPPER:** And that's going to be like a surf shack? **SCHNABEL:** Yeah, surf shack, you know. A bigger version of the dome: deck, surf shack, bed, a bathroom to shower, a real livable kind of sculpture-house. Part of Tom's utopia. **SACHS:** Really, it's about the concept of sympathetic magic. We built the world not the way it is but the way we want it to be. Switzerland is no exception. By painting the African states and its capitals in place of the Swiss cantons, I am sort of redistributing wealth politically. In a way, with "Building #5," I want a surf shack in East Hampton, so I'm going to make one. And that's how sympathetic magic starts. You build the table and if it doesn't exist, you make it exist.



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