032c

34th issue Berlin Summer
D€15 EU€15 US$19.90

THE BIG FLAT NOW
How to Be Everywhere, Anytime, and Everyone at Once

The Confessions of Kenny Schachter

Interview THOMAS JEPPE Photography TIM GUTT

In the middle of a dignified Kensington street, Kenny Schachter's bright yellow door is a beacon. A porcelain flower panel by Ai Weiwei looms over the entrance, marking the threshold to Schachter's multi-storied family home. Another hangs in the master bedroom upstairs, though it is hidden behind plywood. "We had to move out for a while after my son set the house on fire," he says. "This box was made to protect the Weiwei. I liked it so I kept it. It looks like a Donald Judd!"

Schachter is an anomaly in the art world. Well-known for his regular columns on Artnet, he has worked hard to earn his reputation as a provocateur. His candid reports from behind the scenes at galleries, auctions, and the ever-expanding list of international art fairs tread the ground between market reconnaissance and industry satire. In a milieu of polite decorum and unwritten rules, Schachter flouts convention: naming names (frowned upon), citing prices (unthinkable), and putting himself and his kids at the center of the story (entertaining). His diaristic approach is both salacious and informative, featuring, and read by, everyone who matters in art.

Schachter's rise as a tribune of transparency comes after a formidable run as a curator, dealer, collector, and, as he is quick to attest, lover of art. A chance invitation to Sotheby's Warhol estate auction in April 1988 was his first exposure to the mechanics of the business. From there, he made a career importing works from the much-mythologized German art scene of the early 1990s to New York City. Driven by a passion for peripheral figures like Vito Acconci and Paul Thek, Schachter organized a series of temporary shows, working with over 300 unaffiliated artists, many of whom went on to enjoy significant success. However, he did not shy away from the blue-chip market, dealing works by Picasso, Cézanne, and Monet that sold for tens of millions of dollars.

Schachter moved to London in the early 2000s, switching focus to the burgeoning design market, evidence of which is still visible throughout his home. A suite of Zaha Hadid pieces that he commissioned populates the lounge, still in bubble-wrap from their last exhibition. The sunroom, surrendered to his kids as an in-house painting studio, contains a Marc Newson prototype chair covered in paint. Schachter's office is his sanctuary, hidden at the end of the garden among his collection of cars, his desk perched over the bonnet of a 1976 Autobianchi Abarth.

Schachter's is a restless mind. He speaks with urgency and enthusiasm, painting himself as an uninvited guest at the table, though he's received warmly at many. Between writing, collecting, and a spread of exhibition projects, a pattern emerges. Here is an autodidact of the present, living a life defined by objects. As if to emphasize the point, Schachter has already commissioned his own coffin, modeled on his favorite Porsche, to assure himself a "bespoke demise."

In one of the property's several living rooms – surrounded by works by Claire Fontaine, Sterling Ruby, William Pope.L, and two of the more elegant extinguisher paintings by Lucien Smith – Schachter invited me to discuss "the back side of the painting." Precisely three decades after the art world first opened its doors to him, I sat down to hear his confessions.

FIRST PURCHASE

I grew up in the suburbs of Long Island, an isolated, overweight child with no interest in art per se. I was catatonic. My mother died when I was 13. My father was a fucking asshole. I never even had a conversation with him, like the one we're having now, until I was 14 years old.

I had these cork walls in my room where I would take magazines and collage cut-out pictures from *National Geographic*, or *Road & Track* magazine. I lived in my head, culling information. I finished high school with shitty grades and went to George Washington University in DC, which was the only college I got into. There were kids from 150 different countries at this school, so from the very onset of my career, I had this international perspective. A lot of Americans aren't like that growing up. College made me associate with so many different kids from different places. It was there that I found philosophy. I knew I liked political science, but being exposed to Freud, Hegel – this ideational exploration from Kant to Thomas Mann – I never even knew these types of dialogues existed. And what is art anyway but philosophical illustrations?

But there were no jobs in philosophy. I did well in college and got accepted at one law school: Cardozo in New York City. I had no interest at all in practicing. After three quarters of the first year, I stayed within the structures of the school, but I never went. It was just a hiding place for three years. I had a series of jobs over this time. I took the bar exam, but I had to find out what I liked and how to make money out of it. So I tried fashion. That was the only aesthetics that I knew existed, the only thing I knew that was both creative and entrepreneurial. I literally went to a garment building with 300 resumés, stuck them under every door, and got a job with a tie manufacturer who was Nino Cerruti's grandson.

Previous page: The curator, art dealer, columnist, and car collector Kenny Schachter curled up between a green 1976 Autobianchi A112 Abarth and a 1977 Volkswagen Golf GTI Mark 1 in his office in London.

"I'd like 10,000 dollars please, to buy some art," a penniless Schachter told the loan officer at J.P. Morgan during a summer internship at a law firm in 1988.

I was like Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, carrying these ginormous suitcases. I had to rent this big car to fit them and I would be hobbling down the street with these things, fanning out ties to clients. The whole process was soul-sucking. The company was going out of business. The designer was a chronic gambler. And I'm allergic to silk! At one point, I took the ties and rubbed them all over my face so my eyes would swell shut. That was the only way to extricate myself from the company.

I was a bad tie salesman. I was a bad lawyer. And I am a bad art dealer. [*Laughs*] I quit the tie job, and a friend from college dragged me to the auction sale of the Warhol estate. I didn't like Warhol at the time, or know much about him – the auction was for Warhol's personal collection, not his work. But I was flabbergasted. It was my first taste of the art market, shoved in my face. I didn't know you could buy this – that art was something transacted on the most basic level.

Once I found out what I wanted, I set myself to it. I had the discipline of law school, which is like military training for your head. It took 1,100 pages of notes to pass the bar exam. When I made my first purchase, which was a Cy Twombly drawing, I had no money. I went to a gallery and there was the art that I'd seen in the museum for sale, so I went to the bank, J.P. Morgan, and said, "I'd like 10,000 dollars please, to buy some art." They looked at me like I was retarded. I was working at a law firm for the summer and I made the manager call the bank, so they gave me an unsecured loan for ten grand. Like an idiot savant, I immediately started selling to other dealers. Realizing this stuff could be bought and sold was the eureka moment.

A COMMERCIAL PHILOSOPHY

I'm a professional collector. I sell art to make money and pay bills for my family. I don't sit well with cash, so for me, money just affords me the opportunity to collect more art. Being in the moment of cultural production is my priority. Art reflects everything that's happening socially, politically, and economically, like a mirror. It's the way I engage. The dealing part is what I have to do to make money, and you don't have to be smart, you just have to work hard. I'm not wildly theoretical or complicated. I'm a very simple person. And I was always invested in broadening the potential for art to reach people.

Because I was so naive about art growing up, I came to it ready to talk to anyone about every aspect of it. I can teach anyone on the street everything about contemporary art in six months. A reading list, some discussion, that's all it

takes. I curated my first six shows, then conned my way into a job at The New School, teaching a class on Duchamp, even though I'd never taken an art class. I would read the first three chapters of a book, teach them, then read the next three chapters – drink a beer before class because I was petrified. My teaching was always a mixture of art thrown in with the hard and fast realities of having to eke out a living. I became an adjunct at that school and from there I taught at NYU, Columbia, RISD, the Royal College. I teach now at the University of Zurich.

My passion far exceeds any intelligence I may have. It's all driven by my adoration of art. Artists are like magicians. When you see a painting take shape – the confidence – it's a manifestation of human activity. It's emotional. It's primal. It's philosophy. It's ideational. It congeals all of my interests in the world into this thing. Like a slug leaving a line across a canvas, it's this residue of human experience and thought. A picture takes me out of my reality. It's a gateway to drift.

In the 1940s, there were four or five galleries in New York City that emulated this clinical architectural model based on the Museum of Modern Art. That's when the white cube came into existence. They were trying to make art seem unknowable to most people. Why would anyone pay three grand for a drip painting at the time they were being made? The galleries needed to construct that market – make it an elite thing, make it complicated, make it *not* for the masses. This marketing painted art into a corner and diminished its audience tremendously. Compare this to the "Armory Show" in the 1910s, when people lined up around the block to see *Nude Descending a Staircase*. Those days dissipated over time.

I remember Gavin Brown used to curate pop-up shows in New York in the 90s. You'd have to go to an office, say you wanted to see blah blah, then they'd give you the key and you'd go up. He'd say, "If I can get 50 of the right people, that's enough." And me, I always said I'd rather have 5,000 of the wrong people see the show. I used to leave the door open in the winter. I got a cold for two years from sitting at a show. Always by myself. Extra hours. Open Sundays. I thought art could communicate to a broader base of people. Now it does. It's become a visible social ecosystem. There's been more growth in the past 25 years than in the past 500 years.

Is it better or worse? Well, it's definitely worse when someone can't open their mouth to talk about art without telling me how much it costs. I say this even though I'm guilty, because I'm deeply involved in the market. But I like to talk about the behavior of people. The motivation and the cause. I consider myself a commercial philosopher. Still, I think the readership is shrinking for more serious stuff. Jerry Saltz is kind of a cartoon character, but I love Roberta Smith. I think her work is fantastic. She made me cry twice. Once for good and once for bad. The first time was my first show. I recognized her and couldn't believe my fate, to have her in my space. I went up to her and started introducing the show, "This is blah blah blah." She stopped me and said, "If I needed art explained to me, I would have no reason to leave my house." One tear dropped down my cheek. The other time was 20 years later. She complimented me on my writing in an email. I just couldn't believe it.

MINISCULE WORLD

Philosophy was the first thing that pointed me toward Germany. It was that particular field of thinking with Hegel and Thomas Mann, who figured very heavily in my studies. I was drawn to the region because of family heritage, too.

At this time in the early 90s, there were so many talented art dealers in New York. The gallery American Fine Arts was run by Colin de Land, who made work anonymously with Richard Prince in the 80s under the name John Dogg. He was an impresario. He dressed like a rapper – an artist mentality, not really business-minded. His wife, Pat Hearn, was another one of the great gallerists. They later both died of cancer within a year of each other. When I popped onto the scene in the late 80s, New York City had these extraordinary dealers with tremendous vision, and I felt like I had nothing to add. They'd been involved in art for 20, 30 years. They knew way more than me. What could I possibly bring to the table? I wasn't going to pick it up there.

I had the foresight to know that, as a free agent, I could be more international than the galleries that were rooted to their physical space. At this point, galleries weren't doing ten art fairs – there weren't ten art fairs to even do. America went into a recession from 1991 to 1995, and I'll never forget, in 1991, on the front page of the *New York Times Magazine*, there was a picture of Cologne Cathedral, and it said, "What is the center of the contemporary art world: New York or Cologne?" I started reading a lot, and I learned about the action happening in Germany. There was a broad cultural sensitivity toward art. You could go into the homes of people who knew nothing about art and find an edition by Joseph Beuys. In America, that would be so sublime, so complex. The Cologne art fair was on fire – it started even before the Basel fair – and Germany was leading the market. There was Rosemarie Trockel, Albert Oehlen, Georg Herold, Martin Kippenberger. A huge generation of very successful mid-career artists.

Germany was where I took my practical education. The first show I curated was called "German Paper," which was a drawing show at Sandra Gering Inc. in 1990. I was sourcing work for it all over. I would go to Stuttgart, Hamburg, Frankfurt. I went everywhere. I tracked down Rosemarie Trockel in a parking lot. In the 90s, she was one of the most sought-after commercial artists in the world. There was a waiting list at Barbara Gladstone. You couldn't imagine the fervor around her work. So I went to Monika Sprüth Gallery – I was this kid in my 20s – and I told them I would like to consign some Rosemarie Trockels. They were like, "Yeah, you and everyone else. Join the list. But there's Rosemarie out the window, go ask her." Her studio was in the same building as the gallery. Monika kept a tight rein on her. So I went running down to the parking lot. "Hiii!" Then she let me have some drawings. She told me I could show them but I couldn't say they were for sale. I *had* to buy them. I was piss broke, and they were 900 Deutsche Marks per piece. I put them on the exhibition checklist as "Not for sale," but of course I sold them to the wife of Max Hetzler, who ended up representing Rosemarie. When word got back to Rosemarie that I sold them, she wrote me a letter saying, "The world is small, and the art world is miniscule."

THE MEAT MAN

I stumbled across one of Paul Thek's *Technological Reliquaries* – the meat pieces – in a book. I had never seen a depiction in any work of art that moved me so much. Everyone knows someone who's died or had a disease. When I was 13 years old, my mother had cancer. She was slowly deteriorating in front of my eyes until she was a skeleton who couldn't hold herself up in a chair. From the day we're born, we're dying. Having experienced a taste of death at an early age, you can never take those visions out of your mind. Everything you see is couched in this exposure to something so vulnerable. To lose the only nurturing figure in your life. So when I saw this Paul Thek work, it froze me in my steps. It was the perfect encapsulation, the perfect portrait of the line between life and death.

He made a work from this series that was a lucite column of yellow plastic. There was a metal column within the column, and within that sat this shard of beef. This manufactured coldness of man-made machines. This Donald Judd language of minimalism, and within it, this exposed flesh. This vulnerability. It's a snapshot of a ripped-open body in this armature. You don't really think about what's inside your body when you're running around, but there are organs in there that are fragile. We're all fragile. We all share the same inner architecture, and sometimes you lose sight of it. With Thek, here it was, preserved in this in-between state.

Paul Thek's life was the same story. No commercial success. He lived a lot of his life in Europe. First, he had a show at Pace in 1964, made the meat pieces, and became famous. Then, when he heard himself described as "The Meat Man," he never made another meat piece again. He was peripatetic, always traveling. Then he returned to New York and worked in a supermarket. When he was in Europe, before the Internet and all the means of communication, when you were out of sight, you were out of mind. Even though he was with Harald Szeemann and in these international circuit shows, when he came back to New York in the late 70s, there was the Transavanguardia. Francesco Clemente had three shows open at once: at Mary Boone, Leo Castelli, and Sperone Westwater. Julian Schnabel was making these rocky plate paintings that were selling for a hundred grand. David Salle was in the spotlight. And there was Paul Thek, making these paintings on newspaper. This disposable garbage material. Thek was too good. It was too bad to be too good. He died of AIDS. Senile. Miserable. Angry.

For me, the whole story has this romantic notion, but more than anything, the work just hit me over the head. I started to buy it. I was the only market for it. When I would get depressed, I would just beg the dealer to sell me a Paul Thek piece and let me pay it off over time. I mean, the prices were 10- to 25,000 dollars. I started to buy what I could and to write about his work, curating shows of it whenever possible. When he died, there was one drawing in a museum in North Carolina. He's now had a retrospective at the Whitney. I sold a piece to a museum in The Hague for a million dollars.

"I think humor is a disarming mechanism. I'm an asshole, so couching things in a sense of humor insulates me from my bad behavior. Humor sustains you the same way art does. It's nurturing. It's life-preserving."

THE 99 PERCENT

Besides the Warhol sale, the other major influence for me was finding Vito Acconci. When I discovered *Seed Bed*, him masturbating under the floor as an art piece, it was like a massive rupture of historical modes of art. The line of art history progresses over centuries from perspective to abstraction – then you have this guy whacking off under the floor. This is an explosion of possibilities. Okay, it's a sensational piece, and later in life he regretted having done it because he just couldn't shake it. But all of his early pieces really struck me. It's danger. It's sculpture. It's formal. It's threatening. It's menacing. It's dangerous. Like life! Like my life.

Acconci made the type of work that would alienate people, but with a language and an economy of means that was accessible to all. Everybody shares the alienation. The insiders are equally afflicted by it. He was concerned with dematerialization. He and his cohorts were trying to make art that couldn't be collected. He suffered so much for his craft. He flitted from one form of production to another and died destitute. He was successful in terms of museum representation, but never succeeded in financial terms. He had no possessions, nothing.

A Porsche RSR Factory Prototype, which finished 4th place at 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1973. It is the jewel of Schachter's office-cum-garage.

Schachter's sky blue, silk-lined sarcophagus, produced by the Joseph Ashong "Paa Joe" workshop in Ghana. Images courtesy of Kenny Schachter

I tried to contact him for an eternity. I just wanted a piece for a show, some interaction with this man on any level. I sent him faxes and called him for ten years. Nothing worked. Then I read that he had switched to architecture, and that he was so desperate for work that he would settle for doing a bathroom. I was reading this in *New York Magazine*. I put down the magazine, called his studio, and left a message. Within 20 seconds, he called me back, and was sitting on my couch two days later. I still have the microcassette of the message, with no device to play it. His voice was so legendary. I was under the thrall of it, too.

Once I had Vito on board, I invited him to design a gallery for me, using Frederick Kiesler as a starting point. In The Art of This Century, the gallery Kiesler designed for Peggy Guggenheim, there was a chair that doubled as a pedestal, a storage device – there was literally a list of 18 functions for this famous chair! Then there was a Lazy Susan, where you could turn the disk and see this little Klee painting on a shelf from the front and the back. Things were cantilevered off the wall with sawn-off baseball bats. After the white cube became the paradigm for presenting art, this was turning it on its head, making an amusement park out of it. I wanted a gallery that wasn't a gallery. I hate the antiseptic, clinical format. That's why I loved Vito. Because while people are in one gallery looking at a pretty picture of a landscape, this guy has built a fake floor and he's jacking off under it. What a nihilistic thing to do! I wanted a gallery that was part Cedric Price's Fun Palace, with Vito on the walls. I wanted his personality smeared over it.

Of course, there was always a degree of sloppiness. Nothing was ever finished with Vito. Everything was behind schedule. I was so lucky to get into his thought process, to be in his presence. He was a poet. Then the words kind of fell off the page, and he started making performances. He used his body as a medium. Then he removed his body from the process and made sound and sculptural installations. But in the art world, when you're making these photographic collages with text and photography, *then* you turn around and you're making unwieldy sculptures, *then* the next day you're doing furniture, *then* you start to do buildings, you basically disavow half your life's output. He was very self-sabotaging, in a way. With new building developments in the US, you have this program where one percent of the building budget needed to go towards a cultural project. Vito said, "I don't want the one percent, I want the 99 percent." After he designed the gallery space for me in New York, I got him a few commissions, and we ended up having this incredible 15-year relationship.

He was pretty chuffed about the gallery. It was called conTEMPorary, and was always meant to be a temporary space. It turned out to be 30,000 pounds of steel, and when I moved, I had to deal with it. I considered putting it on eBay as a joke. This was at the embryonic moment of this Design Art market that the Phillips auction house engineered. They literally gave it nomenclature. Called it "Design Art." So I thought, "Fuck it, I'll just sell the whole gallery at Phillips." The front door spelled out the building number – "fourteen" – in steel block letters, and it jutted into the space and morphed into a window shade made of galvanized steel that peeled off into a desk. Dakis Joannou bought the whole thing. The front door to my house! Then Simon de Pury bought my entire gallery office for himself. It didn't go for much money – I took a beating on it – but the gallery went on to have another life.

Later on, Vito designed a booth for me at the "Armory Show" in New York, and one at Basel Miami. The last show I did with him was in 2007. It was the only new art show he had made in 20 years. He was on his hands and knees at the last minute, writing the text pieces right before the show was about to open. He was so imbued with failure. All the paper started coming up and crinkling. It was so badly done. I remember going into his storage. It was literally just a floor-to-ceiling pile of stuff. He had no organization of his archives. He famously had 15 gunmetal gray filing cabinets from the 50s that were just rammed full of his typewritten texts, all his documentation, all the primary source material for all the most profound pieces that he did.

Electric cars commissioned by Schachter and designed by Zaha Hadid. Photo: Leon Chew

LONDON

I was so bored in New York City by the end of the 90s. When I started, I was showing only unrepresented artists. There was a recession in New York, and there were maybe two or three galleries that would entertain showing the work of an unaffiliated artist. So I started doing these "hit-and-run" shows – this was before the term "pop-up" came about – with unaffiliated artists. But by the year 2000, all the galleries had moved from Soho to Chelsea, and there were now 300 galleries showing emerging artists. So I was bored again. In the midst of this, I did two pop-up shows in London. One in 1996, and one in 2000.

I was attacked and robbed at the second one. At that time, I had a temporary space in Shoreditch, back when Shoreditch wasn't a nice neighborhood. I got myself a video camera and had it trained on the front desk of my gallery, and whenever anyone would come in and try to buy something, it was broadcast live online. It was an art piece designed to make a parody of this transactional situation. Until some guys came in and called me into the back. I tried to get them on camera and launched into some dialectical explanation of the show, which was bad, but not so bad that the guy should start choking me. I fought them off until they threw me down the stairs, threatened me at knifepoint, locked me in the basement,

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and stole everything. They were thieves hitting every gallery, because usually it's just one girl sitting there with a nice laptop. This was a huge trauma for me. When it was over, Keith Tyson came by with a couple of beers. We got drunk, and I opened up again the next week with a security guard. Just after this, I had to give a lecture with Hans Ulrich Obrist at Walsall, and I used the story as part of my act.

I thought I would never come back to London after the experience, but in 2004, we moved here with four children. My wife wanted to be closer to her dad in Europe, and despite my reluctance, I thought, "How many times will I have the chance in life to reinvent myself?" When you're uncomfortable in a context, it activates the senses. The first year I moved to London, I did seven art fairs just to immerse myself in Europe. I had booths at three fairs in Italy. I found that in Britain, artists really communicated with the public, which just didn't happen in the US. I came here and every taxi driver knew who Tracy Emin was.

ZAHA HADID

After curating shows for 15 years, I was burnt out. I did not talk to an artist for ten years. I just couldn't take the art world. At some point, I thought I would get a loan, buy a building, and develop it. Zaha Hadid had been living in London for 30 years and had never built a building in the UK. She won this award in Cardiff to do the Opera House, and they took it away from her. I just cold called her company asking her to do a building. I was terrified of her, so I always communicated through other people, until one day she cornered me and yelled: "What are you doing! Why don't you speak to me!"

After that, she became one of my closest friends. I'll start weeping if I think about it. I loved her so much. We had lunch every weekend for five years. We went to every country together – Korea, Azerbaijan, all over Europe. And people would come running up to her, dodging traffic, and just say, "You inspired me so much." Not even architecture people. Women. Arab women. She didn't break the glass ceiling, she exploded it. It was an extraordinary thing to be near such force.

I never had the wherewithal to make the building with Zaha, but I eventually commissioned two cars from her, a boat, and around ten furniture elements. She kept all her drawings, paintings, and models. In the beginning, she was trying to sell buildings based on abstract, reptilian paintings. When I saw all these models at her Guggenheim show, they were so appealing and jewel-like that I had the idea to make them into objects so that people could have the miniature, if not the building. I curated seven shows for her around the world, with these hybrid projects between design, art, and architecture.

It was a relief to get away from the art business. But my work with Zaha ended up bringing me back to art. The design market had grown and started to ape all of the worst characteristics of the art market. All of the furniture was coming in editions of 12. Everything was a "prototype." What's a prototype? It was all nomenclature, economics. Then the speculation started. People were flipping design pieces. I did Zaha's gallery exhibitions during the recession, from 2008 to 2010, and you could not sell a piece. But in the same period, the art market did better than anyone could have dreamt in such terrible financial straits, while the design market evaporated. Art proved resilient. I had to get back into it out of economic necessity.

THE G WORD

I never foresaw that my writing would have an audience the way it does today. I expose myself to ridicule. To humiliation. To failure. To fisticuffs! But at the same time, I feel that I have a moral obligation to share my findings. Iwan Wirth says everyone in the business of art reads my articles because I'm the only idiot that would say the things I do. He told me, "I love your writing so much, I just wouldn't want to be you." I don't want to be me either!

I've been debating the G word with people for years. It's almost a punch in the face to say I'm a gossip. I mean, I love gossip, but it's a bad term for what I'm trying to do. To me, I'm sharing information. Some of it's salacious. Some of it's serious. Of all the people that are really involved in this business to the extent I have been, none of them have really put pen to paper. I'm interested in sharing my experiences. I did a talk at my kid's school, which is art-focused, and some of the students came up and asked if they could continue the discussion with me, maybe take an internship. Now I've got this meeting at six o'clock with these 15 year olds! My son is like, "What is wrong with you?" But I don't differentiate between a billionaire and a 15 year old, if they have a desire to know.

Writing these experiences diaristically gives a greater depth to these mere commercial acts. I know I contradict myself, but there's a lot of hypocrisy in the art world. That's one of the kernels that I'm after in my writing. I think humor is a disarming mechanism. I'm an asshole, so couching things in a sense of humor insulates me from my bad behavior. Humor sustains you the same way art does. It's nurturing. It's life-preserving.

THE IMP

I love cars because they were my gateway drug into art. I saw these voluptuous objects, and it was the shapes, the forms, the volumes that I was attracted to. When you have a car parked under your office desk all day, you see things you would never notice. The economy of line. The feel. The look. The smell.

With cars now, like art, all of it is going slick. Think Jeff Koons bags for Louis Vuitton. Everything looks the same. Not to be too nostalgic, but when you look back at older cars, things were done for different reasons. Companies used to lose money on these wacky cars. In order to participate in a racing series, there was a process called homologation. When Alfa Romeo, Porsche, and Renault were developing cars for races, they would have to put 500 of these unorthodox models on the road to qualify. So you had vehicles that make no economic sense. I love these oddities. Sometimes I buy them just because of the seat.

I never got into cars for money. Because I loved them as a kid, I maintained that admiration. But there was no profit. I've sold 100 cars since being in London, and I made money on just one. One I got back what I paid for it – 1,900 pounds sterling on an Imp. I just loved the name so much! How do you name a car "Imp"? It's impudence!

BESPOKE DEMISE

In Ghana, you're allowed to be a pauper in life, but you can't scrimp on your death. It's a celebratory way to go out. If you lived your whole life in debt, as long as you die with a flourish, it's acceptable in this community. They make these folk art sculptures that get sunk into the ground. And the coffin makers look for the icon of your essence. Whatever it is that defines you, or how you define yourself. That's what your coffin becomes. If you're a photographer, you're buried in a camera. If you're a lawyer, you're buried in a brogue shoe.

I discovered the coffin tradition in an exhibition in Paris, and I decided to get one made for myself. So I commissioned it from abroad. I write for *GQ* from time to time, and I told the editor in passing that I had commissioned this coffin, and he sent me there to write about it. We live in a world of entitlement. There's so much money floating around, and we're getting to the point where there's almost this idle class of people. I thought it would be a great lesson in humanity for me and my family to exit our comfort zone and land in Africa. So I brought the kids to see their father's coffin being produced. They have a good sense of humor. It wasn't morose. It was a celebration.

When we got to Ghana, the whole place was carpeted with people living on the street. The first thing I thought is that my entire career has no meaning here. How ludicrous and obscene our notion of art is. It just made me step back from the things that I'd been striving for. My nose is against a screen 24 hours a day looking at this stuff. Then I move and I'm faced with the rest of the world. When that art context disappears, there's a whole other set of questioning going on.

My coffin ended up being this crudely rendered Porsche. I had it in my living room for years. It's made of scrap wood, with all kinds of African fabric inside. It was entropying in real time. Even dying in it would be problematic. You know, I would love to write my own obituary, and I would do it in the most fiercely critical way. But if I can't write it myself – these are the objects that will write it for me.

This page: The hood of a 1977 Volkswagen Golf GTI Mark 1
Previous page: Gabriel Schachter paints the walls of the family solarium. Dad doesn't mind.