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Tom Sachs Is Issuing Swiss Passports Out of His London Gallery in an Epic 24-Hour Performance

Bill Powers is among the art world celebs who will be manning the 24-hour pop up.

Naomi Rea



Tom Sachs, Swiss Passport Office (2018). ©Tom Sachs Studio 2018. Photo by Genevieve Hanson, 2018.

“So you like to drink, huh?”, Tom Sachs asks as he peers at me over a clipboard. I’m thrown by this question, and my stomach sinks. Somehow Tom Sachs knows about that time I threw up in a bidet.

I’m seated opposite Sachs in an art installation in London, but the space across the desk between us seems to widen as my discomfort transports me to the fictional Swiss passport office my physical surroundings are designed to suggest.

Feeling the many eyes in the sky upon me—without turning my head, I count four highly customized cameras trained on me—I squirm in my seat as the artist grills me on other examples

of my most cringe-worthy Instagram posts and the details I provided on an official-looking form that asked about my annual salary, my last physical exam, and recent sexual activity.

“I noticed that you left some fields open,” Sachs probes. “Why?”

Eventually, he laboriously taps out a serial number on the antique Smith Corona typewriter in front of him, and I am handed my very own Swiss passport. And while I might be hard-pressed to get across the border with it—the inside is decorated with some of Sachs’s favorite Swiss people, from Lee “Scratch” Perry to Bond actress Ursula Andress—the artist assures me it’s no fake.

“It may not be authorized by the Swiss government, but it’s not fake,” he explains, stamping it with a Tom Sachs Studio endorsement.



Tom Sachs, Swiss Passport Office (2018)/ ©Tom Sachs Studio 2018. Photo by Mario Sorrenti.

At 6 p.m. tonight, Sachs opens his Swiss Passport Office for business to all. In the epic 24-hour-long performance out of Thaddaeus Ropac gallery in London, he will be issuing Swiss passports to people for the equivalent of around \$20. Who says you have to shell out the big bucks to get your hands on an original artwork during Frieze week? You really only need to give up a slice of your dignity.

Entering the Eurozone

Sachs’s project is particularly poignant in an era when millions of innocent people displaced by war and other forces are kept rootless by powerful nations defending their borders. “I don’t believe in these international borders,” he explains. “They are artificial, created by governments and the corporations that control them.”

He chose the Swiss passport because of its prestigious status in the international community. “It’s the most important passport in the world,” he explains. But in this passport office, that status is not reserved for an elite few. Here, anyone can be Swiss. “This is not the way a Swiss passport is, but it’s the way it should be,” he says.

The experience of the performance is a Kafka-esque send-up of the process. “We’re trying to create as many bureaucratic checkpoints as possible,” he explains. Citizenship hopefuls must

take a number, be photographed, fill out forms, sign their names in a ledger, and may be subject to an enhanced interview process.

“We’re interested in profiling. So we won’t be checking out granny’s wheelchair for bombs, but we will be checking anyone who looks like a thug,” Sachs explains. He is making a serious point about proper education and sensitivity training to avoid the tragic results of racial profiling. “I come from a country in which black men are ritually executed while driving for the color of their skin,” Sachs explains.



Tom Sachs, Swiss Passport Office (2018). ©Tom Sachs Studio 2018. Photo by Genevieve Hanson, 2018.

When the artist originally did this installation out of a bodega in New York in 2016, it surely was meant to conjure up thoughts about Donald Trump—whom Sachs describes as “a bully in a position of leadership”—and his ideas for increasingly restrictive immigration policies. Bringing this enhanced version to London as the UK tees up for Brexit adds another layer to the message.

Sachs thinks the country’s decision to leave the European Union is “a mistake.” Departing from the 51-year-old economic accord that brought an end to centuries of conflict across Europe is a massive step backwards, he says, which is why he is only accepting euros in exchange for his passports. “We decided not to reward the UK for Brexit,” he says.

Nor will he be accepting Swiss francs. To be a European country in the middle of Europe and not a member of the European Union, he says, is a “moral crime.” Switzerland’s ethical rap sheet, the artist says, includes its policy of neutrality in global affairs and its position as a tax haven and facilitator of money-laundering for the extremely wealthy.

A Vehicle for Ideas

You can pre-book a time slot to get your €20 Tom Sachs passport between 6 p.m. this evening and 6 p.m. tomorrow. For context on how good of a deal this is, the gallery just sold a Sachs work from its Frieze booth for \$160,000.

Sachs will be staying up all night to oversee the project, but he’ll have help. There will be a series of celebrity clerks manning the passport desks; Bill Powers has confirmed he is participating, and Virgil Abloh, Julia Peyton-Jones, and Amy Cappellazzo have expressed their interest too. After the 24 hours are up, no more passports will be issued, but the installation will remain on view at the gallery until November 10.



Tom Sachs, Swiss Passport Office (2018). ©Tom Sachs Studio 2018. Photo by Genevieve Hanson, 2018.

Sachs will be churning out as many as 3,000 passports. He explains that he is partly channelling the spirit of Joseph Beuys in creating his multiples. In making the objects available to so many, he says, he's increasing the number of people who can experience a connection with his ideas.

Like this new accessible Swiss citizenship, Sachs's passport-based art is no longer the preserve of the wealthy elite. The small works are a vehicle for ideas, and the artist hopes people who get their hands on one will be more connected with each other as well as with the concept. "It's an opportunity for people to talk about the issue."