

VINCENT KOHLER — SOUVENIRS, SOUVENIRS

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The point of departure for *Souvenirs, souvenirs* is an ashtray that Vincent Kohler bought on a trip to the American West in 2008. The ashtray is the shape of the Salton Sea, California's largest lake at roughly 525 square miles, half an hour or so by car from the famous, chic desert resort Palm Springs. The lake is almost twice the size of Lake Geneva. It came into being in 1905 almost like a ready-made when the Colorado River burst one of its dykes and its waters flowed unimpeded into the Imperial Valley over a period of two years, forming the lake at the valley's point of lowest elevation 66 metres below sea level.

In the first decades of its existence the Salton Sea attracted great numbers of yachtsmen, surfers and fishermen. The '40s, '50s and '60s were the region's heyday, turning it into a gigantic gold mine for the tourist industry. Concurrent agricultural development brought with it excessive fertilization and the resulting agricultural runoff upped the lake's salinity, leading to a massive reduction of the fish population. Countless dead fish were washed ashore to decompose and create an unbearable stench. Tourism disappeared, people moved away and the hotels, restaurants and petrol stations were left to rot.

The inhospitality and tragic gloom of the region left a deep impression on Vincent Kohler and motivated him to create a corresponding souvenir of Lake Geneva for the exhibition in the Kunsthalle Marcel Duchamp. As visitors we wonder whether Lake Geneva might not be another ecological time bomb. We are all aware of the artificial lakes in the nearby Valais, the hydroelectric storage reservoirs with their huge dams, whose durability we are loath to contemplate. We also wonder what potential is left for an ashtray today to serve as a symbol of the lightness of being, of freedom and pleasure. In Europe, as in the United States, smoking has been a major contributory factor to the development of disease patterns over the past century. Seen in this light, Kohler's ready-made *Souvenirs, souvenirs* has come a long way from the tourist souvenir that inspired it. It is a complex metaphor for man's paradoxical relationship with Nature, designed to be exhibited in the world's smallest museum against the backdrop of one of Europe's most stunning natural panoramas.

Vincent Kohler, born in Nyon in 1977, has had solo exhibitions in a number of venues including the Musée cantonal d'art, Lugano; Sic!, Lucerne; Les Complices, Zurich; Galerie Edward Mitterand, Geneva; and the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne.