



Tom Sachs A Studio Is a System

The artist Tom Sachs has long embraced what he calls “the right kind of wrong”, a philosophy informed by principles of imperfection and ritual. Known for his hand-built recreations of complex system – *Hello Kitty Nativity* (1994), which sparked early debates around iconography and consumerism; *Cultural Prosthetics*, with works like *Chanel Guillotine* (1998) and *Prada Deathcamp* (1998), exploring the ties between fashion and institutional power; *Unite*, Sachs’s homage to Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’Habitation*, reflecting his ongoing interest in architecture and modular living; *Space Program: Mars* (2012), featuring a DIY Martian habitat and functioning mission control; *Tea Ceremony* (2016), a reimagining of the Japanese tradition using plywood and soldered joints; and other works like *Hermès Value Meal* and a gaffer’s tape *Mondrian*, which examined access, replication and aspiration – Sachs’s work is less about replication and more about process. His New York studio, where he takes this call, is a rigorously ordered environment in which every object and tool embodies a guiding ethos: make everything from scratch and uphold craftsmanship above all. For Sachs, the studio is not only a backdrop for making, but a vital part of the work itself, embodying a lived philosophy of controlling your outer world to sustain the inner one – a premise we explore in this conversation. Sachs also reflects on comfort, discipline, the virtue of working with haste, and how constructing a space, both as a physical environment and a philosophical system, creates a sense of civility. Sometimes, it turns out, a clean sink is all that stands between chaos and clarity.

words RACHEL WEINBERG

RACHEL WEINBERG You grew up in Westport, Connecticut. Can you tell us about your experience growing up there, and whether any qualities of that first home have carried into your life or spaces today?

TOM SACHS Well, Rachel, I think it's worth noting that I didn't come from an art family. The first time I ever went to the Museum of Modern Art was in college. My girlfriend at the time took me to see a Richard Serra show in, I think, 1985.

I grew up in a town called Westport, which was like the suburban Jewish alternative to Greenwich, Connecticut, both were affluent suburbs of New York City. In the 1970s, most families only had one car. The mum would pack the sleepy kids into the back of the station wagon and drive the dad to the train station.

My mum would often meet her friends at the station. One of them was Martha Stewart, who sold farm-fresh eggs from the chickens in her yard. Another was Janet Horowitz, who wrote children's books that included little maps you could drive Matchbox cars around. These women were the ones who raised me.

My mum used to take me to Goodwill, and we'd buy old lamps or furniture, things we could rewire or refinish. In the 1970s, the stuff you'd find at Goodwill was from the '30s, '50s, or '60s and was really nice. Not like the junk you find there today. That's where I learnt how to strip furniture with chemicals and how to paint. I was raised by these really powerful, self-possessed women. They were always making things, not art, but things for the home. It was about making the home better. Even now, in my studio, if I don't know what to do with myself, I'll make a lamp. In fact, I think I have one right here [shows the lamp].

RW Is that made with plywood?

TS Yeah, it's plywood and steel and cork, and this is Lego [points to the lamp's neck]. It's just an obsessive little detail, but it's easier than making a sculpture, and still important.

RW As you started figuring out what you liked and how you operated, ideas began to shape your process. You once said that there are three reasons people do anything: spirituality, sensuality, and stuff. I wanted to ask if you could elaborate on that framework and share how each of those ideas began to show up in your life and practice, even early on.

TS I've always been really interested in stuff. When I was younger, all my friends smoked weed. I did too, but I didn't like how it made my brain feel. Still, I thought bongos were cool. I've always appreciated the objects, even if I'm not into the activity. Same goes for cooking. I love food, of course, but what really excites me is the gear, like beautiful German appliances, French pots and pans.

If we're framing this conversation around the idea of home, then that 'spirituality, sensuality, and stuff' framework really fits. Spirituality asks the big questions: Are we alone? Where do we come from? That's where science and religion run parallel. But in the context of home, spirituality becomes about people, family, safety, comfort and rest.

Sensuality, in a religious setting, might be the smell of incense, the awe of a cathedral, or even the thrill of space travel, the thrust of rockets, that sense of wonder. At home, sensuality is about how things feel: how it smells, whether it's warm, whether there's a breeze, if the air conditioning works in the summer. It's all about the sensory experience.

That's really what architecture is about: how we interact with nature to create a sense of civility. That's where *stuff* comes in. It's the physical things: the furniture, the wallpaper, the objects we touch.

I'm a maker. I'm not James Bond, I'm Q – the guy who makes all the gadgets. For me, spending time making a lamp and obsessing over every detail is my greatest privilege and pleasure. But what's even more satisfying is using it: reading in bed by a lamp I made, turning it on and off, living with it. That's where you really learn what works and what doesn't. I live with pieces in all stages, some perfect, some flawed, some still in development.

RW I suppose the essence of what you're saying is that, while spirituality, sensuality and stuff are distinct, they often intertwine, depending on how you value a particular object or experience. In your life, even something material, like a lamp, can carry a kind of resonance or meaning similar to walking into a church, because of what it represents or how it's used.

TS I've lived in great homes, and I've lived in terrible ones. But coming home and being able to breathe a sigh of relief – knowing you're with people who love you, that you feel safe, and that the ceiling isn't leaking or you're not worried about intruders – that's everything. Creating that sense of safety and comfort is, I think, the most important thing to cultivate.

RW I wanted to talk a bit about your early work, which began in the 1990s while you were working odd jobs, doing lighting displays at Barneys and repairing elevator shafts. One of your early pieces, *Hello Kitty Nativity* features Hello Kitty as the Virgin Mary in a Chanel bra, the Three Kings as Bart Simpson, and a McDonald's logo on the stable. The piece stirred both acclaim and controversy, and introduced themes of branding, iconography and consumer critique that remain central in your work. So much of your work has a tongue-in-cheek quality. It feels like that tone started there and has only been strengthened over time. Looking back, how has your relationship with satire and consumer critique evolved since then?

TS When I was a kid, I used to buy Hello Kitty stuff because it was really high quality and pretty cheap. For a dollar, you could get something small that made you smile. Even if you didn't have much money, you could still walk away with something joyful. I remember buying, or more likely, stealing, my sister's little Hello Kitty pencil set. It came in a plastic envelope with tiny, coloured pencils and a little notebook. So fucking cute.

But back then, I wasn't collecting that stuff for irony or critique. I just genuinely loved it. The Hello

Kitty of my childhood was beautifully designed. It felt like a BMW: perfect and not shitty. It was cheap, but it had integrity. It made you smile in a really pure way. There was nothing tongue-in-cheek about it. As I continued making work, I started shaping the world the way I wanted it to be. With *Hello Kitty Nativity*, I wasn't trying to mock Christianity or Christmas. I love the mythology. I love the Christ myth. I wasn't trying to say, "I'm going to stick it to the Catholics" or anything like that. Even though I think that's how *Hello Kitty Nativity* was received by some people.

My work always comes from a place of appreciation. If it *seems* tongue-in-cheek, it's only because everything I do looks kind of rough. That's just because I'm impatient, and I like to work fast. I actually think there's a virtue to speed. When something's done quickly, it carries flaws, but those flaws are human. If you take your time, you can make anything look like anything. And I know how to do that. I *can* make anything look like anything. But it's far rarer, and more meaningful, to make something that looks like I made it. It's always a fine line. I like to say I work with love and haste.

RW Haste, as in, fast?

TS Yes – fast, hasty. In New England, there's this saying among the snobby carpenters: "There's never time to do it right, but there's always time to do it again." It's meant to scold young carpenters who rush through their work. But I always thought, *that's exactly how I want to do things*. I want to do it wrong and then do it again, so you can *see* that it was done twice. I want to see the pencil marks. I want to see the blade cut. Because if you take your time and do it perfectly, there's less evidence that *you* were there. The imperfections are where the soul lives.

RW Your first major show, *Cultural Prosthetics*, explored what you called the "bourgeois zone", a space of domestic survivalism, where comfort is improvised through repair and absurdity. What are the strange fixes or systems keeping your own space functional?

TS I like when things work. Functionality is really important to me. I love making things from scratch. Everything! There's that old line: "If you want to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe." That's how I feel. It's my pleasure, and honestly my greatest privilege, to be able to make things from the ground up. Of course, that takes time. It means more work. But that's the privilege of what I do.

RW There is a system behind everything you do. In your studio, everything has its place, and it's all organised. You have an approach of breaking things down into stages, creating systems. Have you always been someone who thinks in systems?

TS No, not always. In New York, you *have* to be organised. It's more about keeping your shit together out of necessity. Honestly, if I had more space, things would probably be a lot messier.



Tom Sachs
Hello Kitty Nativity, 1994
Duct tape, plywood,
synthetic polymer
167 x 245.11 x 160 cm

page 134
Tom Sachs
Chanel Guillotine
(*Breakfast Nook*), 1998
Mixed media
373.4 x 309.9 x 317.5 cm



Tom Sachs
Clusterfuck, 2014
 mixed media

opposite
 Tom Sachs
The Sacrifice, 2012
 mixed media
 79 x 15 x 9 cm



RW *Haute Bricolage* embraced the aesthetic of imperfection with burns, messes, so-called “mistakes” that were deemed as meaningful. One piece in particular stood out to us: a DIY filtration device made of a basin, blue water tank, vacuum pipe, and ladder. Do you build things like this in your home or studio? Has your domestic space become a testing ground for these experiments?

TS Well, it used to be that way, but then I made the decision to get married, and now I don't really live in *my* home anymore, so I don't experiment anymore. I used to live in my studio, and I still have an apartment here. In the studio, every square inch, including the ceiling, is something I've made. But at home, it's different.

RW In making things, you not only get to test them, but you also ensure they're right for you.

TS Well yeah, but I'm the only one that matters in *my* home. And in *your* home, you're the only one that matters. That's true for everyone. What matters most is what *you* think. That's what gives you confidence, makes you feel safe, or provides whatever it is you need from that space.

RW You've often said that *everything is art – furniture, sound systems, even the music they play – and that rituals are what bring objects to life. What kinds of daily habits or personal rituals activate your space?*

TS My rituals are pretty simple. I start with my morning AeroPress routine, then I move to ceramics. Every day, I make a cup, a tea bowl or a Chawan. And I always make sure to do *output*

before *input*. Every morning, before I look at my phone, I try to access that subconscious or dream state, just for a few moments, by creating something. Otherwise, I forget it. That's why I believe in starting the day with output – writing, drawing, touching clay, dancing, singing – *before* letting in emails, Instagram, or whatever else.

RW There's an adage that says we control our outer world to help manage our inner world. It's that idea of shaping your space to reflect or process your emotions. With that in mind, I wanted to ask how your work and home environments reflect your inner world? And how much do you consciously control those spaces to maintain a certain mindset or emotional state?

TS That's so beautiful. I've never heard it put that way before. I can't leave a room without putting everything away. Because if I come back and there are dishes in the sink or clutter around, I just don't feel comfortable. I can't think clearly. That's why I invest so much time in systems. I want everything put away, clean, and in its place because it not only looks good, it feels good.

I guess I struggle with that balance, especially being around people – at home and at work – who don't always understand that need. It's not OCD. It's just that I care deeply about my inner world, because that's where the ideas come from. People always ask, “Where do you get your ideas, Tom?” And the truth is, I need to be calm and have my external world organised for the ideas to flow. That's when the magic can happen. But if there's pasta stuck to a plate in the sink, stinking up the

place, I can't work under those conditions. I just can't think clearly.

RW You have a lot of people in your studio, and not everyone feels the same need to control their outer world the way you do. Maybe their inner world is governed by something else, maybe being messy is part of their process. But ultimately, they have to adapt to your way of doing things, because *your* need to control the outer environment is central to how the studio functions. The systems you've created work for you, and they're integral to how the work gets made. So naturally, everyone in the studio has to work within those systems too.

When you're involved and invested in your space, you *become* present in it. I feel like that's what you're trying to embody and pass on. That idea that you have to be fully present in your environment. And by doing that, you create the conditions where the work can actually happen.

TS That's exactly it. You have to understand and accept yourself and your situation so you can have the courage to make the *right* wrong decisions. Because art doesn't make sense. It's not engineering or math. It's not one plus one equals two. In art, one plus one equals a million.

RW And if art doesn't make sense, but the space makes sense, then that structure creates the right conditions for the work to evolve.

TS Well, the space you work in is really important. It helps you hold yourself together. I think it's essential to surround yourself with beautiful



Tom Sachs
 Landing Excursion
 Module (LEM), 2007
 Mixed media
 700 x 670 x 670 cm

things. It's like building your own temple, and once you have that, you can pray. That's why I always say: *always be knolling*. If you don't know what to do with yourself, which happens to everyone, spend that time setting up. That way, when inspiration hits, you're ready to move fast.

RW In your *Space Program: Mars project*, you built a DIY Martian home complete with duct tape, plywood, mission control and survival gear. If you had to build your own permanent Mars habitat, what would it look like?

TS No, thanks! Technically, sure, you *could* build a billionaire's prison cell on Mars. They'd live in a tiny box, drinking their own piss, eating terrible packaged food, with nothing fresh. Or you could spend your life enjoying this warm, wet kiss that is planet Earth. It's the most generous, beautiful place there is. Mars is incredibly hostile. I don't have many fantasies about building a space station there. It's like living at the bottom of the ocean in a box. But I do think it's fascinating that we have this planetary twin. Mars is a kind of mirror. We can look at it and see Earth's possible future. A planet that once had water and now has none.

RW Do you think about inhabiting other worlds?

TS I think about moving to France or Nigeria. This world is incredibly complex, and there are so many places to experience. Every time I travel somewhere new, I'm always amazed by how diverse the world is. I want to explore as much of it as I can before even thinking about another planet. I'm all for sending robots and other people who want to go. I just don't want to.

RW What's usually playing in your home? Music, movies, books? What makes it feel like you?

TS I've been reading a lot lately. I just finished *The MANIAC*, an incredible story about the development of artificial intelligence. I also read *Next to Heaven* by James Frey, which is indulgent, fun, perfect summer reading. Right now, I'm reading a new book by Naomi Alderman. I can't remember the title, but she wrote *The Power*, which is fantastic. In *The Power*, one day women wake up with the ability to generate electricity, like electric

eels. Some women are incredibly powerful, others less so. It totally shifts the balance of physical power between men and women. The story is told 500 years in the future by a male author, whose female editor constantly berates him for being male. It explores a world where women hold physical dominance over men. It's a sci-fi thriller, but also a kind of feminist treatise on power. Really great. It would make an amazing movie.

RW Who or what continues to inspire you to keep pushing your projects forward?

TS James Brown and Fela Kuti are the rhythms in my head that keep me moving, keep me making. I don't really look to other artists in the art world for inspiration, even though there are many I admire, including Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović, Bernini, Chris Burden, Calder. What does inspire me are things like old BMWs from the 1980s. They're like myths now. You can't really have one because they're 40 years old, but I love thinking about that time, when design was beautiful and software wasn't lazy or bloated. Before computers got so sloppy. Although I'm starting to appreciate modern machines just because they're so powerful.

RW If you could live in anyone's home, past or present, whose would it be and why?

TS I'd live with Benjamin Franklin and Bob Marley in the Villa Savoye. It's just far enough outside Paris that you'd be stuck there, and you'd *have* to deal with those two maniacs. I've always wanted to live in that house. To me, it's Le Corbusier's masterpiece, and he's my favourite architect and my second favourite artist of the 20th century.

RW What do you like about Le Corbusier?

TS Even though he has a bit of a bad reputation, I love his idea of elevating buildings off the ground and bringing gardens up above. The way he separated cars underneath created a different relationship between people, nature and infrastructure. There's a great sense of humanity in his buildings. His *Five Points of Architecture* are so simple, but incredibly important. And I love concrete. It's the ultimate building material. I don't think anyone used it better than he did. Sure, a lot of his ideas have been bastardised over time, and

there are some terrible interpretations of his work out there. But he really knew what he was doing. There's still so much to learn from him, especially about restraint.

RW What are your thoughts on the relationship between art and architecture? Do you think those two disciplines are considered closely enough, or are they still too often seen as separate?

TS I don't really draw a hard distinction. I understand the difference between a sculpture, a piece of architecture, and a painting, but to me, they're all part of the same language. They just come with different constraints, advantages, problems and solutions. For example, I don't like irony in architecture, but I need it in literature. What matters across all mediums is beauty, craft and a sense of care – consideration and respect for the user, the reader, the viewer. I'm obsessed with craft. If something isn't made well, I don't care how good the idea is. I lose interest.

RW How do you think your own work reflects this same commitment to craft and respect for the viewer or user?

TS In writing, you're taught to omit unnecessary words. A film should be as short as it can be, but no shorter. Trim every frame. The same goes for sculpture. It should take up the least amount of space necessary, but no less. That doesn't mean it has to be small. A sculpture might need to be the size of a city block. I'm not arguing for smallness for its own sake, but for precision and purpose. That's why I'm always asking: *Can the idea be a painting? Can it fit in the palm of your hand? Can it be a film, something that takes up no physical space, only time?*

RW You've said that sculpture is your art form, but after hearing what you just said, I wonder if it's really about the *object* of sculpture, or more about the *instruction* behind it. What matters more to you: the physical form, or the idea and process that shape it?

TS Neither. For me, it's all about the making.