

# BERGGRUEN GALLERY

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**MEDIA MIX MASTER** | Despite his bad-boy antics, Tom Sachs, photographed in his New York City studio, manages his 15-man operation like a Fortune 500 company. *PHOTOGRAPH BY SEAN DONNOLA*

### SOAPBOX

## Tom Sachs

October 28, 2011

"Creativity is the enemy" is the first rule in artist Tom Sachs's recent short film "10 Bullets." "Stick to what has been defined for you to do." A collaboration with filmmaker and former assistant Van Neistat, "10 Bullets" is a brilliantly twisted homage to corporate training films as well as an amusing look at Sachs's exacting studio process. At the end of the day, for example, all of the workstations must be "Knolled," meaning to group similar objects parallel to each other—a word Sachs picked up from his time working for the furniture company.

A self-described "middle-class kid from Connecticut," Sachs worked with Frank Gehry and Tom Dixon before embarking on his art career, where he gained fame creating cheeky depictions of famous brands, typically rendered in a DIY-style bricolage sculpture: Chanel guillotines, McDonald's Value Meals emblazoned with Hermès logos and enormous Hello Kitty sculptures.

Still, beneath the pop-provocateur veneer, Sachs has always maintained a childlike awe of the golden age of industrial might and technology, most recently in his fascination with space exploration. This spring

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the Park Avenue Armory will be the site of his artistic expedition to Mars, complete with a biology lab for Martian plant cultivation. (Sachs borrowed the technology from marijuana growers.) And this month his show "Work" opens at New York's Sperone Westwater gallery, featuring pieces like a Japanese tea ceremony and a version of Roy Lichtenstein's razor-blade painting "Duridium," made here out of screws.

The show's title is fitting. Despite his proclivity for thumbing his nose at authority, Sachs is, in fact, a taskmaster in the studio. Managing 15 assistants and overseeing his many labor-intensive projects requires creativity as well as equal parts discipline, precision and consistency. "I want things clean and organized," Sachs says, "so that my brain can think."

—Tom Vanderbilt

**Tom Sachs:** "My favorite thing to talk about is work. James Brown said something like, 'I thank the Lord every day that he allows me to work.' For him, it was his honor and privilege to perform to the day he died. I feel so lucky I get to make stuff all the time. The reward for work is more work.

I work seven days a week. My girlfriend is completely freaked out and horrified by this. She wants to do nothing some days. I understand how that's important for some people, but for me I just want to putter around, and in a way get lost in the studio.

One of the ways of understanding the word bricolage, historically, is to 'putter about.' There's something about puttering about, and half working on something and getting lost in the subconscious. I'm very disciplined, but when I allow my mind to wander in those places, I sometimes solve problems that I was stuck on. I think it's very important to think calmly. Every idea equals a certain number of man-hours. You've got to really take your time before you choose red duct tape instead of silver.



We say creativity's the enemy. In '10 Bullets' we call it 'working to code.' In my work I only use white Casio G-Shock DW5600E-IV timepieces. I only use 3M polyguns. I only use Makita batteries. I only use Raleigh "Twenty" bikes from the '60s and Shinburger pedals from Brooklyn Machine Works. I always use three-quarter-inch A-C fir plywood, and we always paint it before we cut it, so that it reveals its construction. I am so consistent with these things that if you see them around different pieces they start to connect with my own language of sculpture.

(left) "Space Suit" (2007-11) is part of the artist's ongoing series about NASA. PHOTOGRAPH BY SEAN DONNOLA

I tried a number of times with other projects to use fabricators. The more I tried to erase the handicraft the way Donald Judd did—first of all, the more expensive it got. Secondly, the more my efforts were hidden. And I realized I'm competing with the people who make seamless objects, where you have no clue how it was produced, like when Roland Barthes talked about plastic, how things appear to be miraculously produced, whether it's a diamond or a bucket. Then I thought, I can't compete with that. I'm obsessed with innovation. It's like that David Foster Wallace thing: If you worship money, you'll always feel poor. If you worship beauty, you'll always feel ugly. If you worship power, you always feel

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powerless. I worship innovation and I always feel like I'm not doing enough new stuff. That's my impulsiveness.

The only prerequisite for working here is you have to have been a dishwasher or a waiter, just to know how bad it can be. Dishwashing is the most disgusting job that a lot of people you or I know have done at one time or another. And being a waiter is one of the most demanding, humiliating jobs that a lot of people have done.



We made '10 Bullets' for the interns, so we don't have to teach them everything. These were things that were just basic in any work environment; 'sent does not mean received' is a profound thing. Half of your job in this studio is doing your work, the other half of your job is communicating that it's been done. Because if you do it, and I don't hear about it, how do I know what's going on? I'm not trying to control everything, but in an intimate work environment, where we're really trying to develop something complex, a nod, saying, 'I got it,' helps moves things along.

(right) The 10-foot-tall "My Melody" (2008), inspired by a Japanese toy, once stood in front of the Lever House. Cast silicon bronze, paint; edition of 5, 120 X 80 X 60 inches, platform: irregular ellipse 81 X 82 X 17 (H) inches, private collection.

COURTESY OF SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK

I've read in the blogosphere that some people hate the film—"I wouldn't want to work there." Other people say, 'I can't wait to show this to my staff.' In fact, it's gone viral in some corporate cultures. They watched it at NASA, and at Nike.

The artist's creative process is a very fragile thing. Nowhere else do you find people who are as brilliant and self-motivated as in the arts and yet as fragile and insecure. Working with 15 people is very difficult. We're trying to cultivate the indulgences of the creative process and, at the same time, eliminate creativity as a capricious gesture. In other words, a little creativity goes a long way. It's like chili pepper. A lot of artists are filled with caprice and silliness. Finding that balance is the key to everything."

—Edited from Vanderbilt's interview with Sachs.

"Tom Sachs," *The Wall Street Journal* [October 28, 2011].