

# HYPEBEAST

## Tom Sachs Talks Spirituality, Sensuality & Hardware Ahead of Major "Tea Ceremony" Show

by Keith Estiler  
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TOM SACHS STUDIO

*"The most powerful tool you have is your subconscious."*

Anyone closely following Tom Sachs' career should know about his *Ten Bullets*. For those who don't, it's a set of rules that the American artist developed for his assistants in 2012 to ensure order, productivity, and zero defects for creating works at his New York City studio. Such rules include "Work to Code" where assistants are ordered to build works off a preexisting concept, and perhaps the most well-known rule, "Always Be Knolling," that instructed team members to place tools back to where they belong in a 90-degree angle.

Shortly after *Ten Bullets* was produced, filmmaker Van Neistat, a close friend of Sachs, translated the studio guide into a film. Seven years later, the duo launched *Paradox Bullets*, short film that offers contradictory rules to the initial directive. "*Ten Bullets* is about the rules of the studio whereas *Paradox Bullets* is about creative problem solving, which at times doesn't make sense," Tom Sachs told HYPEBEAST.

Whether or not any of these rules or directives make sense, Sachs explained that they are the foundation for all of his upcoming projects. More specifically, the guidelines were key in developing his upcoming "Tea Ceremony" presentation at the Tokyo Opera City Gallery. The artist has launched numerous installments of the showcase, the first having been hosted at The Noguchi Museum in New York City back in 2016. However, Sachs says that the latest exhibition will be his largest one yet and is filled with never-before-seen sculptures that were inspired by his deep passion for space exploration and the ancient tea practice from Japan.

Ahead of the "Tea Ceremony" launch on April 20, we phoned in Sachs to learn more about the exhibition, his inviolable *Bullets*, and why he treats his collaborative Nike sneakers as sculptures. Read the full interview below and stay tuned for a recap of the show. And in case you missed it, Sachs also recently launched a pop-up store at BEAMS Tokyo to coincide with the "Tea Ceremony."

BOB COLACELLO



**You share explicit studio rules in *Ten Bullets*. How were they developed?**

Well, the style of filmmaking that *Ten Bullets* follows is called industrial filmmaking. Industrial films, like your first day at McDonald's when you're learning to flip a burger. They teach you how to do stuff. It's a film you might see in school or in the military, so it's not quite propaganda, but it is trying to teach you how to do something, and the *Ten Bullets* is there to teach people on our team or visitors or whatever about the ethics and message and guidelines of what we're about.

**From its launch seven years ago to today, have these rules been updated?**

I think it's pretty well thought out because they were done about five years before that, and they were tested and sort of rewritten for the movie, and I wouldn't say they've changed. They're really not perfect, but they're a compass to point you in the right direction. No one can follow all Ten Commandments perfectly. They're kind of a guide to steer you in the right direction.

**You also offer contradictory rules in *Paradox Bullets*. When is it appropriate to break guidelines or rules in general? For your team members?**

We take this stuff really seriously, and it's not whimsy or caprice. It's deadly serious.

**How deadly?**

It's as deadly as if an intruder comes into your house with an ax at three in the morning. You have to immediately take him out, because of the consequences. There's no alternative, other than death, and with *Paradox Bullets*, it's a way of coming to terms with the contradictions of the rules.

**What exactly spurred the creation of these contradictory rules?**



There's a rule in YouTube filmmaking: "Thou shall not look at the comments." And of course, I've broken the rule by looking at the comments, and people I've noticed seem to be very upset with contradictions. *Paradox Bullets* was our answer to that, which is making a series of *Bullets* and then finding *Bullets* that were the opposite with equal balance. For example, "Do the hard thing first," and then the opposite, "Do the easy things first." The latter gives value to procrastination. The [opposite rules] are almost always true, and it's important to embrace that.

**Are there any rules that you've created that you haven't made public?**

There are so many. One of them is: When you wake up in the morning before you look at your phone or read the newspaper, do a drawing, touch clay, dance, or do something worth an expression of yourself. And then, use those last eight hours for the nonsense things you need to do.

Expressing and creating things that don't necessarily make sense will put your subconscious in a surreal state because the rest of the day will surely take that away from you. Like, whatever horrible thing Donald Trump did that day will find you, you don't need to go search it. These are things that I've learned from the great Edward Tufte.

**So, breaking away from technology, and engaging in this sort of guided meditation for creativity will sort of feed your subconscious?**

Well, I think the most powerful tool you have is your subconscious. That's where your dreams reside, and the inversion of that, is the cold rationality from the external memory of your phone, and it's unavoidable in today's world.

**Is there a solution?**

If you're integrated with other people, you have to be part of



the cybernetic connection that we all share, but your sleep time isn't controlled by that. That's still yours.

**What's very controlled is the traditional Japanese tea ceremony, a ritualistic practice that continues to influence your works, especially your upcoming show in Tokyo. In what ways are you applying your studio rules to this age-old ceremony?**

Well, I'm not sure about the studio rules, but there are three reasons people do anything and that's spirituality, sensuality, and hardware. In the space program, spirituality is asking the same question that science and religion have always asked: Are we alone? Where do we come from? Sensuality is going where no man has gone before, exploring space, g-force of excitement, climbing the highest mountain, and stuff is hardware. Rockets, spaceships, satellites, and cool stuff.

It's the same thing in the tea ceremony. Spirituality is zen. Sensuality is the smell of the tatami, the cuts of the kimono, the taste of matcha, and the third part is stuff, hardware. It's where I come in. The tea bowls, the building the kimonos, making the tea house, the whisks, the katanas that hold the tea, and of course the sculptor, and this is entirely about sculpture. That's what we make. Our priority is sculpture, but it doesn't mean anything without the ritual and without the spirituality and the reasons behind it. You've gotta have all three.

**The power of objects is pivotal in your practice. How do you decide on which objects to create?**

I really make these things for me. The tea ceremony that we make is our tea ceremony. Of course, I have tremendous respect for the Japanese tea ceremony, but it takes a dozen years to be a good guest and three dozen years to be a true host. I'm not going to say that I don't have the time to do it,

but I don't want to wait 20 years. I'm interested in learning now, and using the 30 years of making sculptures that I have as a foundation for the "Tea Ceremony" show.

**What's the overlap between the traditional tea ceremony objects and yours for the exhibition?**

You'll see things that look like all the sculptures that we're making. You'll see screws and hardware, and thumb stains, and pencil marks and evidence of things made in everything in our tea ceremony, and that's why we use porcelain for the tea bowls because you can always see the fingerprints, you can always see that I was there when it was made, and then in 50,000 years when they'll be able to clone me, Walt Disney, and Hitler back from our fingerprints.

**So you're saying that you would have a tea ceremony with Walt Disney and Adolf Hitler?**

No way, I think those people would be at the bottom of my list. I have really no interest in Hitler or Disney, but I think these are people worth mentioning as the most revered and feared heroes. The people that I would want to have in my ceremony are people that are great leaders with a good moral compass, like Benjamin Franklin or Bob Marley would be my top two.

**What will the final installation look like for your show at Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery?**

This is our fourth exhibition of the "Tea Ceremony." It's a great honor to be invited here and there will be a bunch of new work at the Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery. It's a prime spot in Shinjuku. It's big and there's a lot of care to the environment. I'm working with a great art production team called Tokyo Studio that's helping us install and build a koi pond.

I would advise any young aspiring artist to stay away from

BOB COLACELLO

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water. It's very dangerous. It will ruin your life. It's not like gonna drown you, but it ruins every material around you and we've really struggled with our koi pond.

**Any closing thoughts for our readers?**

We're also doing a show at Tomio Koyama Gallery, and that's in Roppongi Hills, and I've been working with Tomio for over 20 years, and this is the best show we've ever done. If HYPEBEAST readers are into what we did with the shoes and everything, I would encourage them to go see the sculpture there because it's the original generator and I'm very proud of the sneakers we did, and I consider them sculpture first.

Also, if they're interested in learning more about the works of the "Tea Ceremony," the show really embodies the values of the studio more than anything else because they're about the transparency of the material. You can see how things were made.

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All Images Tom Sachs Studio

