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“We’re more flexible than Elon Musk”

Tom Sachs' art oscillates between playfulness, esotericism, craft and critical conceptual art. A conversation about his latest mission to the asteroid Vesta, shredded cell phones and what art he would send into space. BY MELANIE VON BISMARCK / PHOTOS: JULIA STEINIGEWEG

Mr Sachs, your space program started in 2007, you sent excursions to the moon, to Mars, to Jupiter’s Moon Europa. You leave people like Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson far behind – you must be proud.

I am. I have a lot of respect for my competitors, but I'm not really interested in waiting for all the necessary ingredients to go. Life is short, so we must go now, even if it's imperfect. I have friends who spend half a Million dollars renovating their vans going on these perfect camping trips. But I'll take the van that I have that's imperfect, do it with an umbrella and just go.

Space exploration is supposed to be the peak of human scientific-technological achievements. At the same time humans take off for planets they gave the name of gods. Religion and science meet - as in your work. Is that also a reason why space travel fascinates you?

I think that it is space travel where science and religion intersect. There are three reasons why people go to other worlds. They do it for spirituality which is like science and religion answering the big questions: are we alone, where did we come from. They do it for sensuality, for the smell of the rocket fuel, the smell of the matcha in the tea ceremony, the Tatami, the incense of the church. People go to other worlds because they love rocket ships and a great cathedral. These are the best

made things of any era. And maybe that's the part where I come in most meaningfully only as a sculptor. Because this is all sculpture. And the landing module is maybe my greatest sculpture to make, a full size LEM, that stands on its own four legs without a central column holding it up like most homemade LEMs have.

The destination of your interstellar mission is the asteroid Vesta. What's the goal of this mission?

We make a billion and a half cell phones every year. I have if you add up my computers and my iPad and my phones which are all capable of being cell phones, at least three in this. So we are stripping the earth of its natural resources. We are running low on gold. We've run out of rare earth elements here, so we have to go to another world to get them. Vesta is the 4th largest asteroid in the asteroid belt. And this belt is between Jupiter and Mars. It was discovered in 1807 by Heinrich Wilhelm Olbers here in Bremen, an important philosophical scientist and astrophysicist. So in a way it's a homecoming to this part of the world, Bremen is not so far.

Why the asteroid Vesta?

Vesta was named after the goddess of hearth and home. And it's no irony that we are going to the goddess of hearth and home as we are destroying this hearth and home. There is the Myth of Vesta that she protects the flame and keeps it going. And she has 16 vestal-virgins, who are her assistants, and if you have sex in one of those, you and the virgin are burned at the stake. So no messing around with a flame. You are striking to the heart of the temptation of sex and the ultimate punishment which is death.

Beyond that – does ancient mythology play a role for you?

The more I learn and educate myself the more I believe that my religion is the classics. That I am I think Pagan in that the values that we learn from the greek mythology are the most useful, because we are not bad, we are not God or the devil. There's no original sin. We are Apollo *and* Dionysus. We are Saturn, we are Zeus, we are all of these people, we are Achilles, we are Icarus. All of these stories, these parables, happen to all of us at one point in our life. And what we must do is learn from these gods and from their stories so we're not forever running from the minotaur in the labyrinth away from our problems that we face, and we fight them so we can escape, that's what the hero does.

Roman Vesta priestesses, the vestals, where supposed to keep the contact with the gods. You always send female astronauts to the planets. They seem to me like priestesses in a quasi-religious cult. Too far-fetched?

I like that. There are many reasons why we send women. Number one they're more interesting and sophisticated. They're also the reproducing elements. The men only carry the code, but the women carry the mechanism for reproduction. Were very close with genome coding where we'll be able to send code by radio signal. And then have humans grown far away. That's how we will conquer interstellar travel. They send by radio the sequence of the genetics and then have a being generator or grower on the other end. I think that we're generations away from that. But conceptually you can in this conversation we can understand how that's possible. That will be the way we travel. But for now, then we can just send some women and embryos to go.

In the exhibition there is a dig-site, we have a Mission Control Unit with all the monitors, the LEM, the landing excursion model, which is the replica real NASA LEM.

I would start by saying that it's not a replica, but it is real. We're in a *Kunsthalle*, we are not in Cape Canaveral in Florida. I would like to say: We have our spaceship. It's like dub music. It doesn't have the essential thing, the words, but it has some more meaningful things like heavier drum beat. It's

the version, that allows the artist, the DJ, to add more to it and make it his or her own. In the same way this space program, our Lander, is real. It stands on its own four feet.

So it has everything, that the Lander, that's on the moon, has,

It has more. We have a sound system, a bar, a flushing toilet. Ours is made of plywood, so you can see how everything is made. There's a transparency, that connects us, you and me and everyone, who's part of this. And you're part of the space program now too, because you're recording this conversation. These things connect us. So this space program is not a performance, but it's a live demonstration of our systems. And our systems are maybe a little idiosyncratic or Byzantine, but they are authentic to the culture of the studio. Because we don't have to have the other NASA compliance, we have our NSA compliance. We have more flexibility than Elon Musk does. We create the world not the way it is, but the way we want it to be.



The whole space landscape here is handmade. It will come to life in the 12 hour live demonstration. All the objects carry the traces of their coming into existence, which is central to the aesthetics of your sculptures, like the leaf blower made of plywood for example. The sculptures are made of everyday material, put together with hot glue. How did this start? With the camera you built for your father?

My father wanted this camera. He talked about it a lot. And so I went ahead and I did my best to make it for him in clay. Obviously, it didn't really work. But I made the film to fit into the back and I made the lens, and I made the button, and I made the Winder, and I made the brand icon. So did everything that I could to make that camera be as real as I can. I used all of my resources in the same way that I've used all of my resources as 55-year-old man to make this space program function the way it needs to, the way I want it to provide a framework or armature for all of our ritual activities.

I think emotionally I understood that for my father it may have not been about the moment of the moment of image capture, but also the possession of a piece of beautiful engineering and industrial craft and a beautiful Olympus or Nikon or Leica camera those like represent like the highest level of technology for a SLR camera in the 70s. Later when I was a teenager my father gave his real camera, the Olympus Om-1 camera to me and I was the yearbook photographer. So it was kind of sympathetic magic in that that camera came back to me.

Have you never had the dream to go to the moon yourself?

I'm currently in astronaut training for a mission to go to the moon with SpaceX and a project called *dearMoon*, where they're sending eight artists to go to the moon and back. I don't know if it'll really happen, because it's a couple of years away and there are others, and I don't know if I will be chosen. But it's clearly because of my involvement in this project, my commitment to studying this, that I'm being examined as a possible candidate. And so this entire space program, it's sympathetic magic.

We find some symbols in your work and I cannot say where they come from. Are they Freemasons-symbols or from Satanist cults?

A lot of the values of the Church of Satan are in this work. The *11 satanic rules of the earth* which are taken from Anton LaVeys Church of Satan from the 1960s. The 11 satanic rules of the earth are scripture to us. They're all good things, based on the 10 commandments, but there are more realistic. And we live by them.

When you say 'we' you mean your team in the studio

Everyone in the studio believes. We are all Satanist.

The video *10 bullets*, is a manual with guidelines for employees and visitors of your studio. It is an ironic but rigid code of conduct. What you demand is absolute commitment for instance. The claim seems totalitarian, I associate religious sects. And in the exhibition, there is the areas of indoctrination and reeducation-centre, that remind us of totalitarian states. If there wasn't so much to laugh about in your work, it would be really scary...

Well, it's not that we are like a cult, we *are* a cult. And you are part of our cult now and so are you, dearest reader, you are part of the cult. It doesn't mean, that you have to adhere to our values. We don't want you. We're too busy building our cult. If you align with us, you are one of us. If you don't, you don't. But it's important that the values of this studio are strictly defined, so that you can understand your place in our world. This is an open cult. For example, you have your social media, maybe you're on Instagram or Facebook. Many people follow you and you follow them. You are part of their cults, and they are part of your cults. People have greater or lesser degree of commitments. What's important, is that our values are clearly defined, and we do make movies like *10 Bullets*.

The code of conduct *10 Bullets* and the way the work is organized in your studio reminds me of the medieval *Dombauhütten*, the cathedral building loges, where craftsman, carpenters, brick layers, Smiths and so on came together. They also had strict regulations and clear ethical standards. Did they serve you as a model?

Thank you, I take that as a huge compliment. Yes, a spaceship is a cathedral. The largest room on earth is the Vertical Assembly Building in Cape Canaveral. That's the room where the Saturn V moon rocket was assembled. It's over 304 hundred feet high, it is the largest room on earth. And we built a small one in there, it's like 17 feet high. It's like a cathedral, the largest buildings of their time. And this is the largest single room of our time. They're both portals to other worlds. It's a room where you

go in and then when you leave the room eventually, you're in another dimension. It takes generations to build a cathedral, it takes generations to build a space program.

How many people belong to the studio team?

On the core studio team In New York there are 22 people and about half of them are here. So are our local coven of 12 here are working to realize those dreams and bring them to Hamburg and to Vesta. But in a sense the project is larger than any one of us. That's not unlike a cathedral. Or a major motion picture. I might be the director or the lead shaman or whatever, but it doesn't work without everybody else. I'm just like a part of it. It's an Organism, and if my ideas are too aggressive or progressive or sudden, I'll be surrounded by white blood cells and ejected.



You have put the two towers of the cathedral of Chartres on top of a tool cabinet, which looks like a holy shrine from the inside.

Yes, in the transubstantiation area. The transubstantiation occurs when you take your phone, your extension of your body and soul, which has all of your information, and you submit it. You crush it We have a crusher, it's called the active submission. Then it goes into a little ship that sails to the next dimension through a hole in the wall to the transubstantiation chamber which is the one that has all the tools in it. And there the phone is disassembled. The battery is removed, and the little vibrating motor is removed. A photo is taken of you from your social media how you choose to represent yourself. Foto, battery and motor are assembled to create a vibration instrument, which is to vibrate the lower shakra, the sexual shakra, to remind yourself, that you are a human being that you are sexually reproducing being. That object which is like your portrait of you as a sexually vibrating creature goes in a shrine with the cabinet of all of the people who've submitted to this. Then there's still lots of you left because that's just maybe your body right, but there's still your SIM card and your memories in your Apple ID and the part that lives beyond you after you're gone. Your soul maybe, I don't know what you want to call it.

But the SIM card is destroyed...

Well, it's destroyed, but it's still in there. There are ways of getting your SIM card out, with extreme work you can scrape data, it's possible. But it then goes into a blender. And then it's *really* chopped up. And the data is in there but it's very hard to decipher. All the atoms are separated and ground up and turned into dust. Sort of like what happens to you after your body dies. There's still some electricity, some memory in there, but it fades. We don't know how to capture it, yet we don't have technology. We don't know if it's still there or not. We just don't have the science or faith that's organized sufficiently to really understand it. But certainly, your memories live on. And certainly, you have emails from people in your life that are dead now. And their voice is still there, and you might have video of them, and that voice is still there. And if you could imagine, if we invested sufficient energy into that you could have a sort of sense of immortality providing, you're willing to live with the reduction in the reproducing arts.

So I give away my cellphone, my soul ...

Well, maybe not your soul. But the part of your soul that's connected with this.

And I gain something, maybe another kind of existence.

That's your judgment. I personally agree with your judgment, but that's not for me to say, that's for you to say, what you gain. The gift that you get is nothingness. What you get is your freedom back, which is the most valuable thing. Let me go on. You have lost the battery, lost the motor of the cellphone. The SIM card, which actually does have all the information, you put this to a blender. All the glass and plastics are blended and turn to dust. And then we wash the dust and extract all the gold. If you take 5000 phones, there's enough gold to make a Golden Idol. So we wash 5000 phones and we extract the gold. We've done it this year and we have collected gold. We pour the gold into a mold and make a golden idol that we worship. Then we bring The Golden Idol to the Vertical Assembly Building. We put it on a pedestal in a shrine and we can pray to it.

And I am allowed to look at it, as soon as I undergo the process of indoctrination?

Yes. And there is the other path. After the gold is stripped, we still have some base materials from your Cellphone: steel, silica, plastic, a lot of carbon, really like dust. That gets mixed in with our special black paint. In the can I write this number 10 to the 80 th power. This is how many atoms there are in the entire universe. Not so many. And that is in every breath you take you are breathing in part of Julius Caesar's body, his toenail is in your breath. We are all made of Stardust. So the phone is mixed with black paint, that we use to create our abyss, our emptiness of space. So from your phone we have a golden idol and the abyss - the most refined, most spiritual, and the most nothingness. The abyss is in several places in the exhibition. Every time you see black. Like the entrance is the abyss.

Transubstantiation in Roman Catholic faith is not only a symbolic thing. It but means that wine and bread are really turned into flesh and blood of Jesus, thanks for divine power. So I wonder if visitors, who will submit to the whole procedure, will not be different when they leave the exhibition.

They will if they're of faith. They will if they believe. We believe. We believe that this is a better way. Unlike Christianity, it's not important to us, that you believe. It's not important, that you believe or not. It's entirely up to you. And we hope that you either believe in our way or create a way for yourself that's authentic to you. Because above and beyond we believe in authenticity. We are not evangelists. If you want to be part of us, we have lots of ways in...

I could for example buy in your shop a shirt or a sticker or something like that. If I spend a little bit more money, I could also buy sneakers. The sneakers are perfect and expensive items, how does that fit into your do-it-yourself aesthetic?

Good news and bad news. The good news is, we made sneakers so everyone could be involved and could connect their bodies with the earth, through our shoe. The bad news is, we didn't make enough of them. So they sold out too quickly and they're very expensive. The good news is we are making more of them and hopefully they will be accessible. This is the plan. So the idea is, you can represent your shared values of us through wearing the sneakers or to some extent. because... If you watch *Heroes Journey* - did you get to watch the video? (shown in the indoctrination center, d. R.) You know Joseph Campbell's *Heroes Journey*? It's the model of every classic myth. The hero refuses the call actually, is thrust into the situation, is forced to confront his fears, eventually kills the dragon, but not before meeting the goddess. And becomes the teacher in the end. Every story is this. But everyone's in a different stage. Even when you complete it, you start again at the beginning, until you are no more. The sneaker is an expression of that, it is the expression of our values.



Some last words to the tea ceremony. In the exhibition there is area devoted to tea ceremony.

The tea ceremony to me is art. There's a lot of art in here, but I try and not use that word, because I think, that it means too many things. For me the tea ceremony is a lot like the space program. It has spirituality, Zen. It's like where we come from, where are we going, which is in a space program going where no man has gone before. It's got sensuality. The smell of tee or the tatami, that smells like hey. The touch of the kimono. But again, most of all as a sculptor it's stuff. So I love to build, to research the space program to build and to explore the space program. My job as an artist is to educate and entertain myself. So I get to learn all about science and engineering and build such a thing which I am very proud of the. In the tea ceremony it's the same. Whether it's building the

teahouse or the chawan. I made a 1000 tea-bowls. I am an intermediate level ceramic artist. I'm not master yet, I'm on my way I'm learning. I've only been doing it for 10 years.

On your personal scale of values – where does stand the Tee Ceremony

If you can pick those three things: spirituality, sensuality and stuff, I think the tea ceremony represents the best of what earth can represent as art. So if I were to take art to another world, what art object would I send? A Jackson Pollock or Vincent van Gogh? Now I would say: take the tea ceremony, that's my one work of art and I would say an entire tea ceremony from 1535 as presented by Sen no Rikyus to Toyotomi Hedeyoshi in the cloister Daitoku-ji in Kyoto in May. That would be, what I could send as art. That's sort of my version.

This installation for the tea ceremony does something to all the other things around it...

It's important like what are we doing here on earth. It's a very fucked up world where there's lots of wonderful and horrible things going on. The best way that I can help is not by focusing on the anthropocene and the horror of it, but by showing the beauty, you know, in everything. These horrible rocks that are made of natural material and plastic that are being formed in the ocean. This one of the main things that the anthropocene will be known of. Pretty soon we will all have plastic in all of our bodies. To have all that petroleum mixed in with your biological system it's so pervasive, maybe it is the end of us. I don't know enough about the science of it, but I do know enough that it's not good. The part that I am focused on, is the part of it that is beautiful, wonderful. Things that we can do with these materials, like those milk crates, there are plastic. Milk crates are wonderful because they're using petroleum to make an heirloom product like those crates, that will last longer than us. Disposable stuff I am worried about because it is a single use. They're the same material it's just how we manage the resources.

Melanie von Bismarck works as a freelance cultural journalist and author, among others for the NDR. She also produces audio guides for museums and exhibition spaces.

The exhibition [TOM SACHS - SPACE PROGRAM: RARE EARTHS](#) will be on view at the Deichtorhallen Hamburg from September 19, 2021.