

Fetishism, Youth and Violence in the Work of Tom Sachs

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'I Don't Think I'm a Fetishist'¹

'I used to think you were insane, but now I can see your nuts.'—
Austin Powers

That old joke encapsulates a number of key features of Tom Sachs's work: it gets two of the three references in the title *Nutsy's* (the other is to nuts and bolts); and Powers says it while hanging from the trousers and in uncomfortable proximity to the tattooed buttocks of his would-be nemesis Dr Evil, whose maniacal construction of absurd weapons of mass destruction has a close kinship to Sachs's obsessive tinkering with guns, bombs and soundproof bolt holes.

Trying to get to grips with *Nutsy's*, an installation in which Sachs had set up a racetrack for remote-controlled cars that took in the sights of scale-model modernist masterpieces and ghetto dives, surveillance cameras and an airgun, a burger cart and massive sound system, one critic was moved to comment:

Sachs seems ultimately indifferent, not critical, towards a stratified society in which some can afford Brancusi while others get burgers 'n' bullets; in this sense *Nutsy's* politics are closer to the mentality that brought us *Grand Theft Auto III* than Documenta 11.²

And Sachs plays to the image, creating a *Delinquency Chamber*, equipped with the essentials of cold beer and weaponry, and built for the uninterrupted and utterly focused enjoyment of the game, which he praises as a great work of art:

...the possibilities to fatten up your character by eating hamburgers, the narrative freedom to go on a cop killing rampage, the stellar range of licensed music from Hank Williams to James Brown, or the pitch-perfect balance of fantasy and violence, humor and realism such as picking up a prostitute, being serviced by her to up your health level, then beating her to death and taking back your money.³

Nutsy's was designed to be looked at by art audiences but was also set up to have race parties, with a trophy, a tally of winners, and the supply of beer, burgers and very loud music. Unlike much recent art that, with more or less pronounced tinctures of irony, establishes settings in

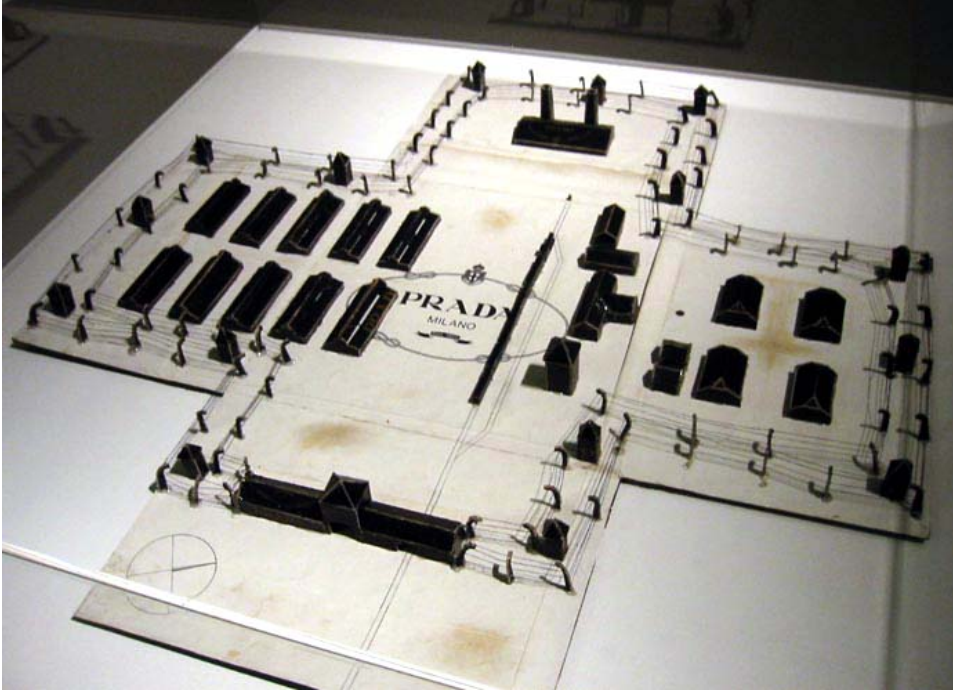
¹ Tom Sachs in an interview with Jon Kessler, *Bomb*, Spring 2003, pp. 69-75:

<http://www.speronewestwater.com/cgi-bin/iowa/articles/record.html?record=201>

² Maika Pollack, 'Tom Sachs', *Flash Art*, March-April 2003, p. 107.

³ Sachs' statement on *Delinquency Chamber*: http://www.tomsachs.org/reference/delinquency_statement.htm

which people can interact in unfamiliar ways, and often breeds awkwardness or incomprehension, Sachs appeals to a particular social niche: hip, smart, youngish and boorish males. Another critic wrote of an earlier show which included homemade firearms that it might make you think of security or paranoia but that would be to miss the point, which is ‘about indulging all the impulses of your average 12-year-old boy’.⁴



So Sachs’ work has certainly provoked critical suspicions, aside from his notorious displays in the exhibition about contemporary responses to Nazi imagery, *Mirroring Evil*—the fashion-house gas canisters and the *Prada Death Camp*. The conservative view of this response would be to say that he is simply having too much fun, is insufficiently guilt-ridden, and celebrates commodity culture as much as holds it up for examination and critique; naturally all kinds of leftist nay-sayers can hardly wait to stick the boot in. Another response would be to say that Sachs’ work genuinely disturbs art-world hierarchies; that although we have had very numerous artists wrapping themselves in the mantle of naïve or dumb or disturbed youth, and although the lowest techniques and materials have been pressed into the making of art objects, that Sachs lifts some other as yet undisturbed stone. Perhaps that stone is something to do with commodity culture, and the critique of capitalism itself, troubling just because it is encased in such apparently light, entertaining and publicity friendly work, rather than shrouded in drab didacticism.

Most people experience commodities as workers and shoppers. As workers, many feel little identification with the products that they labour over, responding to orders from above, working to a rhythm not their own, and generally seeing only a fragment of the finished result. As consumers, in the classic account of commodity fetishism by Marx, they come to

⁴ Mark Van de Valle, ‘Tom Sachs: Morris Healy Gallery, *Artforum*, March 1996, p. 100.

understand that each product has a relation with every other through its price.⁵ All commodities, however diverse they are in the way that we use them, are arrayed on the single scale of price. Prada gowns talk (down) to those in Topshop, Nikon cameras to Kodaks, Mickey Mouse to Hello Kitty, and through the medium of exchange all commodities appear to talk to each other. In this sense, there should be nothing surprising about Sachs' *Tiffany Glock*. It is just a literal rendition of that constant murmuring of one product to another, the effect of which is to blot out the realisation that consumer goods are made by people in circumstances that range from the tolerable to the grossly oppressive, and that such goods are the material realisation of embodiment between people—owners, shareholders, workers, shippers and shoppers.

Ideally, artists who work on a small scale, alone or with a few assistants, are not supposed to be alienated from what they make in the way that factory workers are. Their products are, after all, personal, and while dealers may demand particular products, it is an artist's sole choice to produce an eight-foot-high foamcore rendition of the rabbit Miffy. This problem of the worker's alienation has always been easier to escape from, at least temporarily, than that of the fetishist misrecognition of commodities. Artists, in their enclave that protects them from the full rigours of consumer culture, produce works that are valued because they appear to be rare emanations of pure individuality.⁶ Other people may experience such relief whenever they work solely for themselves in their gardens, allotments or sheds. But if alienation is conquered in art's production, fetishism does not shun the resulting works, which confront the viewer in a manner every bit as metaphysical and theological as any other consumer product (and occasionally more so).⁷

Sachs offers a programmatic and multi-pronged assault on the problem of commodity fetishism. It is most obvious in his use of 'bricolage', or make-do techniques of building things, that he takes first from hands-on instruction from practitioners in poor countries (where these techniques for reusing the discarded and obsolescent are matters of survival, rather than the preserve of artistic entertainment), and only later from Lévi-Strauss.⁸ To walk the streets of any Third World city, or the more neglected areas of many cities in the West, is to be beguiled by the ingenuity by which old consumer items, garbage and packaging are turned from their original use. Sachs' smooth-bore zip guns are dark pieces of bricolage, simply constructed from bits of piping and other scraps of metal, bound to a wooden frame.

For Lévi-Strauss bricolage is connected to the fetishist apprehension of a limited number of embodied signs that hold sway over the world. The combination of these elements in bricolage is constrained by their embodied meanings, each of which contributes to the structure of significance in a society.⁹ Of course, brands seek to hold such a sway over the imaginations of consumers, and their meanings are certainly policed by incessant propaganda, and litigation against those who violate them (the Barbie Liberation Organisation, for example, which hacked the voice-boxes of the dolls to make them say

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex 1976, ch. 1, and especially pp. 163ff.

⁶ I have written about the place of the artist in relation to work and leisure culture in my book *Art Incorporated*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004, ch. 1.

⁷ The terms 'metaphysical' and 'theological' are Marx's; see *Capital*, p. 163.

⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1966, pp. 16-36.

⁹ Lévi-Strauss, p. 19.

‘Math is hard!’.) So Sachs, with pieces like *Prada Toilet*, uses the technical methods of bricolage to break with and illumine the brand’s mythic elements.



In his work, Sachs does not merely show that there is a great deal of labour put into the object (which is quite common with many art objects) but is careful to reveal many details of construction with traces of tape and glue, screw holes and other tool marks that Sachs calls ‘the scars of labor’.¹⁰ The works may set out to impress by the sheer quantity of labour taken to construct them, but not in their construction methods which are transparent and even documented in videos. In this sense, Sachs holds back from one of the commonest and most authoritarian sources of art’s power, analysed by Alfred Gell: the effect of awe and wonder, of submission pressed on the viewer who cannot work out how a thing of such virtuosity and complexity was made.¹¹ This revelation also works against a common side-effect of fetishism which is to conceal all marks of labour in the consumer product, presenting a slick, unitary surface, as if the device had fallen from the skies rather than being the product of machine and human hand.

Against bricolage, Sachs pitches two main enemies, one instrumental, one utopian: mega-business and modernism, personified respectively by McDonalds and Le Corbusier. McDonalds is cut down to size with model burger carts and various scatological jokes. Modernism and Le Corbusier’s iconic buildings, including the Villa Savoye and the Unité d’Habitation, are rendered in remarkably precise scale models. There is a tension between the vast amount of labour-time poured into these models and the cheap and temporary material of which they are made—polystyrene (or foamboard) veneered in paper. This casts at least an academic doubt over the status of the finished models as commodities (although they have been bought and sold), since the work could be seen as performance of which the models are a by-product. Modernism is both lauded and shrunk in these meticulous homages. As Lévi-Strauss remarks, reduction of scale, a commonplace of bricolage, extends our apparent power over the thing represented, making it appear more easily graspable, physically and mentally.¹²

¹⁰ Interview with Kessler.

¹¹ Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, pp. 68-72.

¹² Lévi-Strauss, pp. 23-4.

While in capitalist society the exchange of commodities is valued over their use, Sachs sets up structural oppositions between different elements in his work: so the guns made of fashion-house cardboard packaging are fine renditions of the image of the weapon but do not of course function, while the zip guns, some of which have been made using pieces of wood from police barricades, do. The latter are also images of revolt against the agents of the state, the ultimate breakdown of the commodity system in which its products are reworked as the weapons that destroy it.

Finally, Sachs appears to assault brands, associating fashion with Fascism (and anyone who has seen the camera lingering on the details, and particularly the polished leather, of the Hugo Boss SS uniforms in Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* can grasp the connection), through rude humour, and by seeing commerce as the crude underside of discredited modernism.

In the results, there is a sharp tension between the form and content of these objects (that lead towards a critique of the commodity) and their status (as unequivocal commodities of a quite conventional sort—some would even call them 'sculpture'). But this seems to be something that neither the art world nor the brands concerned seem to have found worrying. Indeed, as has often been recounted, Prada so loved the *Prada Toilet* that they offered Sachs a free supply of their shoe boxes.

Kill All Artists

'White riot - I wanna riot
White riot - a riot of my own
White riot - I wanna riot
White riot - a riot of my own'
--The Clash

Perhaps that lack of disturbance is to do with Sachs' artistic persona, the teen rebel who is apparently indiscriminate in his targets and certainly irresponsible in his methods. Sachs' works are often scrawled with obscenities and punk lyrics. The enthusiasm for weapons, video games and sound systems is apparently genuine. Then, there are many crude jokes: 'assburgers' were supplied at *Nutsy's*—a burger wrapped in a photocopy of the server's rear end.

This stance is linked to the examination of commodities: first, because adolescents often have passionate identifications with commodities, to such an extent that they make meticulous hand-made copies of brand labels. Sachs did this himself as a youth, customising his car, and over-painting the brand name on his skis with a more prestigious one. Later, Sachs says: '...when I was able to see how debasing it is to find self-esteem in brands, I look duct tape and covered up every logo in my life'.¹³ This was to replace one labour-intensive, d-i-y response to branding with another. For some adolescents the brand is a fetish object, not metaphorically because of the concealment of social relations, but literally because it is an object of worship. That level of identification can lead to violent disavowal of the object

¹³ Tom Sachs to Julie Caniglia, '80s Again: Tom Sachs', *Artforum*, March 2003, p. 240.

of worship, as we saw with Sachs' own act of iconoclasm, and to a simultaneous love and hatred of the enslaving brand.

Second, time seems to stretch endlessly in youth, allowing extraordinary feats of mind-numbing manual labour, whether it is the painting of hundreds of model soldiers, making zip guns, or generally prizing objects out of the regular circuits of commerce by adaptation and misuse. In many of his pieces, Sachs emulates that activity, for example by over-painting of consumer objects so that record-players are personalised, the logos reproduced in painted handwriting, the control instructions with idiosyncratic inscriptions, often a little rude. There is quite a strain of this aping of adolescent activity running through contemporary art, with artists making fan paintings (like Peyton) or pouring out works about their tortured psyches (Emin), or constructions of adolescent spaces (Starr's teenage bedrooms) or ramshackle macho tastelessness (Rhoades).

Sachs interest, though, seems particularly focused on the intersection between youth and the commodity, and what is important here is the adolescent attraction to conspiracy theory, the idea that all things are connected at some occult level, leading to the promiscuous shuffling of associations that is such a salient feature of postmodern culture. Sachs' links page on his website is a melange of cultural artefacts, slightly twisted from the norm, that takes in sites about death row; of the great state spying organisations and their subversive opponents, whether they be Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam or the American Nazi Party; sites of cartoons, weapons manufacturers (for the consumer and the military), fast food, tools, fashion, novelty gross-out sites and those devoted to modernist heroes.¹⁴ In some, such as heavy.com, you get improbable cultural mixing: gutter-humour mutations of computer games; the subversion of adverts and brands, for example the reworking of Disney characters with striptease and fetish gear. And here we are back to Austin Powers, the knowingly degraded and clichéd mockery of the great commercial and state powers, toothless because its irony is so all-embracing, and because its output is yet another commodity. The subverted adverts at heavy.com are funded and literally surrounded by the real thing.

Extrapolating from Sachs' links, we can easily think of other configurations: Nazi teddy bears, military rock, death row fast food, Christian power tools. This shuffling of cultural signs, if not of actual products, is just contemporary capitalism, and in this we are at the opposite pole of Lévi-Strauss' limited play of bricolage. In this sense, the combinations of brands with noxious elements are merely the steps that might be taken in any marketing campaign to seize the attention of the publicity-saturated viewer. This is just the weakness of satire in this situation; most of its material has already been dreamt up by some advertiser, and that which has not, soon will be. Even Sachs' association of fashion and Fascism (on the grounds that it erases people's identity) has been well-trodden in the many perfume and haute-couture adverts that play on Nazi photographic aesthetics, particularly the work of Riefenstahl. This accounts for the sense of familiarity, of inevitability almost, that can be felt before some of Sachs' interventions: the *Hermes Gift Meal*, the *Chanel Guillotine*, the *Prada Toilet*—but *of course*, the viewer thinks before these pieces that are presented with all the precision of a magazine advert.

¹⁴ <http://www.tomsachs.org/links/index.htm>

For Kant, the appreciation of beauty was one step beyond the fetishist worship of an object (though one step short of religion), the primitive mentality modulated with a dose of critical consciousness.¹⁵ Sachs, like some adolescents, shuttles between critique and adulation both in his statements and in his work.¹⁶ In some statements (though of course we should regard all artists' pronouncements as marketing tools), he seems to admit that critique may be a pretext for making objects: 'If I need to drop a little theory or throw in some context to keep an audience, I'm okay with that kind of whoring.'¹⁷

It is also unclear that the maniacal order of the hobbyist, which Sachs emulates in some of his installations and objects, is any less a product of domination than commodity culture itself. In Adorno's critique, those consumed by their hobbies reproduce in their free time the order of work, and fiercely police the boundary between work and leisure to conceal their secret affinity.¹⁸ Even so, one may see a utopian moment in this activity, since in the hobby the one who normally takes orders imparts it, and in doing so may attempt to make sense of the world, and also indulge in purposeless pleasure and sociability (such as model car racing and beer drinking). The art work is often not unlike a hobby object that has strayed into the commodity world; at least on the Marxist account, as soon as it comes to market, it cannot escape being seen as every other commodity is seen, although its qualities as an object may be alien from the slick and seamless surfaces favoured in manufacture. So the object is a conundrum, and Sachs plays to this puzzle (in this sense, his work is at the opposite spectrum from those, like Koons, who adopt the sealed look of the consumer product). That tension is critical to Sachs, and he claims that with the A-bomb replica *Sony Outsider*, which he had manufactured, it was lost, and the work was less effective as a result.¹⁹

Cultural Imperialism

'There is a lot of art that has its pants down, so to speak, and gets the critical attention. I think the popularity of my work doesn't leave a void for critics to fill. It's a very complete world; it's anti-elitist. There might as well be a sign on it saying, "This doesn't need anyone to explain it."'²⁰

¹⁵ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1952, book II, especially pp. 148ff. This is discussed in William Pietz, 'Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx', in Emily Apter/ William Pietz, *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1993, p. 139.

¹⁶ See his remarks on consecrating the brand in Oliver Koerner von Gustorf, 'Weapons, Status, Shopping: Tom Sachs' Ultra-Democratic Model Worlds', at <http://www.deutsche-bank-kunst.com/art/2003/11/e/1/96.php>

¹⁷ Interview with Kessler, *Bomb*, Spring 2003.

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, 'Free Time', in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein, Routledge, London, 1991, pp. 162-70.

¹⁹ Interview with Kessler.

²⁰ Interview with Kessler.

Sachs' work appears to wallow in the allure of instruments of violence. If the point of the *Tiffany Glock* is not the improbability of such an object (there have been plenty of highly adorned handguns, and plenty that are purchased as fashion items) but the coupling of the high-class jewellers with a weapon made from high-impact *plastic*, Glocks also have an aesthetic appeal in the surface expression of their lethal efficiency. Sachs also features a Glock on his posters and T-Shirts, printed with the injunction: 'Kill All Artists'.

That interest is also turned to thinking about cultural imperialism. The art work as an instrument of domination is given literal expression when a sculpture becomes a functioning gun. *Sony Outsider* is meant as a comment on the way that local cultures are destroyed by satellite television and the VCR, the atom bombs of hegemony. Such pieces, and his large, meticulous replica of the Presidential Seal, are given added point by the newly overt imperial adventures of the US and its allies.

What gets blind-sided in our view of commodities is the social relations between the people who make them and bring them to market, which encompass legal arrangements, political structures and workplace rules but also the entire spectrum of oppression and force, from the cattle-prod wielded on the sweatshop floor up to the bombing of civilians and the seizure of state assets. In this sense, violence and the commodity are inextricably linked; as Thomas Friedman put it famously: '...McDonald's cannot flourish without McDonnell Douglas....'²¹ In this, and with added force as US and British troops occupy Iraq, and terrorist suspects are tortured in secret CIA jails, Sachs by bringing the consumer culture and arms together, seems less a product of his adolescent persona than a Marxist analyst of the reproduction of capital.



²¹ Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Harper Collins, London 2000, p. 464.

How to reconcile the two elements? Does not the youthful enjoyment of arms—the firing of zip guns into telephone directories or pellet guns at model cars—undercut the radical realisation that seems to be bound up in *Cbill Out Japan or be Nuked Again*, where the tender blandishments of consumer culture (personified here by Hello Kitty) are reinforced with the threat of annihilation (and if that threat seems overwrought, remember the genocidal efforts of the US in Vietnam where the option offered the populace was indeed: consumerism or death).

One way would be to say that capitalist culture as a whole has an adolescent character in its insistent violence (both in deed and image), its paranoid linking of every product and phenomenon, its attitude of rebellion (here more in image than deed), its principled thoughtlessness, impulsiveness and inconsequentiality. Yet again, we run up against the problem: is Sachs' work critique or celebration of this condition, or both at once? The conundrum is, after all, a familiar one, for the same question can be asked of Fleury's shopping trips, Beecroft's naked models, Mori's techno-idols, and a host of other enjoyable, critical art objects.

Without prospect of any exit from the system of shopping and oppression, a detailed and knowing enjoyment of our own decadence is the fundamental charge of such work. Marx attempted to grant a view beyond commodity fetishism by examining it as if it was the ur-religion of an alien culture; Sachs tries to get a similar fix on its oddity through bricolage. But, unlike religion, commodity fetishism is a necessary falsehood, a reality in itself, integral to the operation of capital, and cannot be escaped by mere consciousness-raising.²² Yet it is also fixed on the individual who constructs his or her identity through consumer choice. And for artists, the archetypal individualists, to play out their own fetishism is a logical (and familiar) role. The difficulty is to generalise the condition of alienation and fetishism outwards to a more wide-ranging analysis, especially in an art world where the supposed autonomy of the individual, the work and the viewer is so central and so connected, and linked to the production of particular and peculiar objects. Perhaps such an effort can be made with more prospect of success in the collective, collaborative and anonymous labour of the online gift economy. Oddly, it may be here that the ethos of craft skill, of modest but effective work with materials (now immaterial code), of collective ingenuity, the passing of which is so lamented by Sachs and to which he builds monuments, has migrated.

²² This point is made by Dimitri Dimoulis/ John Milios, 'Commodity Fetishism vs. Capital Fetishism: Marxist Interpretations vis-à-vis Marx's Analyses in *Capital*', *Historical Materialism*, vol. 12, no. 3, p. 32.