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Ritual Activity

A Conversation between JJ PEET and Tom Sachs

By Daniel Kunitz



JJ PEET works in a range of media, including installation, painting, video, and sculpture, but among cognoscenti—quite a few of whom are fellow artists—he is celebrated as a master ceramicist. He teaches contemporary ceramics in New York at both Columbia University and the 92nd Street Y. It is through the latter that a group came together to work regularly with PEET at the studio of widely known artist Tom Sachs. Including Mary Frey, Pat McCarthy, Sachs, and PEET, the quartet is showing as Satan Ceramics at Salon 94 Freemans through October 25. PEET and Sachs sat down in the latter's studio for a conversation, moderated by Modern Painters editor in chief Daniel Kunitz.

Tom Sachs: So Daniel and JJ and I were in the studio eating lunch, and one of the topics we were talking about was ritualized activities. Eating lunch is certainly one of those things. Baudrillard said that one of the great sins of Americans was eating lunch alone, and in the book *America*, he describes a guy standing eating a sandwich using the hood of his car as a table. He wrote about how that's unthinkable in France. And we're drinking out of PROXY_Cups that JJ made. There is an important connection between the ritual activity, the ritual of work, and making things that serve those rituals, and I think that those are central to what you do, JJ. What does ritual mean to you?

JJ PEET: Ritual for me means making an object that is focalized, to use one of my terms, down to the bare necessities of what you need. A daily activity is a ritual, drinking water is a ritual. So the easiest thing for me to explain is the PROXY_Cup, and it is kind of where a lot of my work starts, because it is an object that first and foremost is functional—it holds liquid, most importantly water, because we have to drink water. Then we can put either wine, whiskey, coffee, so forth, in there as well.

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TS: And it should be made?

JJP: Probably by me. But when I make a PROXY_Cup, in most cases I take a ball of clay and my only constraint is that it will hold a liquid, which is the function of it. And I transfer my energy into that Cup. So it is a transfer of a life-form into a functional vessel. I will make that Cup over and over again until it's completely transferred, so if I fuck up the first time or it's not right, if the form is not the way I need it to be in that moment, it doesn't work. And I wedge it up and do it again and again and again.

TS: The same ball of clay?

JJP: The same ball of clay. Then I get to a point where it passes my formal judgments: the way it feels, the size of it, what- ever constraints I've given it. And then it moves into what I call information versus decoration. On the surface, there could just be a transfer of my fingerprints. Sometimes the cups wobble a little bit, so you have something to do as you are drinking. Sometimes your hand fits into a corner, or there's a nubbin that you might hold or prop your finger against. All those little details come through in the making, but I refine it right toward the end. Once it passes judgment, the ritual begins. I put it in the kiln, it comes out, I fire it, I fire it a second time, and then it goes into this container, and then I transfer it to a different person. And that's the end of the ritual. This is your primary Cup; this is the Cup you should use the rest of your life. There are three or four people on the planet who have a PROXY_Cup so far. This has only just begun.

TS: When you are making this PROXY_Cup, are you thinking about the person you are making it for?

JJP: When I made the ones for my gallerist, Candice Madey, and for my mother, I did. In making this one, I did not. It was my girlfriend, Nori, who basically stole it. Because she knew it was right—she knew it was her cup, and she just took it. I have one for you, Tom, but I haven't given it to you yet. I know what's right for the person I transfer it to.

TS: You have a unique and special vocabulary. Why, for instance, is it a PROXY_Cup, and not another kind of cup?

JJP: Well, one type of PROXY_Cup is a DECOY_Cup, also known as a Shiv Cup, which is a PROXY_Cup with a porcelain blade embedded in the base. And it serves three functions: water, defend, or end. Either you drink with it, you defend with it, or you end your own life with it.

Daniel Kunitz: But why PROXY?

JJP: When I am making work, a lot of times I don't know what the fuck it is until I give it a name. I can make 20 pieces and still not know what they are until I find the name. For me a PROXY, especially in ceramics, shows every moment and every move that you make on that object. Whether it be gigantic or small-scale, it shows every imperfection and idiosyncrasy of the material. The term PROXY means also that the Cup is a PROXY, or stand-in, for me. So when you are drinking out of it, you don't have to be thinking of me, but it may remind you of me.

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TS: So we are drinking out of you.

JJP: Yes, exactly. When I make these things, I'm not fucking around. I'm not making hippie pottery—it's serious.

TS: You also don't use the wheel in your pottery.

JJP: No. I know how to, but it's too much of a machine, there is too much interference. This mitt right here, it's the best thing we have. In ceramics, a thought or feeling goes from your brain or your gut, through your hands, and into the object. There is no interference, and that's what I love about the material. When you get into using tools and wheels, and all those sorts of things that we have used for thousands of years, it's fine, but there is sort of a disconnect there. If I want a disconnect, I can go use a piece of wood, pull some concrete, something else. This material really lends itself to directness. You don't have to slow down when you make something with clay. I don't have to stop and think, How the fuck am I going to cut that? You just rip it apart with your hands.

TS: The hand in ceramics is so important because we are living in this age of perfectly made stuff, like an iPhone, and great efforts have been made to eliminate the evidence of humanity in a product like that. And what is special about this Cup that I am holding in my hand that you made is that it literally has your fingerprints on it. It is screaming, "This was made by JJ PEET!" And in this age of incredible objects, of customization, this seems special, a pinnacle product.

JJP: Brain to hand to object is what I push upon my students: It is what the material is about. The other thing I love about this material is that it shows the maker completely. And that's what I love when I teach it—when I start teaching someone, I can see the type of person they are immediately.

DK: In addition to fingerprints, there is imagery on some of the PROXY_Cups.

JJP: That gets to level 2, using an implement, a fingernail. The mark is a signifier of what mode we are in on the planet or what I am dealing with on the planet. First, there's always an X somewhere on a cup. Whether there is only one or a thousand, it shows that I picked it up and thought about it again and again and again. Sometimes I just sit with an object for hours putting Xs on it, thinking about it and transferring more information to it. It's what I call in my work "coding."



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TS: This Cup also has an umbrella.

JJP: The umbrella is the DEFEND_symbol. When I am in DEFEND_mode, I'm not really collecting information anymore. In the past I've shot a lot of photos and video, but as we humans all do that all the time, I become less interested in those things—I think there are better ways to get information out, like a PROXY_Cup or a BRICKVACE, an actual thing that we hold on to, that we drink out of, that we use. Some of this comes from being around Tom and seeing other ways to disseminate information, not through video or the computer but through zines, for example. Making a PROXY_Cup becomes a slowed-down version of making video for me. I don't have to take a video or a picture, I can put that information into my brain with my eyes, and I can transfer it out through Cups or objects. But sometimes I need an actual camera to capture some shit, so an upside-down umbrella is a COLECT symbol. So it's collecting information. You might have a DEFEND_cup, I might have a COLECT_cup.

TS: You have a fascination with dualities. A Shiv is a phallic symbol and a Cup is a yonic symbol; one is a piercing weapon, the other a vessel. And it's the same with an umbrella: It's for protecting or attacking. It suggests to me that these functional objects are imbued with spirituality. And these same ideas are also part of your sculpture, your tableaux. I don't know the right word . . .

JJP: STILIFES—with one L, not two.

TS: Do these dualities operate in the STILIFES, or not?

JJP: Well, let's talk about a Brick. I think that's a good thing to talk about, a Brick.

TS: What's a Brick?

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JJP: A Brick for me is either Build or Break. Really, that's what it comes down to. Which is another duality, of course. My Bricks came about because I was thinking about what other stuff is made out of clay. Our toilet is, our kitchen knife is, our car brakes—it all fascinates me. When a building crumbles, we start to use those bricks for revolution, for fighting, for protecting, to push our culture further.

So I made a Brick. Brick number one was OK, but Brick number two kind of hit the mark. I cut the core out of the Brick, a hole that's maybe an inch all the way through, and I took that core and made a PROXY_Cup out of it. When I make something, I use all the material, all the clay. I don't toss stuff away.

TS: You start with a ball of clay and you make a PROXY_Cup or a Brick, and you use the scrap. It doesn't go back into the scrap pile. So from the onset, it is you and your grip strength and your physicality.

JJP: And there is no waste. Once you grab that chunk of clay from the earth there is no waste, so you try to make everything you can from that piece. So within the brick, I punch a hole through that, and it tends to tear at the end. So I cut that off, and I might make that into what I call a key chain, or a VOP. And then in your car, you put the brick on your seat, and then you have your PROXY_Cup and you are drinking either water or whiskey from there. And you are in front of someone's house, maybe in front of the bank, and you are making the decision to either use that Brick to start a building or throw it through a window and start a revolution. So the process of having a PROXY_Cup and, let's say, a VOP, is that you have something to fondle with your hands and you have something to drink out of while you're making this decision. That creates what I call a loop for the user. Once you take that Brick, it is in your hands now. You are deciding to throw it through the window, to start a revolution, or build a bridge.

TS: How do ceramics serve your sculpture?

JJP: It's just another material.

TS: Versus, say, aluminum.

JJP: Versus aluminum. Clay for me is the most direct material. I think of something and I make it immediately.

DK: I want to ask you both about design, if that's not too abstract a word. Each of your work plays with the line between function and ornamentation.

TS: I think there is a jihad against design or functionality in art because the intellectuals say, "If it holds your ass up like a chair, then you can't ascribe a mysticism to it." It's not as much of a contemplative object as something that is taking up wall space. I've noticed that there is a hierarchy of objects and that their artistic desirability is the inverse of their functionality. But at the same time, when you make a sculpture, you can't ignore that it exists in the same world as a pair of sneakers or a fighter jet or whatever. One of the things that we are interested in is military stuff because it always breaks the laws of economics and physics. The sound barrier was an unbreakable law, the atomic bomb, going to the moon, these are all impossible things that we have found to be possible through science and spending, and warfare. And art does a similar thing. Cinema, for example, breaks the laws of reality and builds impossible realities, and advertising builds impossible structures and desires for us to never live up to, to help keep us in a constant state of neurosis, narcissism, and what the Buddhists call the hungry ghost. But I think that the sculpture that deals with these issues, which is in between, can help us reconcile these conflicts. We've been the land of pockets for 500 years. Living in a world of pockets causes some complications in our minds.

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JJP: A functional thing can have just as much heady information as a painting. Like, I am going to live with this cup much more than I am going to live with a painting. I love painting, I paint. But this cup, I get to hold it, I get to touch it, I get to see the information or decoration that is on it, and relate that to what is going on on the planet. There's an intimacy to my relationship with it.

TS: Yes. People go to the shoe store when they need shoes to protect their feet. But if a sculptor makes his own shoes, it brings into question the concept of connecting your body to the ground. And I think that's true of anything that artists have made. We are living in a time of non-handmade things, so anytime you take the energy, anything you make, you are spending money to make. It costs 50, 100 times more to make one of these PROXY_Cups than to buy the most expensive cup at Crate & Barrel. So anyone who says they made it because they want to save money is lying. The real answer is that they made it because nothing like it could possibly exist otherwise. This Cup is not going to exist unless JJ makes it. And it's not just because it has his fingerprints, and it's not just because it's one fistful of clay scooped from the earth, but it's all the storytelling, and his life experience that goes into that Cup. And the cup at Crate & Barrel has none of that.

