

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Tom Sachs: Space Program: Mars, Park Avenue Armory, New York

By Ariella Budick

There's a demented intensity to this colossal piece of performance art, in which old junk has been fashioned into equipment for an expedition to Mars



©Genevieve Hanson
'Mars Excursion Roving Vehicle (MERV)' (2010-2012)

The geeks are in charge at “Space Program: Mars”, Tom Sachs’s wacky and intoxicating art immersion experiment, where limitless outer space is compressed into the prodigious but finite expanse of the Park Avenue Armory drill hall. Science fiction usually takes the form of sleekly designed fables and computer-generated tableaux, but the slyly eccentric Sachs and a team of assistants have taken an artisanal approach to interplanetary travel. With a fusion of irony and nerdy sincerity, they have mustered a lot of old junk into a collection of sculptures and machinery intended to outfit an expedition to Mars.

The equipment, made mostly out of plywood, glue and cast-off hardware, mimics real Nasa gadgetry in astonishing detail. Sachs has built his own mission control, mobile quarantine unit, self-cooling space suits, launch platforms and simulated splashdown apparatus. He has also fashioned a cornucopia of gear that Nasa might have dreamed up, but didn’t, including an elaborate “Hot Nuts Delivery System (HDNS)”, which sends snacks along a conveyor belt for effortless consumption. Food preparation is a big part of this trek. A dedicated space shack contains all the equipment necessary for a tea ceremony on the fly: a bamboo scoop, whisk, a

flask of Jack Daniel's to fuel the fire that boils the kettle, and a Pez dispenser to supply the obligatory sweet.

Sachs and his team have bewitched themselves into feeling that they're really on their way to Mars, and they do their best to convince the rest of us that we're along for the ride. This colossal piece of performance art requires more than just physical immersion; it demands a kind of psychic reorientation, one that takes place gradually, over time. As you interact with Sachs's creations and chat with his roving acolytes – or grumman, as they call themselves – you find yourself sucked into the skewed sensibility that made all of it possible. Some visitors may come to the Armory and never leave at all, choosing, via the “indoctrination station”, to become members of this rather sweet low-tech cult. Those who prove their commitment by sorting screws, sweeping floors and taking part in an escalating sequence of rituals are awarded their own uniform: white shirt, skinny black tie, and pen-filled pocket protector. The rookie grumman must literally drink the Kool-Aid from the fully functional fridge (constructed out of plywood and wire and who-knows-what else), at which point they have won the right to enter the holy of holies: the Landing Excursion Module (LEM), a full-scale replica of the Apollo Lunar Lander.

Part prophet, part profiteer, Sachs has often preached an anti-consumerist message, but here he also collaborates with corporate partners in the wry, self-mocking style of Stephen Colbert. The gift shop you exit through on your way back to Earth offers the “Mars Yard Shoe” Nikes he designed – for \$385 a pair. But Sachs is no huckster. He believes in the urgency of his mission as deeply as his busy, eager proselytisers do, and his dedication to this imaginary world is evident in each hand-made piece of technology and in every minute rule that governs the mini-society he has dreamed up.

Sachs and his assistants have been living this hermetic fantasy for years. Studio assistants have regular drills in standard-issue workout gear, which includes white trainers with an outdated Nasa logo, white shorts and T-shirts with the American flag and the words “It won't fail because of me” emblazoned on the back. Hewing to the proscribed “five ingredients” of exercise, they adhere to a strict diet of red beans and rice and refresh themselves at a Darth Vader-shaped refrigerator that holds cans of beer and excretes vodka chilled by liquid nitrogen. That ground training prepares them for the task of explaining all those totems and fetishes to a puzzled public. It also builds a powerful, if slightly creepy, esprit de corps. Asked why the pentagram symbol graces so much of the equipment here, one grumman breezily answered: “Oh, we're all Satanists.”

“Space Program: Mars” has a funhouse feel, but it also emits a demented intensity that transcends mere spectacle. As a practised provocateur, Sachs has in the past issued twisted commentaries on consumer culture. In 2002, his “Prada Deathcamp”, a scale model of a concentration camp emblazoned with the chic-est of logos, set off a furore of protest at the Jewish Museum by implying that designers' dictates are morally equivalent to Nazi edicts, and that fashion victims are no different from any other kind. His irony fell odiously flat.

The current installation feels less didactic and more searching. It suggests that the entire Apollo space programme itself was a colossal piece of performance art, mounted for the benefit of the Soviet enemy and the public at home. Whatever lunar exploration may have achieved in practical terms, it was also an enormously expensive act of showmanship. The image of a man on the

Moon stoked national pride and quelled America's Cold War fears of inferiority. If, for Sachs, the Moon landing was a tour de force of propangandistic spectacle, his own stakeout of "space" is a neo-Duchampian riff on that same pageant of science and spirituality.

At the outset of the space programme, president Kennedy said: "We choose to go to the Moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organise and measure the best of our energies and skills." With deadpan earnestness, Sachs has taken at face value Kennedy's invocation of single-minded labour for its own sake. His mission may lack scientific purpose, or billions in federal funding, or the potential for fatal calamity, but as a way of organising energies and skills, it is extremely impressive. "Space Program: Mars" occupies the zone where irony and fantasy meld, where the crew is also the cast, and where it's possible to know that you're steering a useless contraption around a big old room and at the same time believe that you're preparing to depart planet Earth.

'Tom Sachs: Space Program: Mars', co-presented by the Park Avenue Armory and Creative Time, until June 17.