

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

The New York Times

From Earth to Mars, at the Armory

By Randy Kennedy



Natan Dvir for The New York Times

Tom Sachs, right, working on the Mars project in his studio with two assistants, Mary Eannarino, center, and Evan Murphy.

IF you wanted to find a good place in Manhattan from which to plan a manned mission to Mars, the studio of the artist Tom Sachs might not be the first place you would look.

On a stretch of Centre Street at the edge of SoHo that has achieved the antique polish of so many fashionable downtown blocks, the storefront studio stands out as a holdover from the neighborhood's pre-money past. The main entrance is barricaded by a rusted metal cage and gate, behind which there is a beaten-up buzzer and a hand-scrawled sign that says, unhelpfully, "Brancusi." If you didn't know an artist and his assistants worked there, you could easily mistake the interior — encrusted with power tools and cubbyholes and bad fluorescent light fixtures — for a wholesale hardware supplier.

During a recent visit Mr. Sachs and his studio manager attempted to show off a scale model of the Saturn rocket that launched a generation of men to the Moon. But just as a demonstration was about to get under way to create a smoky, realistic-looking liftoff on a small video screen, power to the model went kaput. A space heater wired up in an old Winnebago parked out front had tripped a circuit breaker in the studio. "That's crazy," Mr. Sachs said, staring ahead in disappointment. "We've got to get it on a dedicated circuit. That should not happen."

Then again the trip to Mars he has been planning obsessively for several years is not really the kind where an equipment failure would spell catastrophe, unless you concur with the artist Bruce Nauman's dictum that art is a matter of life and death.

This Mars mission will go only as far up as the Upper East Side. The air its astronauts breathe will be of a late springtime New York City composition. The landing module from which they emerge will be made mostly from three-quarter-inch plywood and screws. And the surface their motorized rover explores will consist not of rocky red soil but of the flat century-old pine boards that form the immense drill floor of the Park Avenue Armory at East 66th Street, where for a month beginning Wednesday Mr. Sachs will become the latest artist to take on the daunting space. Since the Armory's transformation in 2006 into one of the largest contemporary-art exhibition spaces in the country, artists have approached the drill floor's 55,000 square feet with widely varied modes of assault. It has been draped with Lycra tulle (Ernesto Neto), "painted" with the aid of peeling-out motorcycles (Aaron Young), filled with 30 tons of discarded clothing (Christian Boltanski) and turned into an oddly didactic Renaissance painting classroom by the director Peter Greenaway, whose installation looked lost in the setting.

Mr. Sachs will likewise use the floor to display all manner of objects, some quite realistic — the rover, the lander (a life-size model of the real Apollo lunar lander), a mission control center, a mobile quarantine unit (the aforementioned 1972 Winnebago) — and many others that would never make a NASA manifest but that sound like pretty good things to pack for a very long interplanetary trip, like a hot-nuts machine, an old-school JVC boombox outfitted with solar panels and a beer fridge shaped like Darth Vader.

But his larger intention is to transform the drill hall into a theater for an extended piece of performance art, one that mines the United States space program for an entire prefabricated aesthetic — script, choreography, costumes, sets — and also for a complex load of cultural baggage about what fuels the compulsion to explore outer space.

Mr. Sachs, 45, has long had a reputation in the art world as a kind of high-comic tinkerer and provocateur who remakes industrial and consumer objects in an abject wood-shop fashion, as if to reclaim the mass-produced world for humanity or at least reopen humanity's eyes to the things that increasingly make up its visual landscape. He has carried this objective to sometimes sensationalistic lengths. In 1999 the dealer Mary Boone was arrested after a Sachs show featuring handmade shotguns and an Alvar Aalto vase full of real bullets for people to take home. At the Jewish Museum in 2002 he exhibited a scale model of a German concentration camp made from a Prada hatbox, an equation of fashion and fascism whose "irony, if that's what it was," Michael Kimmelman wrote in *The New York Times*, was lost on the Holocaust survivors who wrote him in angry disbelief.

Mr. Sachs's DIY aesthetic has always straddled the line between art and science project, and the critical knock on him has often been that he labors perhaps a little too much to satisfy his own material fetishes. With "Space Program: Mars" the risk is that the project will be seen less as an art installation than as a monumental space-nerd amusement park, a view that Mr. Sachs said would greatly underestimate his ambitions. "I always feel that people really misunderstand my vision, especially when it comes to NASA," he said.

His fascination with the space program goes back many years — he staged a mission to the Moon at Gagosian Gallery in Los Angeles in 2007 — but it did not grow out of boyhood astronaut fantasies. It grew instead out of his conviction that the Apollo program, one of the crowning technological achievements of the 20th century, was in itself mostly a work of performance art, one that spoke volumes about America's aspirations and fears. Relative to their immense cost the Moon shots produced little of practical value, their real goal being cold-war cultural and political spectacle, which placed them, Mr. Sachs said, firmly in the realm "of the useless and spiritual, just like art." He saw it all as a perfect kind of

ready-made. And like many artists of his post-post-Duchampian generation he set out to remake it in his own style, not casually but by adopting all the discipline and can-do spirit that President John F. Kennedy summoned in his famous 1962 Moon speech.

“I’m a complete perfectionist, as you can see, in my own filthy way,” said Mr. Sachs one morning in early spring in his studio, where many members of his 15-member crew were hard at work on elements of the Mars mission, which has been commissioned by the armory and the public art organization Creative Time.

“I like to say that unlike the military, where you have to build something to such an exacting degree that it works every time and doesn’t kill someone, we have to build it so that it will work at least once,” he said. “But that’s still very hard to do, and we’re very serious about it.”

He even sought the advice of real space scientists, befriending engineers at NASA’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory near Pasadena, Calif., two of whom came to New York to visit his studio in 2010 and have acted as unofficial advisers ever since. “It was going to be just a lunch meeting,” said Adam Steltzner, one of the engineers, “and it actually ended at 3:30 or 4 in the morning the next day. It was kind of unbelievable. It was a very high-level interaction.”

Mr. Steltzner, who is in the midst of his own Mars mission — he oversees entry, descent and landing for the \$2.5 billion NASA project that will try to deposit the Curiosity rover on the planet in August — said the chemistry in the studio was partly personal (there is rarely a dull moment around Mr. Sachs) but also a result of the engineers’ appreciation of the degree to which artists can engage in intellectual, conceptual play.

“We actually experience some small, short periods of that in our work here,” he said in a phone interview. “But that’s maybe four hours in three years.”

By contrast, after Mr. Sachs appealed to the engineers for badly needed help transforming an E-Z-Go golf cart into a working, realistic-looking Mars rover (complete with a joystick to replace the terrestrial-looking steering wheel), the project ended up being heavy on the play: in Mr. Sachs’s telling, “a really fun night of drinking and welding.”

If scientists yearn for the freedom of artists, however, Mr. Sachs’s studio operates as a place where artists — or at least the artist in chief — yearn for the rigors of science. Upon entering, every visitor is photographed with a large handmade camera fashioned mostly from plywood and issued an official-looking identification sticker. The walls are covered with labels and handwritten lists. And anyone doubting the importance of these lists is directed to an instructional video called “Ten Bullets,” which Mr. Sachs and a former assistant, Van Neistat, made in 2010 to explain the studio’s philosophy. Among the precepts: “Creativity is the enemy;” “Inventions and developments must happen within the existing vocabulary — don’t jump ahead; stick to what has been defined for you to do”; “Proper knowledge of the code is the first step in working to code”; and “Follow this guide carefully and you probably won’t be fired.”

Mr. Sachs said he made the video mostly so he wouldn’t have to explain the basics to new interns. But while its management-seminar deadpan is extremely funny, the message is utterly serious, and the video has taken on a strange life of its own as a training tool. (A Young & Rubicam executive recently praised the video on his blog as “impactful.”)

The video and code are knit deeply into the entire project. And over the course of the exhibition the public — or “civilian witnesses” — will get to see a fair amount of the results of the studio’s “Right Stuff” training and preparation. The more adventurous will even get to participate, earning rewards, like a visit to the landing module, by helping out with menial mission tasks.

But the majority of the performance involved in the project has happened over the last few months for the benefit of no one, really, except Mr. Sachs and his crew, as if the exhibition is only a kind of public observance of much more extensive rites for a new secular religion. Every Friday morning, for example, in a borrowed room at the armory, they change into white shorts, white running shoes and white T-shirts with the maxim “It will not fail because of me” written on the back and do an hour of vigorous calisthenics and stretches, a routine the young studio assistants seem to embrace with mostly nonironic gusto.

“It’s almost like a cult,” said Anne Pasternak, Creative Time’s president and a curator of the show. “It’s not just about making objects. It’s about involvement in an ongoing performance every minute of the day. And he’s using that to ask a lot of very serious questions about human ideologies and the decisions we make about this planet and the future of our species.”

Of course it is also highly entertaining for the self-appointed flight director of an intricately constructed fantasy world almost entirely of his own design, in which everyone suits up and plays along.

Sitting one morning in the rover, parked surreally in an old oak-paneled storage room at the armory awaiting its mission, Mr. Sachs said, “There’s a very fine line between having great knowledge of all these scientific and technological and industrial cultures and actually becoming a part of them.”

Whether he still knows the location of that line may be an open question. “We’re really going to Mars,” he said with a smile radiating Chuck Yeager confidence. “I mean, we’re doing it here at the armory, but except for the setting, we’re really going.”