



May 15, 2012

Tom Sachs
SPACE JAM

by Emily Nathan

From May 16 to June 17, 2012, the willing voyager can travel to Mars for a mere \$12. Not the planet, that is, but an otherworldly environment meant to feel a lot like it, all courtesy of the art-world bricoleur Tom Sachs (b. 1966), who has transformed the enormous Park Avenue Armory drill hall into a kind of mad scientist's aeronautical workshop. The project, co-sponsored by Creative Time and titled "Space Program: Mars," takes off from Sachs' 2007 installation at Gagosian Gallery Beverly Hills, for which the artist re-imagined man's first landing on the moon in 1969 via a series of DIY sculptures and sets.

The work of Armory artistic director Kristy Edmunds and Creative Time head Anne Pasternak, the Mars project is the fourth in an annual series of special contemporary art commissions that have generally been grand and even edgy. Previous editions have included Ernesto Neto's mass of immersive netting, Christian Boltanski's theater of the abject featuring 30 tons of used clothing, and Aaron Young's triumphant "action painting," a composition created by the burned-out tire marks of ten choreographed motorcycles.

Now we have Tom Sachs, who has converted 55,000 square feet of creaking, wooden space -- run for years by the National Guard and known as the 69th Regiment Armory until its recent rebranding -- into a sprawling amusement park for space nuts and art nuts. But unlike so much contemporary art, Sachs dispenses with high production costs in favor of his signature technique: painstakingly hand-crafted, semi-functioning sculptures made entirely from salvaged quotidian materials like foam core, plywood and duct tape, all held together with hot glue and household screws.

Speaking at the press preview, Pasternak described Sachs as a sculptor with an encyclopedic understanding of every material he uses, and admitted that the aeronautical world he has created is one of "contradictions and hypocrisy. It honors every mission and every vehicle ever sent to space," she pointed out, "while remaining acutely aware of American cowboy pioneerism and the very real ethics of screwing up another place, when our own world is already in trouble."

To this, Sachs added his own disclaimer. "There is no cutting-edge technology here," he said. "Our space program is expensive, slow and crappy. That's why it's magic."

Magic it is. The assembled works -- some objects, some machines, and some small installations -- are loosely modeled on elaborate NASA spacecrafts, exploratory vehicles, launch platforms, recreational amenities and control centers. The meat and potatoes of any space program, they have titles like Mission Control Center (MCC), which describes a network of old TV monitors hooked up to surveillance cameras that provide live feed from every station, and Landing Excursion Module (LEM).

The expansive interactive installation also features such delights as a popcorn-equipped cinema (it screens Sachs' videos, which detail the project's long production with wryly subtle humor) and a hot-nut dispensing machine. Everything is manned by one of Sachs' 13-member team -- young, attractive, mostly male studio assistants.

Billed as a "demonstration of all that is necessary for survival, scientific exploration, and colonization in extraterrestrial environs: from food delivery systems and entertainment to agriculture and human waste

disposal,” “Space Program: Mars” is incessantly alive with tinkering. Gliding among their various structures on skateboards and bikes, Sachs and his workers regularly “demonstrate” -- the artist’s preferred term, in lieu of “perform” -- the myriad procedures, rituals and tasks of their mission, from “Rover Deployment” to “Red Beans and Rice Preparation” and “Suiting Protocol,” which takes place in a kind of locker room, name-labeled cubbies and all.

Another section of the installation has been precisely crafted to resemble a traditional Japanese chashitsu, an alcove for ritual tea ceremonies -- since Sachs the colonizer has chosen tea as his contribution to the extraterrestrial population he intends to colonize. A series of real-time “lift offs” to Mars are also scheduled during the residency, with multiple monitors projecting live camera footage of ingeniously engineered small-scale rocket models, and “special effects” from sound to smoke.

Participation is paramount -- once visitors have absorbed the information presented in the films that are screened on a loop in the cinema, they are invited to head over to the “Indoctrination Station,” a library set with long tables and lamps, for an in-depth written and oral examination. If they pass, they are allowed to join in the action like a member of the studio team -- organizing discarded screws, sweeping the floor, and ultimately earning the right to enter the Landing Excursion Module.

“This project preserves the activity of Sachs’ studio inside the Armory,” said Edmunds, taking the platform. “All day long, every day, the team is on site, working on their problems -- and we have programmed numerous demonstrations for the public. These are not performances,” she cautioned, “but rather the extension of a narrative that is constantly taking place.”

Sachs concurred. “The exhibition is a continuation of my bricolage practice. Me and my pseudo-scientists are here to share with you our views of transparency,” he said. “My goal is in no way to compete with the clean impeccability of objects made by Sony or Apple, but rather to exploit and showcase the imperfections of the handmade -- that is art’s privilege and prerogative.”

The whole shenanigan is more than a little silly, though it is redeemed by the gloriously meticulous detail of it all, and it might be obnoxiously ironic if it weren’t so shockingly earnest. Members of the Sachs team all wear matching uniforms -- Sachs-designed Nikes, white button-down-collar shirts, striped ties, beige slacks and pocket protectors full of pens, every item inscribed with their name -- and they are absolutely committed to playing their part. There is no attitude, no snark, no sarcasm. The crew is sincerely invested in the whole mission, committed to what it takes to be an art-world astronaut.

“Are you kidding me? This place is every kid’s fantasy,” said Lieutenant Nick Doyle, one of the stylish studio hands. “And it’s every adult’s fantasy too -- though they might not know it until they see it.”

Tom Sachs, “Space Program: Mars,” May 16-June 17, 2012, Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10065.



The entrance to Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," 2012, at the Park Avenue Armory, New York



Anne Pasternak, Rebecca Robertson, Kristy Edmunds and Tom Sachs speak to the press for the debut of "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," 2012, with *Mission Control Center* behind them; Park Avenue Armory, New York



Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," installation view, 2012, Park Avenue Armory, New York; photo by James Ewing



Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," installation view, 2012, with *Landing Excursion Module (LEM)*, *Mars Excursion Roving Vehicle (MERV)* and Tom Sachs on a bike, Park Avenue Armory, New York; photo by James Ewing



Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," installation view, 2012, with *Bike Station* and *Repair Station*, Park Avenue Armory, New York; photo by James Ewing



Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," installation view of *The Dig*, 2012, Park Avenue Armory, New York; photo by James Ewing



A Tom Sachs studio assistant mans the *Hot Nut* machine in "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," 2012, Park Avenue Armory, New York



Tom Sachs' studio team navigates Mars landscape in *Mars Roving Vehicle*, Park Avenue Armory, 2012; photo by Genevieve Hanson, NYC



A Tom Sachs studio assistant speaks to the press about "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," 2012, Park Avenue Armory, New York



Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," detail, 2012, Park Avenue Armory, New York



Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," detail, 2012, Park Avenue Armory, New York



A Tom Sachs studio assistant works the mini launch model, "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," 2012, Park Avenue Armory, New York



Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," installation view with the *Indoctrination Station*, 2012, Park Avenue Armory, New York



Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," detail, 2012, Park Avenue Armory, New York



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Tom Sachs' "SPACE PROGRAM: MARS," installation view, 2012, with *Mars Roving Vehicle*, Park Avenue Armory, New York