

THE DO LIST

# Tom Sachs Leads Space Mission to Jupiter's Europa Without Leaving Earth



By **John Wilkins**  
SEPTEMBER 22, 2016

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We live in a world savaged by disbelief, where we're quick to label everything a scam. So one of the strangest effects of Tom Sachs' *Space Program: Europa* — both the multimedia art installation showing at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) through Sunday, Jan. 15, and the six-hour performance that Sachs and company undertook for the show's opening weekend — is how it reconstitutes the possibilities of belief.

That it does so by constructing artifacts of a mission to Europa, Jupiter's icy moon, as a Smithsonian style exhibition, and then re-animating that exhibition through performance, is kind of miracle. No matter how you experience Sachs' wildly inventive take on exploration, either by roaming through the YBCA galleries or catching all or part of the accompanying performance (which the artist and his team intend to remount once again before the show closes) the message is bracing and consistent: we are creatures of belief and imagination. And these qualities compel us — sometimes vainly and foolishly, but always with joy — to wilder and wilder feats of daring.



The Landing Excursion Module that the Astronauts use to explore Europa in Tom Sachs' 'Space Program: Europa' at YBCA. (Photo: Josh White)

Stand before "Mission Control Center" in Gallery Two and marvel at its "can do" futurism. Comprised of 50 television screens, a JVC boom box, and a ticking clock, it's all you need to feel like you're witnessing the longest human voyage in history. The same goes for the Hibachi grill in the YBCA's bamboo garden that plays such a crucial role in piercing Europa's icy surface (a piece in the exhibit that gives new meaning to ice sculpture); and for that matter, the majestic "Landing Excursion Module" in Gallery One, an eye-catching plywood variant on the Apollo 13 lunar module measuring over 20 feet in height and width. The line between art and equipment has never been so thin. It's a boy scout's path to the sublime.

To see Sachs and a company of at least 20 helpers, including *Myth Busters'* star Adam Savage, turn the exhibition into a performance is thrilling. Sachs prefers to call it a "demonstration", but that word undersells the sweeping power of what he's achieved. *Space Program: Europa* has the feel of a distant memory coming to life. If the exhibition is the proof, the aftermath of one grand moment in human history, the performance of Sachs' demonstration is the ghostly reminder of what it took to make it happen.

So when we enter the main performance space in Gallery Two, we're in Mission Control just before the first manned (though both astronauts are women) flight to Europa. Three technical operators sit at the master panel, readying for blast off. Sachs paces the stage, confident and nervous. Of course, it's all a ritual of performance: From *Capricorn 1* to *Apollo 13*, the space drama has always been the stuffy cousin to the backstage farce.



Ready for the ordeal of a long, long flight in Tom Sachs' 'Space Program: Europa' at YBCA. (Photo: Josh White)

If we have lost a taste for the momentous nature of space flight, Sachs reminds us how wonderful and challenging the momentous can be, even if just a stunt. So in the quiet right before the start of the mission, the first movement of Gustav Holst's *The Planets*, "Mars, the Bringer of Wars," roars through the speakers. And we watch on the monitors as the astronauts — in full space suit regalia — jog through the YBCA galleries towards their ship. The museum erupts into applause, the first of many spontaneous expressions of joy throughout the performance.

Just like the production of a real mission, Sachs balances these moments of ecstasy with minute details and excruciating boredom. The most memorable section is a 40-minute (it feels longer) tour-de-force, where the astronauts drill into Europa's frozen surface. When the drill gets stuck in the ice, it takes a pickax, a blowtorch, and the ever-handy Hibachi to save the mission. At first we watch in agony as the clumsy, gloved hands of the astronauts attempt to dislodge the drill. And then we see a bare hand enter the picture to work on the drill, too.

It is part of the exquisite charm of Sachs' vision that he can maintain two fictions at once: that we are in space and that this is a production whose stars, the astronauts, are constantly aided by a backstage team — not just in mission control, but also on Europa with them, like an extra terrestrial team of Mt. Everest Sherpas. In freeing the drill, both worlds collide without comment. And yet the piece feels all the more real for it. So that when Sachs yells, "whatever you do, keep that Hibachi lit," it becomes a serious concern for both the fiction of the mission and the actual production before us.

There are moments of stunning beauty: the astronauts spooning to Al Green's "Let's Stay Together," a tea ceremony to mark the last moments on Europa, the sharing of one last Oreo cookie, and the wild celebrations in Mission Control every time a difficult task is completed. And the pleasure comes from the simple realization that human ingenuity never stops.



The astronauts perform a tea ceremony on Europa in Tom Sachs' 'Space Program: Europa' at YBCA. (Photo: Josh White)

But perhaps the greatest achievement of Sachs' performance is what he does to time. We can't help but be aware of it: the performance is epic in length and the clock keeps on ticking. But sometimes it stops without explanation, as if in the high stakes game of space exploration and art, there are moments that just slip away, that we simply cannot catch. And then, of course, you realize that in a fundamental way this performance of *Space Program: Europa* isn't happening. We're watching something in the present that is by the logic of the exhibition it created, already over. Even in a scam, there are so many beautiful things to believe in.

*Space Program: Europa* is on display at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco through Sunday, Jan. 15. There will be one more performance of *Space Program: Europa* on the closing weekend, also at YBCA. For tickets and information please [click here](#).

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