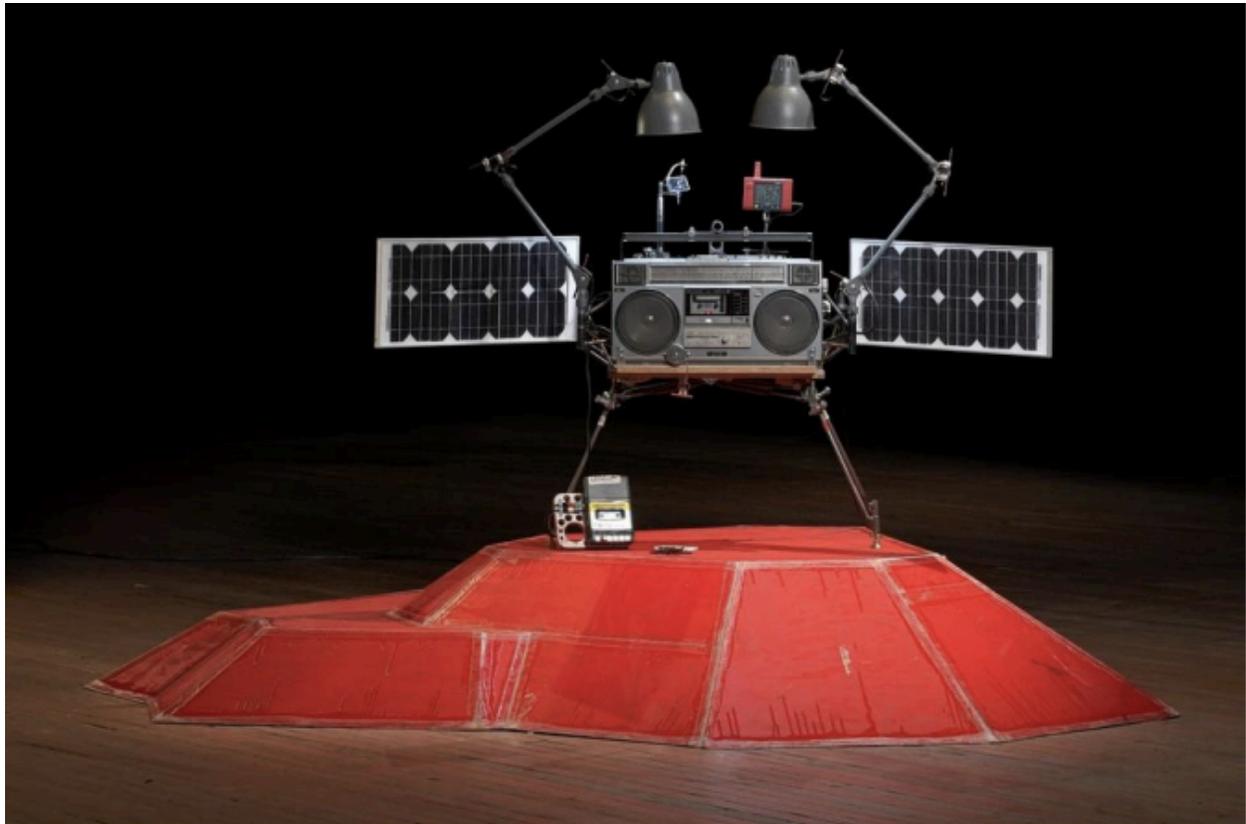


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Tom Sachs Brings His Boomboxes to Austin

'Tom Sachs: Boombox Retrospective 1999-2015' surveys the inventive artist's own DIY electronics.

by Alexandra Wolfe
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"It always starts with a party," says Tom Sachs. In fact, the sculptor—known for a do-it-yourself punk style that often pokes fun at consumerist culture—made his first "boombox" for a Manhattan street party.

It wasn't his last. On Jan. 24, "Tom Sachs: Boombox Retrospective 1999-2015," a selection of sculptures, will go on display at a Texas museum, The Contemporary Austin, and run through April 19.

It's the New York-based artist's first solo exhibit in Austin, where the museum's senior curator, Heather Pesanti, says, "Local artists really dig his bad-boy challenge to the art world." Controversial pieces by the 48-year-old Mr. Sachs have included "Barbie Slave Ship," a sculpture of a slave ship carrying hundreds of Barbie dolls to "examine the links between slavery...and advertising," as his website says. Ms. Pesanti also points out unusual Sachs ideas such as constructing a bodega inside the Austin exhibition space.

Mr. Sachs says that he started creating his boomboxes for fun in junior high school and only later began to think of them as art. Made of found objects, they were in keeping with the handmade aesthetic of his other sculptures, so he considered them works of art as well as sound systems. He exhibited three of his early boomboxes in 1999 at New York's prestigious Mary Boone Gallery. Since then, he has exhibited in spaces such as New York's Park Avenue Armory.



The exhibit traces the trajectory of Mr. Sachs's sound systems—all of which can play music—from that first boombox to his more recent ceramic music players. On display are dozens of works, including a larger-than-life, "Hello Kitty"-inspired sculpture and a handmade version of speakers used in the Nazi era for propaganda.

"I've always had sound systems, whether in a car or in my life," he says. "Being a nerdy, lonely guy, I've maybe put too much energy in it."

His early sound systems could play records, cassettes and then compact discs. Mr. Sachs later made improvements to these works, such as adding an umbrella to protect the boxes from the sun. Then he began creating boomboxes from plywood, making sure not to paint over the cut edges to "show evidence of the making."

Everything in Mr. Sachs's strictly run New York studio (and an online store for less expensive merchandise) is built to promote the idea of handiwork, he says. At auction, his works have sold for four to six figures.

Lately, he has been using porcelain to construct his boomboxes. "I've been studying the Japanese tea ceremony, but instead of making [the boomboxes] out of stoneware, I've been using porcelain because I'm American, and it's the most industrial material we use."

Today, Mr. Sachs says that in his mind, the boombox concept has expanded to include anything that has a speaker, is portable and can play music. "Currently, there are more boomboxes than ever before," he says. "Then again, I consider a laptop a boombox."