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VICE

Tom Sachs Brings the Noise and ‘A Space Programme’ to SXSW

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*Installation view, 'Tom Sachs: Boombox Retrospective 1999–2015,' the Contemporary Austin-Jones Center, Austin, 2015.
Courtesy Tom Sachs*

It's a sunny 70 degrees in Austin on the first Saturday afternoon of South by Southwest, the kind of weather that announces spring has arrived in central Texas. Tom Sachs's hotel room-turned-makeshift studio is located just south of downtown, and bands playing along the city's seminal strip of South Congress can be heard throughout the boutique hotel's quaint grounds. Inside, Sachs carries on a somewhat manic conversation on his iPhone as he balances a cup of tea. Ceramic pieces in various states of completion are strewn about his hotel's patio, with many baking in the hot March sun.

Sachs has developed a reputation as an artist who appropriates pop culture, reconstructs these pop totems through DIY means, and then offers a newly contextualized identity for the piece. Even as early as the 1990s, Sachs has been toying with giving commercial objects a deviant twist, like he has in *HG (Hermès Hand Grenade)*, a fabricated hand grenade covered in Hermès logos, or the *Tiffany Glock (Model 19)*, a fake Glock Pistol painted Tiffany's blue. More recently his style has considerably evolved to encompass video, sculpture, and sound, such his deliriously ambitious DIY NASA sculpture project titled *A Space Program* (which he shared with us in a 2012 video for Motherboard). Yet the same pervasive need to subvert our culture's iconography persists. And for an artist so smitten with the duality of consumer culture, SXSW is the perfect environment of branding hell and rampant materialism for him to run amok.

Turning his attention back to the interview at hand, Sachs quickly wraps up his call and gestures to open a bottle of beer on the patio table before settling in to discuss his SXSW film debut of *A Space Program* (his documentary of his exhibition of the same name) and *Boomboxes*, his many-faceted solo show ongoing at the Contemporary, which features Sachs's playful, functional

boombox sculptures from 1999–2015 along with collaborative DJ sets from artists like Young Guru and J Rocc alongside contributed playlists by Frank Ocean and Kanye West.

VICE: The last time you were in Austin, you were kicking off the *Boombox Retrospective* at the Contemporary. How did that show come to be?

Tom Sachs: From what I gather, Louis Grachos [the Contemporary’s executive director] is new in town, and he asked his associate curator, Sean Ripple, who is local, what kind of artist Austin would like. Ripple mentioned my name, and Louis lit up. Louis and I have done two shows together. This is our third museum show, and our biggest one yet.

So I flew to Austin and instantly fell in love. I’d heard [about the city], but I instantly got it... I’ve also just been experiencing the music and the vibe and the energy of the city. When Louis said, “Do you want to do a show?” I immediately said yes, because I’d do anything for Louis. But when he said the show was in Austin, it presented a double whammy.

What about Austin made an exhibition focusing on your boombox sculptures seem like the right fit?

The boomboxes are an important part of my history. Every major project I’ve done has had a boombox. From Nutsy’s world in 2000 to *A Space Program*, or a boombox from the parties I used to throw on Lafayette Street in New York, which may feel more authentic. All of these are important parts of my life including one for *The Tea Ceremony*, which I can’t yet talk about but has an appearance in the film we’re debuting [during the festival].

Could you talk about your film, *A Space Program*? It debuts tomorrow night at the Paramount as a SXSW feature film.

So you can see bits and pieces of the movie on Instagram or the trailer online. *A Space Program* is a story of two women who go to Mars to find life. They have some trouble, as all astronauts do. They have a fight, they reconcile, they have a tea ceremony as a way of settling their differences and come to terms with each other’s personalities, and they learn the art of the dampening effect in conflict—the art of compromise. We’re trying to use the space program and the tea ceremony to talk about moments in our lives that are meaningful.



Still from 'A Space Program' (2015), by Tom Sachs

You have the exhibition up downtown, your film debuting, DJ sets planned on your functional boombox sculptures, and the pirate radio station playing curated playlists from the exhibition. It feels like you're coming at SXSW from all angles.

When Louis asked if I could do something in Austin, I specifically asked if we could do it during SXSW because I can't do things half-assed. I have to go all-in. It's a sickness that I have. [Laughs] We talked about different times of year to have this go up, but it just had to be now.

The boomboxes are pieces that have carried me through my adolescence, and I knew that music was one of the many things that just defined Austin. It seemed right to have all that happen now. I don't know if the SXSW scene has embraced the show, I can't tell, but to me, it seems right. But it's also important to know that if you're in town, you can hear the playlists that correspond to the boombox works on 94.3 FM.

There are some big-name contributors on the playlist roster, like Frank Ocean and Kanye West. What was the process like getting them involved, and why did you want to collaborate on the playlists?

We all make playlists, right? So I reached out to my friends and asked them all to contribute. I have a relationship with Kanye and Frank, and they were psyched. This is their talent, [to create music]. You just can't argue about Kanye's musical ability.

So what you hear on the pirate radio station, and what you hear in the gallery since they're the same, are sounds from my community. And now my community, our cultural communities, are much larger than they used to be. I don't see those guys that much, but I'm glad they got the chance to participate.

We've seen the boomboxes, we've got the film debut, and you hinted at *The Tea Ceremony*, but what's next?

Well, *A Space Program* is a real movie. We're continuing to develop *The Tea Ceremony* and we'll probably do some shorter video or movie attached to it. More in the tradition of

the *Nutsy* movies. But many of these projects are ongoing. *A Space Program* continues. We find that there's evidence of water on Mars. And there's all the things you need to support life on Mars. We haven't found life proper, but there may currently be life there. But we're looking to other planets, like the icy moon of Jupiter known as Europa, which has six times the water as our planet.

To cut through ice of that depth is a pretty daunting task for a spaceship or probe coming from earth with our level of resources, but that's our problem. That life *could* exist there, that's the exciting thing.

A Space Program opened at the Paramount earlier this week. An additional screening at the Alamo Drafthouse South Lamar location will occur on Thursday, March 19. Electronic artists such as Young Guru, J. Rocc, and IAMNOBODI will be performing at the Jones Center, using the functional boomboxes in his ongoing Boombox Retrospective at the Contemporary, starting at noon on March 18 and running through March 20. In addition, Tom Sachs's exhibition Nuggets will be on display at Austin's Lora Reynolds Gallery through April 25.