

GAGOSIAN GALLERY



Grandmaster Sachs

With his handcrafted, fully functioning boomboxes, the artist Tom Sachs celebrates a bygone analog era, and reflects on what's been lost now that all the world's music can reside in our pockets.

Jody Rosen



Tom Sachs, who improvised his own tape deck as a child and whose retrospective of sound-system sculptures is on view at the Contemporary Austin through April 19. Credit Ben Sklar for The New York Times

We need a new word, preferably a German one with a dozen syllables, for a phenomenon that is peculiar to, or at least peculiarly acute in, the early 21st century: nostalgia for technology of the relatively recent past. Clacking roller-ball typewriters, gleaming hand-pumped espresso machines, midcentury television sets the size of compact cars — these gizmos have passed through that phase of obsolescence in which they are discarded and forsaken, tossed on the curbside trash heap, and have come out on the other side as fetish objects and targets of eBay bidding wars. It's an understandable reaction to the digital age. As the world disintegrates into bits and bytes, it's natural that those of us with a sentimental streak train our love and longing on the machines of the analog era, which not only remind us of days gone by, but which, literally, have some substance to them, some heft.

If anyone can be said to suffer from — and to revel in — this passion for analog-age stuff, it is the sculptor, painter and installation artist Tom Sachs. Sachs, 48, is based in New York, but on an afternoon not long ago he could be found in downtown Austin, Tex., in what looked like a psychedelic version of a RadioShack. In fact, he was at the Contemporary Austin museum, in a vast second-story gallery. He was surrounded by a motley assortment of audio devices that he had designed and made himself.

The artist and his team were racing to complete the installation of “Tom Sachs: Boombox Retrospective, 1999-2015.” The exhibition collects nearly two dozen of Sachs’s imaginatively jerry-built audio devices. The show is a historical excavation — a tribute to the portable music players that occupied center stage in popular culture from the mid-’70s to the late ’80s, from the golden age of disco to hip-hop. It is also a record of Sachs’s decades-long obsession with music and the now-outmoded machines that once blasted it out into the world. “The nostalgia I feel for these boomboxes is intense,” Sachs said. “But it’s not exactly nostalgia — because I haven’t let them go. I just kind of keep building them and scattering them around my everyday life.”



A mischievous mixed-media boombox. *Ben Sklar for The New York Times*

Sachs’s fascination with boomboxes first stirred as a child growing up in Westport, Conn., when he improvised a tape deck by attaching his Sony Walkman to a pair of mini-speakers using scraps of plywood and Velcro. In a sense, all of his art has been an elaboration on that little contraption. Sachs is a tinkerer, a man for whom tinkering doubles as a virtuoso craft and a spiritual pursuit. His sculptures, which often mimic mass-produced objects, make use of humble materials and tools — Scotch tape and plywood, screwdrivers and vice grips — and the finished products have a deliberately scruffy quality, with glue drips, duct-tape traces and the ragged edges of jigsaw-cut wood left visible, foregrounding what Sachs calls the “scars of labor.”

The results can be grandiose, mischievous, gaudy — often all of the above. Sachs has made bronze sculptures of the Japanese character Hello Kitty roughly cast from foam-core, like a ragamuffin riff on Jeff Koons. He has built a lo-fi mixed-media replica of a NASA lunar module, which was used in “Space Program: Mars,” 2012, an elaborate staging of a Martian landing that took place at Manhattan’s Park Avenue Armory. His work has addressed themes of consumerism and authenticity, violence and race; he has courted controversy and sought succès de scandale. (In 1999, the Manhattan gallerist Mary Boone was arrested for weapons possession when she hosted a show featuring Sachs’s homemade handguns.) But his project is first and foremost

about what he has termed “haute bricolage” — the glory of humble materials and the ingenious things you can build using them.

Things like boomboxes. At the Contemporary Austin, Sachs led me to a plywood D.J. booth emblazoned with the presidential seal, which had a built-in shelf stocked with booze. All of Sachs’s music machines actually function, and in his latest exhibit each one is equipped with a different playlist; the “Presidential Vampire Booth” serves as the command center, with a switchbox controlling the individual boomboxes. Sachs began fiddling with the switchbox. Nearby sat “Model Thirty Six,” 2014, a blunt cinder block fitted with subwoofers, stereo inputs and a metal-pipe handle — a boombox fit for an Olympic weightlifter.

The boomboxes flaunt their usual Sachsian scars, the rough-hewn edges and glops of silicone and epoxy. They are witty; some of the pieces make you laugh out loud. A ceramic boombox created in 2014 at a studio at the Contemporary Austin’s art school is attached to a pair of longhorns: a cheeky tip of the Stetson to Texas. “Guru’s Yardstyle,” 1999, is a vertical stack of audio equipment — speakers, a turntable, a sequencer, an old CD Walkman — crowned with an umbrella: shelter from the storm for the D.J., and a wink at Magritte.

But Sachs is also thinking seriously about technology and music, and their place in our everyday lives. In the digital era, music has been downsized and disembodied: vinyl LPs gave way to CDs and then evaporated into MP3s. Sachs reached into his pocket and produced his iPhone 6. He said: “Today, this is my boombox. There’s something almost shameful about that. The music on this phone is arguably infinite, if you use Spotify. Of course, that’s something to celebrate. It’s bringing so much music into our lives. Still, I can’t help but feel the loss.”

Certainly that loss is palpable for music fans of Sachs’s generation. There are many of us who can’t repress a pang when we hear the Notorious B.I.G. rap about the boombox of his youth: “I let my tape rock till my tape popped.” But not all of Sachs’s sculptures are analog tape decks; many are elaborate digital players, sculptures with speakers and iPod inputs. In fact, the loss with which Sachs is reckoning is not so much about analog versus digital, but about public versus private: about the music we experience today through earbuds that we once blared to, shared with, the wide world.

The boombox was a symbol of protest, defiance and youth; it symbolized the aggressive swagger of rap, which began its conquest of the cultural mainstream in the early 1980s. It was a flashpoint of racial politics: The derisive term “ghetto blaster” was coined by critics who associated boomboxes with lawlessness and urban decay. But more than rebellion, the boombox represented community and communication. It was a talisman linking the black and Latino creators of hip-hop, and a beacon calling to outsiders like Sachs, who were seduced by the new music and the vibrant culture surrounding it.

A viewer of Sachs’s boomboxes can mull all kinds of cultural and historical questions. But the boomboxes also function as a simple rebuke to his own iPhone 6 — a celebration of big machines, and of bigness for bigness’s sake. “Toyan’s,” 2002, is a phalanx of speakers piled 8 feet tall and 12 feet across. The piece, based on the sound systems that power Jamaican street parties, has appeared in several Sachs shows; it has been used in dance parties on three continents. It is very loud. “It has the sound reinforcement for a stadium,” Sachs said.

But sound quality per se doesn't matter much to Sachs. He's no audiophile. "There was a time in my life where I kind of geeked-out about sound," he said. "But I feel like sometimes the people who get really into audio, they get overly invested in the systems themselves. I love these boomboxes, but I try to remember the important part, the thing the system is there to support. The music."