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Memorabilia. Collecting Sounds with... is a new series from Ràdio Web MACBA that seeks to break through to unearth and reveal private collections of music and sound *memorabilia*. The documentary series is being presented this spring at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) in a prospective conference/listening format, where four collectors have been invited to share the concerns and particular characteristics that have driven them to build their personal collections. This is a historiography of sound collecting that reveals the unseen and passionate work of the amateur collector while reconstructing multiple parallel histories such as the evolution of recording formats, archival issues, the sound collecting market and the evolution of musical styles beyond the marketplace.

This is a conversation by email between Kenneth Goldsmith, Anna Ramos, Roc Jiménez de Cisneros, Rick Prelinger and Jon Leidecker, which took place on April 2012.

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Publishers Weekly described the writings of Kenneth Goldsmith as 'some of the most exhaustive and beautiful collage work yet produced in poetry'. Goldsmith is the author of ten books of poetry and teaches at the Centre for Programs in Contemporary Writing at University of Pennsylvania, where he is also senior editor of the online poetry archive PennSound. Goldsmith is also the founding editor of the online archive UbuWeb (ubu.com), a universal source of reference for avant-garde art on the Internet. An underground project that has no institutional backing or budget of any kind, UbuWeb is an exhaustive and also personal repository that reflects the tastes, quirks and obsessions of its creator. A compulsive digital collector, Goldsmith's personal archive extends far beyond the in itself unfathomable UbuWeb. www.ubu.com

MEMORABILIA. COLLECTING SOUNDS WITH... Kenneth Goldsmith

01. Conversation with Kenneth on his sound collection

Which came first, the chicken (your personal collection) or the egg (UbuWeb)? As you already know, the *Memorabilia. Collecting sounds with...* series mainly focuses on sound and music, but I'm also very curious to find out what else you collect and, of course, how much you define or limit your collection to any one particular area of exploration.

At this point, I cannot separate nor distinguish between what I used to collect for myself and what appears on UbuWeb. In the beginning, I collected for myself – books, street posters, records – but in time, all of these have gone onto UbuWeb. UbuWeb is my *wunderkammer*. What appears there appears for no other reason than I think it happens to be valuable or cool, and it fits into the general scheme of what is avant-garde. Sadly, because there are no other sites like it, UbuWeb is mistaken for an institution when in fact, it is really just one person's obsessive collection; a collection in the disguise of an institution. I have long felt that if I can't share it, it's not worth collecting. Even before digital days, the joy of acquisition was in the sharing of your finds with others. This is why I became a DJ on WFMU: to share with people all of the strange and wonderful things that I had been collecting, and to put them together in ways that were unexpected and beautiful. I did that for 15 years, during which time UbuWeb grew simultaneously. Both fed each other. The most wonderful things in the world found their way to WFMU, many of which eventually ended up on Ubu and vice versa. Over the course of 15 years, while technology has changed slightly, the sharing impulse has continued all the same. The insane explosions of file-sharing that we've seen over the past 15 years are all a result of people's need to share their collections with one another. The shuttering of MP3 blogs and file-lockers has paused this phenomenon momentarily: it will come back stronger in the near future with new technologies. You can't suppress the joy of sharing.

With such a huge amount of material now available on your site, do you have any thoughts on the joy of curating? Every month, you invite guest curators to submit top 10 lists of material drawn from the UbuWeb archives, sometimes based on personal favorites, sometimes theme-based. What are your ideas right now on the act of curating as opposed to the raw impulse towards acquisition?

In a time when everything is available, what matters is the curation of that material. Those who can make sense of this overload are emerging as the real winners. Look at Boing Boing. They don't make anything, instead they point to cool things. They are curators; they filter. And the fact of them pointing to something far outweighs the importance of the artifact at which they are pointing. But the opposite is true of archive.org, where they have amazing stuff, but there's nobody to curate it, to separate the crap from what's great. As a result, you have an open-source nightmare. When everybody is invited to the party, it's a disaster. Everybody has a voice, but not all voices are equal. Ubu is not a democracy. It's very hard to get work on Ubu. But that's why it's so good; people with deep knowledge and very good taste have curated it very carefully.

A friend who is an enthusiastic collector of any means of sound reproduction, Anki Toner, once told me that his way of collecting, and how and what he collects, changed when he realized that he was a collector. Have you experienced anything similar?

I have never been anything other than a collector so I wouldn't know anything different.



[Kenneth Goldsmith, 2012. Photo: Gemma Planell]

But there must have been a moment of self-awareness. What would be your definition of a collector?

Today we have all become collectors, whether or not we've acknowledged it. The act of acquisition on a massive scale – which is what we all do in the digital age – and the management of that information has turned us all into unwitting archivists. Archiving is the new folk art: something that is widely practiced and has unconsciously become integrated into a great many people's lives. Categorically the term 'collector' seems a bit quaint; I prefer 'archivist.'

Your sound collection in numbers: approximately how many records do you own?

I have about 10,000 LPs, 7,500 CDs, and many times more MP3s.

One of the drastic changes brought about by the new digital distribution model is the format of the music we consume. The album no longer prevails and singles and individual tracks seem to be more popular, given that time becomes scarcer as access to content increases. One could even argue that the old album format was actually a trick designed to sell extra stuff at higher prices, but it's obvious that many artists conceive(d) and develop(ed) albums from a conceptual point of view. Do you still find the occasional record which warrants countless repeat listens, or is the competing call of the new simply too great? Do you have any observations on the shift in listening patterns, from music fans who once learned certain recordings off by heart, to the current paradigm where many fans approach a new artist by devouring their entire album catalogue at once?

I find music now to be ambient. I find myself listening with one ear, often surprised at what I hear. There's just so much that I turn it on and don't bother to program it in any way. Occasionally, an album becomes an earworm, but much less frequently than years ago. As much as it has to do with quantity, it also has to do with money. When I was paying retail price for a record, I would try much harder to like it.

I'm not sure that many people devour artists' oeuvres any more. It strikes me that the oeuvre – and even the album as cohesive unit – is a dated notion. Today, MP3 artifacts are shard-like, appearing in download folders from unknown places in bits and pieces: from file-sharing, from links, from tweets, from email. Chucks of odd flotsam and jetsam comprise many digital libraries. Nobody knows where they got them or even who made them. Even the nomenclature – bit torrent, say – implies fragmentation.

I can't resist asking: what is your most expensive record, which one did you pay the most for? Are you very meticulous with your sound collection? Do you collect second copies? Are you very picky about owning mint copies? I sense that you may be more obsessed with content, rather than objects.

I have never paid much for my records for several reasons. Andy Warhol once said that the smartest collectors collect things that nobody else wants. So my obsession with difficult music, obscure poetry, and strange novelty records always fell into that category. Also, since I've never had much money, I've never been able to indulge in such purchases. Thirdly, I don't really care about the condition of LPs, nor do I buy them for their covers like some collectors do; I don't care if something is a first edition or a bootleg; it just isn't interesting to me. All my records were bought in thrift shops and cut-out bins. I take what nobody else wants. I keep a terrible sound system so that everything sounds the same: on my stereo I can't tell the difference between an LP, a CD or an MP3. All I hear is music. Perhaps this comes from the fact that I grew up listening to music on a transistor radio and if it doesn't sound good on a transistor radio, I still feel that it isn't worth listening to. As Phil Spector famously said: 'Back to Mono'. Of course, I haven't bought a record since the dawn of file-sharing.

Where did you used to look for music and where do you look for it now?

Before file-sharing, how I spent all my time and money was being constantly on the hunt for music. Every city I visited I would find the record stores and thrift shops and that's all I would do. Today, I travel much more than I used to and I haven't stepped foot into a record store in fifteen years.



[Kenneth Goldsmith's record collection, 2012]

You're very outspoken about your position on file sharing, and you've even had a very interesting exchange of views with Chris Cutler (<http://www.thewire.co.uk/articles/6715/>) and David Keenan (<http://www.thewire.co.uk/articles/6954/>) for *The Wire*. As they both point out, 'free always comes at a price'. In your 'epiphany' you talk about the changes in the way we consume and access cultural goods (which, I should add, may drastically change in the near future). Keenan and Cutler talk about the consequences.

They're both businessmen. Keenan owns a record store and Cutler owns a record label and distribution service. They're scared shitless. I would be too if I was in their position.

I'm also quite obsessed with the pervasive 'fiction of access and participation'. While we obviously have access to a lot more stuff (at least for the time being), official music/film/art outlets are anything but diverse. So, for example, I often find it difficult to find things I'm looking for. At the same time, sites/communities such as Soundcloud – which could actually offer something remotely resembling participation –, are removing stuff because of copyright infringement (even though what would be interesting in this case is more about sharing mixes, demos and the impressions of the music that users like, with no profit in sight).

But these have always been problems of official cultural outlets. That's why we've always gravitated to and trusted unofficial culture. Commercial culture will always screw you. That's what it's set up to do. Soundcloud is a for-profit service. After luring you to their service with duplicitous feel-good utopian rhetoric like 'community' and 'free' they'll extract their pound of flesh. Anybody who falls for that – or for the bullshit of 'free' cloud lockers – is a fool.

The new laws and regulations being passed seem to be driving the web towards a highly monopolised model, where it is harder to find small, underground things and people's overall relationship with music is more superficial than before. 'One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them, One Ring to bring them all, And in the darkness bind them.' Except that it will be hard to bind/find rare, obscure items. Given that you have tried to make Ubu the exact opposite of this since the very beginning, do you think it is a real threat?

Nah. The underground will always be alive and well. The mainstream doesn't care about us. We're no threat to them because they can't possibly understand us. You know, in this culture everyone wants to be in the white hot center. I say let them. We'll take the margins where there is real freedom. This will continue unabated for those who cherish such values.

Getting back to your collection... are you able to choose a personal favourite?

My favorite is what I most recently downloaded free on file-sharing. So that would be The Grateful Dead's *Aoxomoxoa*. It was much easier to hunt it down on file-sharing than it was to rip my LP. Of course, I haven't listened to my vinyl of it in years and most likely won't listen to the MP3s of it.

Original '69 version or the 1971 remix?

Dunno. It didn't come with liner notes ;)

And what's the most extravagant record you have?

Some of the box sets are extravagant – the original box set of Cage's 25th Anniversary at Town Hall, the *OU Review* (which was the final record I ever bought back in, I think, the late nineties), the William S. Burroughs & Jack Kerouac box sets, and a big box of bootleg Frank Zappa LPs called *Ban the Boots*, which comes with t-shirts, buttons, and a fold-out cartoon tableau of a concert scene. But again, the Cage and the Burroughs is all up on Ubu, the Kerouac is on my MP3 drive and I haven't touched the Zappa set in a dozen years: it is extravagantly gathering dust on my record shelf.

And any guilty pleasures, now that they can't see us?

The great thing about file-sharing – Napster, in particular started this trend – is



[Kenneth Goldsmith's CD collection, 2012]

that it made guilty pleasures visible and acceptable. Whilst browsing another user's files, I was stunned find John Cage MP3s alphabetically snuggled up next to, say, Mariah Carey files in the same directory. Everyone has guilty pleasures, however, never before have they been so exposed – and celebrated – this publicly. My MP3 drive is full of 'bad' things – Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath, disco of all stripes, cruddy indy rock – I love them all. In fact, when I was a teenager, I loved Black Sabbath. When I became a hippy, I loved the Grateful Dead and sold all my Black Sabbath records. When I became a punk, I loved the Sex Pistols and sold all my Grateful Dead records. When I became an avant-gardist, I loved John Cage and sold all my Sex Pistols records. I never sold my John Cage records, but eventually I went and bought back all my Black Sabbath, Grateful Dead and Sex Pistols records. Now they're all on my MP3 drives in multiple versions.

Digital music is seeing a new breed of sound collectors, the 'completists', as William Bennett called them in his lecture last year... What do you think about this new paradigm? Would you call yourself a completist?

No. I'm an incompletist. I take only what I can find on file-sharing. As such, UbuWeb is also an incomplete archive. Why are there, for example, only five Godard films on Ubu? Because those were the out-of-print and strange ones floating around file-sharing.

And where do you find out-of-print material?

I am a member of numerous private file-sharing groups, where insane and amazing collector freaks are. I poach things from there and put them on Ubu. Ubu, in this way, is the Robin Hood of the avant-garde, taking things that are available to only a few and giving them to everyone.

Your approach is quite peculiar – you started as an artist, which suggests that you probably have a certain appreciation for the aesthetic and object value of records, but you don't seem too interested in the object fetishism that tends to capture the imagination of more traditional music collectors.

I actually don't care about aesthetics or music at all anymore. Now all I care for is quantity. I've got more music on my drives than I'll ever be able to listen to in the next ten lifetimes. As a matter of fact, records that I've been craving for years are all unlistened to. I'll never get to them either, because I'm more interested in the hunt than I am in the prey. The minute I get something, I just crave more.

What's your relationship with other collectors exploring similar aesthetics or material? How do they deal with your obsession of digitising and sharing most of your stuff?

UbuWeb has for so long been such a fountain for free culture advocates to drink from that everyone is thrilled to see things that they've ripped show up on the site. When we can, we try to credit the original ripper, but since these sites are pretty underground, most people are – and prefer to remain – anonymous. However, many times people will approach UbuWeb directly with something that they've just digitized and of course they are given direct access to our servers to upload. Again, I can't distinguish this type of activity from my own collecting. Now it's all the same project.

That's actually one of the more interesting things about UbuWeb, the fact that it is closely interwoven with your own personal take on certain issues, practices and aesthetic values. Could we say that the archive has in some sense become your own artistic practice?

Oh, very much so. Ubu is shit. It's an artists' project. I'm no art historian. I have no authority. I just slap up stuff that seems to make sense. But this is how artists' work, you know, intuition, hunches. I'd love to see Ubu done correctly by someone like MoMA: proper taxonomies, complete discographies and filmographies, proper scholarly citations and liner notes, and so forth. The best thing that could happen is that Ubu is rendered obsolete, put out of its misery for being the weird artists' project that it is. But that hasn't happened for 16 years and I've heard no plans of anything coming, so for the time being we're stuck with Ubu's idiosyncrasies. Ubu is an appropriative artwork. If Duchamp appropriated an object and Sherrie Levine an oeuvre, Ubu is appropriating all of modernism.



[Kenneth Goldsmith's MP3 collection]

You've also mentioned here and in other interviews, that only Ubu is making this archival effort to document the avant-garde. What sets you apart from institutional efforts?

The fact that we pretend that copyright doesn't exist. Copyright? What's that? Never heard of it.

I like to think that what we do at Ràdio Web MACBA somehow complements your efforts, perhaps not in quantitative terms, but in our desire to offer context, interpretations and curatorial itineraries around certain subjects. But you are certainly right: it's altogether too common to we find individuals like yourself (or Rick Prelinger with the Prelinger Archives, Jason Scott and Archive.org, etc.) doing the work of institutions. What's the barrier for institutions?

The barrier is that you are funded. And because you are funded, your hands are tied; you can't do what you want.

What we could call the digital revolution has changed sound collecting. Information seems to be more readily available, and obscurer music is more easily accessible (at least for now). Has this changed your collection or your approach to collecting anyhow?

Of course. It allows me to take a risk, to explore and collect things that I never would have if I had to pay for it. I download massive amounts of music every day, most of which becomes part of my collection. As a result my collection has grown in ways I never would've imagined. For instance, before file-sharing, I had about a few dozen seventies dub records; now I've got over 1,000 of them.

You keep recommending that people stop trusting the Cloud and download everything they can while it is still available. Do you think things could drastically change in the near future? What do you make of the Record Industry's latest attempts to stop piracy? What's your own take on piracy?

Things have been changing so fast that by the time this is published, my statements will be very dated. However, the Megaupload raid has scared the shit out of just about everyone in the file-sharing community. People perceived file-sharing to be very risky and one little threat sent many people packing, even though they might not have been doing anything wrong. The specter of copyright has been used as a method of intimidation and many people crumble when faced with it. Most of the time, it's an empty threat. I feel really bad for people who have spent years building the most wonderful *wunderkammers* only to have the entire thing collapse when the clouds have shut down. On one hand, they were silly to trust it: there is no free in the commercial digital world. And these were commercial enterprises. There is always a price to pay.

So what's the future of file-sharing from your point of view? Does it have one?

There will always be file-sharing. The thing is that Megaupload was shut down because they were serving Lady Gaga and Microsoft products, not John Cage. The avant-garde is always safe because it files way beneath the radar. It's funny because UbuWeb is available in China, although it contains loads of sexual, violent and politically subversive work. But if the authorities come to the front page of Ubu, they see a lot of red and black text with names they've never heard of and an image of an old man, Samuel Beckett. They must think it's a site for pensioners.

Compulsive object-music collectors, like Ed Veenstra for example, confess that as soon as they have what they are looking for, the mystique is gone. Are you also a treasure hunter with ADHD?

The hunt is the treasure; the hunt is the mystique. Mr. Veenstra has a very old fashioned view. In my opinion, he is mistaking the forest for the trees. But to answer your question, yes, my hunting is fueled by ADHD. UbuWeb itself, you might say, is driven by ADHD. The hunt also gives us an endorphin rush. We are clearly addicted. That's why the site is so enormous. For the past 16 years, it's been one obsessive drive to archive the weirdest and best stuff we can get our hands on.



And talking about the thrill of the hunt, what are you looking for that you can't find? Can the thrill be as intense with digital music as it is with objects?

We cannot determine the depth of what is being shared, which is why file sharing is so special. The sheer scope, variety, and seeming endlessness of file-sharing is mind-boggling: you never know what you are going to find and how much of it is going to be there. It is as if every record store, flea market, and charity shop in the world has been connected by a searchable database and flung their doors open, begging you to walk away with as much as you can carry for free. But it's even better because the supply is never exhausted; the coolest record you've ever dug up can now be shared with all your friends. These surprises – never knowing what you're going to find – makes this experience a million times better than record fairs or swap meets of old. In those situations, what was under that roof was what you were going to find. Now, every day, my RSS feed shows me treasures that I could never have imagined, all for free.

I'd also like you to share the ritual of the moment... I know it often happens at night...

I put my kids to bed and pour a big glass of bourbon and start record shopping from my desk. Before I know it, I've got 20 or 30 things streaming to my computer that years ago I would've paid a lot of money for. In those days, you'd come across these things only once in a while. Today, each day I haul in up to 50 records. For instance, I recently stumbled upon a torrent with the complete discography of Fred Frith, from Henry Cow to his solo works. There were over 150 albums, which by the time I woke up in the morning, were sitting on my desktop. Will I ever have time to listen to them? Never. But, gee, I'm in love with the idea of having them.

eBay and Discogs are also part of the digital revolution and have affected the sound collecting market. How have these tools changed sound collecting in your own experience?

Only in that they make it easier to find information about the MP3s I've been downloading. Remember LPs and even CDs came with liner notes, which told you where the record was made, who played on it, and so forth. Now we just have these free-floating artifacts so it's good that there's a database to find this lost information. But I've never downloaded a record because of something on those sites, but I have consulted them post-downloading. Also, they provide a lot of the information of obscure things on Ubu, track listings, credits, etc. that I would normally have no idea about.

Is there such a thing as digital hoarding? Do you think you might be a digital hoarder?

Digital culture is all about hoarding. But unlike, say, hoarding money or food, you're not taking anything away from anybody else. You are enacting Thomas Jefferson's famous dictum, 'He who receives an idea from me, receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.'

In a conversation with William Bennett last year he said something that caught my attention: 'The romance of sound collecting might be dead – not because of the music, but due to the loss of the personal human component of the process.'

I completely disagree. There's plenty of human interaction in online file-sharing and communications. In fact, Anna, we've only met once or twice in meatspace, but we've had a very engaged online relationship. I think he's being very narrow, old-fashioned, and rather Romantic in his approach. One thing is clear: the world has changed and it's not going back any time soon.

02. Addenda

Rick Prelinger: Sharing films online and removing them from the realm of scarcity changed my life for the better, so much so that we're now more than doubling the



size of our online collection at archive.org. I'm all for massive sharing of digital materials. And you tend to characterize analog cultures as residual and digital cultures as emergent. But my experience is a little different. I see trends and counter-trends, without unambiguous indications that one is replacing the other. Especially in our physical library of print materials, we've been surprised to see a tremendous attraction (notably among younger people) to paper. These are people who didn't grow up surfeited by books, who didn't (like me) live in houses filled with print. As a result print, rather than dying, evolves into a privileged experience. To this group, aura is cool. Aura is attractive. I wonder whether the world will divide into, for instance, a group that likes a limited amount of music but lots of aura, and another that likes a lot of music without aura whatsoever. Is there any reason to believe that the world is more complex than it was, but that it hasn't really changed?

I feel that digital materials have aura as well, albeit a different type than do physical materials. The aura of digital materials comes from their ability to be shared and the sorts of interactions they create amongst people; think of it as a catalyst for relational aesthetics, auras of sociability. As much as I adore my vast paper and vinyl libraries, I generally bask in their aura alone. So we're swapping one sort of aura, I think, for another.

RP: Libraries, archives and corporate content-owners constantly destroy physical materials that are expensive or troublesome to keep. We lost physical newspapers when they were badly microfilmed. Tens, perhaps hundreds of millions of library books have been weeded or will be as a consequence of Google Books and Hathi Trust. Videotape is being digitized and oversampled, and we'll see it go soon. And though no one says this loud, lots of film won't survive. Lately I'm thinking we need to think about whether physical objects have a right to exist. And if we take up this question, we have to ask it about digital objects as well. What do you think about the rights of objects?

To quote the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler, "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." The digital ecology is additive, unpredictable, and wildly eclectic. Culture marches on in strong and compelling ways. I doubt that there will ever be a drought of intellectual materials or a slackening of their production, if the profusion of digital artifacts generated over the last, say, fifteen or twenty years is any indication. I think physical objects have the right to exist – and there seems to be plenty of people working very hard to preserve them. So we have dual ecosystems at play, sometimes at odds with each other, but often times amending what the other lacks. My physical objects, my records and books, are now lovely house decorating texture – nothing looks better than a wall of books – but my real use of them as intellectual materials happens digitally in the forms of MP3s and PDFs.

RP: I've been admiring your thoughtful and assertive book on Uncreative Writing, which among many other things closes a loop between conceptual art practice and vernacular everyday behavior that hasn't received credit as artwork. But it makes me wonder whether we should be more appreciative of Uncreative Curating. I'd be worried if we pushed artists off the pedestal and replaced them with curators.

I feel the line between artist and curator/archivist is blurring and that a case can be made for many types of artistic practices upon their cumulative, gathering, collecting and archiving tendencies. Sometimes, with such an overload of cultural materials at our fingertips, the need is not to make more of it (which will happen anyway) but to sort and filter that which already exists. As the art world, for example, gets bigger, the problem is not the need to make more art – there's already plenty of that – but the more pressing need is for people to sort it all out, hence the rise of the curation as an artform. Similarly we see this online with sites like Boing Boing, renowned not because they make cool things – they don't make anything – but because they point to cool things.

03. Acknowledgments

This email conversation between Kenneth Goldsmith, Anna Ramos, Roc Jiménez de Cisneros, Rick Prelinger, and Jon Leidecker took place on April 2012.

04. Copyright note

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