Leaving Without Leaving: The Expectation Of An Archive

Adam Michael Hutchinson
Syracuse University

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Abstract

In this writing I intend to connect my current studio practice and personal background by conceptually relating artworks through the idea of the vessel. Using project examples and outside sources I investigate the physical presence of sound through deejay culture, curated archives, and aural collage. Transitional quotations are placed between larger sections of my own writing, meant to act as samples, breaks, or segues in the same way a deejay would shift between records on a turntable. Contained within this document are motivational anecdotes, methods of execution, and historical references that support the exhibition portion of this thesis as well as provide guidance for continued study.
Leaving Without Leaving: The Expectation Of An Archive

by

Adam Hutchinson

BFA, Minneapolis College of Art & Design, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the

Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts,

Syracuse University

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Leaving Without Leaving: The Expectation Of An Archive

For those of you that come in late
We are now having a little cooking session for Blue Note
Right here on the scene
Putting the pot on in here
And we'd like for you to join in with us
And have a ball¹

Tuning out allows for tuning in. I wear ear plugs in my studio to turn the external volume down. Sounds drone on dampened. My breathing slows as I hear my lungs fill inside my head; my heart beats rhythm maintains a steady flow. Thoughts become universes. I implode.

Paul D. Miller, a.k.a. DJ Spooky that Subliminal Kid, is an artist, philosopher, writer, and deejay. In his book Rhythm Science, he discusses sampling as a form of dematerialized sculpture that generates a psychological collage space through sound. Sampling is a term generally used in electronic music which means to take a portion of a prerecorded song or sound and use it to form a new composition. Different meaning of the original sample is formed when used in combination with other disparate components. Throughout this document, I utilize the idea of sampling to connect larger sections of writing. Quotations act as segues, breaks, and transitions the same way a deejay shifts between records in a set. Comparably, the Kuleshov Effect, is a film editing approach developed by Lev Kuleshov. His idea was that an image in

sequence with another derives meaning from the viewer. People make connections between linked media and form some kind of relational explanation. Using samples and the Kuleshov Effect as techniques and conceptual motivations, I generate a weekly radio show in Syracuse, New York (Figure 1). The show is titled, “Cold Heat with DJ Mad A.” Sonic explorations are broadcast over the airwaves via the internet at www.werwradio.com and AM 1670. Each episode revolves around some sort of theme, ranging from the concept of home, how a season feels, or collective shared experiences. By using radio and the internet as a transmitting device I share reinterpretations of my current sonic environment. Every episode becomes autobiographical. Mood can be translated into music which generates a vibe. There’s a sense of release for me in each episode’s performance. I send vibrations out into the world with an

Figure 1. DJ Mad A broadcasting live from Syracuse University’s Jabberwocky Cafe on WERW, 2018.
immediacy of the moment, tearing into the present with sound. Listenership is limited to those able to tune in via the internet or those near the minimal AM signal. During my sets I record a digital version to be archived and posted long term on my website and Bandcamp page. There participants are welcome to return to episodes at their leisure, activating sonic time capsules. To quote Jeru the Damaja, early 1990s hip-hop pioneer and conscious sage spitter, “That's why I compose these verses. Audible worlds, my thoughts are now universes.” Acting as a cultural reservoir, I utilize the platform of web based radio to transmit an alternative aural universe contained within sound waves. In doing so I attempt to affect listeners by providing a sonic experience that transcends daily life.

The DJ spreads a memetic contagion, a thought storm brought about by annoyance and frustration with almost all the conventional forms of race, culture, and class hierarchies.²

Figure 2. Deejay setup used to perform “Fourteen way to interpret my history,” 2017.

Kneeling on the floor, I perform “Fourteen ways to interpret my history.” Positioning myself in this humble, prayer-like posture, I engage with a digital deejay mixer, Technics SL-1200 turntable, mixer, and laptop computer (Figure 2). The digital mixer provides manipulation of a pre-determined sonic catalog including my own field recordings, musical clips,

and audio captures from current events or popular culture. As the composition begins listeners hear vague conversation from my daily life. I use voice as a way to draw viewers in, and focus the listening experience. Blended and jump-cut sounds from restaurant conversation to rain falling off my apartment gutter, combine with altered audio samples. Listeners traverse through “Fourteen ways...,” encountering disparate auditory material in juxtaposition. Quickly participants confront a brief history of America, traveling though time. Starting in the 1960s, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivers a brief message, “America is, essentially a dream,” from his “American Dream” speech which he presented in 1964 at Drew University. This transitions into the current President Donald Trump, where he states, “I’m very highly educated…but there’s no better word than stupid,” taken from a South Carolina presidential campaign stop in 2015. Connecting both of these discernible voices is a game show host asking, “How would you like to be Black for a day?” A narrative arc is generated over the pieces’ entirety; indistinct voices segue into a racially charged description of “the Negroes contributions to American society.” We attempt to “crossover” with a distorted encouraging voice to, “…get angry. Say I’m a human being damnit. My life has value,” bringing to mind a current social climate involving police targeting Black and Latinx people, and the #blacklivesmatter movement. Viewers are welcomed to violence following their call to action, and met with chest rattling bass from Flying Lotus’ “Spicy Sammich.” Drumming recorded in a Syracuse, New York dance studio, transforms from traditional Ivory Coast rhythms into ringing bells and ethereal ambient tones. “Fourteen ways to interpret my history” resolves with a musical track from Aloe Blacc, titled “What Now?” His lyrics posing the question, “Where do we go from here?”
My effort in “Fourteen ways...” is to act as facilitator, initiating a conversation from multiple perspectives, with the intention of altering racial prejudices in a generative manner. By using dee jay culture and the idea of sampling, I present a line of questioning regarding racial tensions in the United States. Tensions I am referring to include police targeting people of color, racial economic inequities, and white privilege. I offer no answers, only my subjective observations and confusion. I’m speaking to a generally misinformed, unexposed, uneducated, White America. My audience is where I grew up, predominantly White, ranging in age from 15-45, but can be transplanted into any scenario where racial bias occurs. I hope to engage a wider community than that which is described while having a clear understanding of my position, as a White, middle-class, cisgender male. My goal with this work is to expose the ignorance in racism, and breakdown prejudices on an individual basis.

Different locations have been explored in performing “Fourteen ways....” An academic classroom gave feedback in a safe environment, promoting challenging dialogue, and discussion around my intentions. Subsequent performances have been in “The Loft,” a gallery space in...
downtown San Pedro, California (Figure 3), and an abbreviated set was played for an outdoor event at The Everson Museum of Art located in Syracuse, New York. In the latter two instances, individuals approached me to discuss my intentions, shared their experience with the work, and gave personal accounts about how music and sound affect them. Part of the power in this work lies in its malleability, that it can be transposed into various forms or locations. The work has the potential to be played in a guerrilla style where I can quickly install my equipment in a public space, perform, and participate in the result. For this reason I see “Fourteen ways…” as a piece that can exist on multiple levels; playing in a gallery context, public space, or a concert hall. “Fourteen ways…” has the capability of mutating, and because of that ability it can connect both art and music communities. This work acts as a cultural mash-up.

Growing up my family attended the Monroe United Methodist Church in Monroe, Wisconsin. There I was baptized, confirmed, went to Sunday school, and sang in choir. Singing came naturally to me. Church was the place I first performed in a theatrical manner. My voice became an instrument. Similarly, as an undergraduate student at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, I participated in gospel choir (Figure 4). Thursday nights the choir met and slowly took the place of my Methodist church community I grew up with. We sang for each other, prepared for on-campus performances, and had weekend long tours around nearby Chicago. Sister Tami was our choir director. Mr. Stanley led the band consisting of electronic keyboard, bass, and jazz drum kit. Occasionally we were lucky enough to add a horn section. Vocal soloists belted their parts. Choir members would sway and clap in various rhythms to add depth to the sound. We were choreographed, dynamic. Our choir had a reputation and were regularly invited back after we had performed. There were Christian themes and references. Gospel
music is religious in nature, but the songs we sang were meant to uplift people’s spirit and well-being. After each rehearsal Sister Tami would hold a prayer and meditation circle. We were not required to stay, but I did the week I had experienced a personal tragedy. A family friend had committed suicide. Everyone was invited to share the events of their week, things that may be causing stress, joy, heartache, or excitement. What was said did not always need to be prayer. It came to be my turn. I spoke slowly sharing my thoughts about my friend and their family. In the moment I realized I had heard other’s stories as well. Different needs, problems with family members, a death, or child’s sickness, everything I typically heard on Sunday in an entirely Caucasian church. Almost all of the people around me were African-American. We were all holding our own experiences, waiting for the appropriate provocation to participate. My choir became more than unified voices, we were unified in our humanity. Singing together meant listening to each other, our voices fitting alongside and blending into one another. In our post-rehearsal circle, we offered prayers and acted as receptacles for each other’s tribulations. My
work has become prayer like in the way I offer it to the world. Presenting sonic environments I attempt to speak outside of myself, to the humanity within us all. By collecting sound, music, conversation, noise, and news I retain information for reinterpretation. I am a repository of sound. Sonically I generate what DJ Spooky calls a “multiplex consciousness.” In this space, past and present memory get called upon to investigate my constructed soundscapes. Everyone brings their own subjective interpretation to the mix.

As devils search for the secrets to immortality
I alter my physical chemistry
Walk through the valley of the shadow of death
I exist even when no things are left
Vibrations transcend space and time
Pure at heart because I deal with the mind
That's why I compose these verses
Audible worlds, my thoughts are now universes
Written on these pages is the ageless
Wisdom of the sages, ignorance is contagious

Put on a pair of headphones and you can disappear into an audible world, an alternative or altered state of mind based on what you hear. My earliest memories involve using music as a way to navigate the darkness within the human condition. Music has the capacity to heal, transcend time, and alter space. “Something To Remember (This Moment Or Me),” is a loop based audio collage experience. Meant to hang in a hallway or corridor, a single pair of headphones rests on a five by five inch shelf containing an mp3 media player (Figure 5). Audio hum, hiss, clicks, and pops intersect with piano chords, a singing vocalist, and repetitive percussive noise. The lyrics, “Please give me something to remember you by,” fade in and out of

recognition, haunt the composition, and resolve just as the piece loops back into itself. I relate this repeating phrase to the cyclical nature of life and loss. Grieving can occur when we leave a cherished place, lose a loved one, or say goodbye to a previous self. A psychologist said, “[that] opening up to the pain of loss, you open yourself to find joy.”

“Something to Remember,” is the first in a series of works attempting to reconcile the past with the present, and find generative means to grieve and heal. By distilling the physical elements in “Something To Remember (This Moment Or Me),” I provoke focused consideration for the audio. The listening site is meant to act as a kind of emotional relief station, similar to the way a drinking fountain quenches your thirst. Participants engage with the work for a duration they choose. By putting on the headphones listeners agree to join in an experience. I am interested in how long I can keep someone’s attention, or if people will pay attention at all. Without giving instruction or duration to the piece, viewers approach the headset of their own volition. In this way, I make an invocation to those willing.

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Figure 5. Installation view of “Something To Remember (This Moment Or Me),” 2018.
Constructing this type of composition, I start with a collection of recorded samples taken from vinyl records. The albums are played on a 1950s vintage Newcomb turntable that is improperly weighted with two nickels taped to the tone arm. Randomly the needle will create its own loop points. When this occurs I use a handheld audio recorder to capture digital audio for later manipulation and in combination with other sounds. I consider this process a kind of controlled, sample based field recording. Samples are then catalogued based on their timbre, tone, vocal arrangement, or other distinguishable audio characteristics unique to each clip. These clips act as raw material to be reinterpreted and considered in combination with each other. To perform alterations, I enact a number of digital audio workstations (DAWs) such as Reaktor, Logic, or Ableton Live. Each DAW has its own unique characteristics that inform decisions.

Figure 6. Music editing software, Logic, allows for precise automated control over various audio parameters, 2018.
made for a given project. In the case of “Something to Remember,” Logic was used for its editing workflow and automation functions (Figure 6). Automation allows control of various parameters such as volume, reverb, delay, or echo in relation to time. Future iterations of this project will involve physical tape loops, which change while decaying over their duration played. Losing control due to the tape’s deterioration is of interest to me as it reflects the very nature of being human. The work has a devolutionary quality in relation to its physical and aural contents.

Use of degenerating digital tape was utilized in a work by artist Kevin Beasley titled, “...for this moment this moment is yours....” In the piece, fifty-two reels held forty hours of audio tape, which were spliced together and played on an Akai x-1800SD reel to reel eight-track player. The Akai brand is legendary for its digital sampler, the MPC 3000, used by notable hip-hop producers J Dilla, Pete Rock, and Madlib. Each reel in Beasley’s work was played from both ends simultaneously, creating a complex, sometimes indiscernible soundscape as you enter the gallery space. By playing each reel back into the space, the audio interjects in the present moment while at the same time slowly disintegrating the sonic information. Relating “Something to Remember” with “...for this moment...” I think about the needle of the record player physically wearing down a groove as it snaps into a loop. Recording the loop catches the audible blip where the loop both originates and ends. Digitizing the audio preserves a portion of this physical object for a listener to experience, a digital memory, and auditory snap of a moment. Similar to the act of putting on the headphones, “...for this moment...” provides a sonic environment to enter into and be present. Each work asks you to pay attention by attempting to reconcile the immediate sonic environment.
Anyway, I wrote the book because we're all going to die. In the loneliness of my own life, my father dead, my brother dead, my mother faraway, my sister and my wife far away, nothing here but my own tragic hands that once were guarded by a world, a sweet attention, that now are left to guide and disappear their own way into the common dark of all our deaths, sleeping in me raw bed, alone and stupid, with just this one pride and consolation: my heart broke in the general despair and opened up inwards to the Lord, I made a supplication in this dream.  

Visiting a used record store reminds me of walking through a cemetery (Figure 7). There are similarities between a gravestone and an album cover. Typically each has the name or names of persons involved. Dates of inception are included. Occasionally a saying or quotation

Figure 7. Dex Records in Long Beach, California, 2018.

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informs the reader of pertinent information. Each album acts as an auditory gravesite, awaiting animation of the hibernating archive. The inevitability that I too will contribute to either space looms heavily in both locations. Album covers read like flashes of a film projector as I flip through bins, milk crates, or dust covered shelves seeking a hidden gem from my ever growing list of sonic grails. Digging for records continues to have a meditative quality for me. You have to kind of stop looking at every album and focus on what is quickly recognizable. Personnel names, record labels, engineers, or producers I notice garner a stop and flip back in the stack. The excitement of finding something never before discovered drives the need to look at every album in immediate proximity. Overwhelmingly I feel the impulse to pursue a new sound, yet unheard. There’s a familiarity to me in these stacks of wax waiting to be activated. Each has its own physical form. Outer plastic sleeve, album cover, record’s paper sleeve, and vinyl platter all come together as a unit. Inside aural grooves await the needle drop. A turntable’s needle acts as the mediator between physical and sonic worlds, culling out the audio information to be interpreted by its audience. As deejay I act as facilitator to that sound, pulling out the sonic ingot’s to meld, mold, and weave together.

Collections have been present throughout my experience within domestic spaces. One example is from my grandmother. Depression Era glassware was arranged in my grandparents home inside of a large, four feet by six feet, dining room buffet and hutch. Along the top shelf were two dozen collectible and souvenir teaspoons. Family photographs were hung salon style along the main hallway of the house. Visual references of each decade on display were easily recognizable. Intricate frames, childhood photos of my mother, my uncle, black and white, changing to color as the photos became more and more recent. Inside the front door of my
grandparents’ house was a glass curio cabinet. Wooden features were accented by inlaid lighting on both display shelves. The piece stood about three feet tall and four feet wide. Contained within were numerous ceramic figurines from the “Precious Moments” collectible series. Each knickknack figurine generally had a motif with matching text to describe its overall message. Items would be changed out for various interpretations of holiday or seasonal themes. Curio cabinet and hutch both acted as reliquaries, where objects were honored, respected, and placed on display in my grandparents’ home. These cases are examples of the way in which I was taught to view and approach objects in every day life. Objects were meant to sit on a shelf, in a specific location, until either called upon to perform a task or be cleaned and put back in their specified position. Taking care of possessions by cleaning or replacing broken parts was not only an everyday reality, but necessity. Items purchased typically needed to have a purpose, utilized, prepared for their next use, and replaced in their unique location. My grandmother’s curio cabinet was the first example I had of a space dedicated for collected items of excess. An archive of gifts or historic monuments with memories attached at each items reception. Her cabinet brought joy in physical objects that embodied a lived experience.

Throughout our lifetime we all encounter some form of trauma. Collecting for me has been a way to operate with and negotiate life’s ordeals. Objects fill a void or bring comfort to me in their accumulation. New knowledge of an object’s history leads to curiosity and further pursuits. There is a sense of wonder and enjoyment when I track down specialized items. I believe objects find me. Some sort of universal language in atomic material is magnetized and attracted to each other. For me the language is sound. Occasionally collections have been given to me. When people move or pass away, objects “need a good home.” I found out about a sale
at a local men’s clothing store after learning that the proprietor had terminal cancer. The sale was not only a store closing event, but a sell-off of the owners possessions. Proceeds would benefit his future widow and teenage daughter. Walking into the shop I did not know what to expect. Earlier I had been informed that Gary, the owner, would be selling his vinyl record collection. Previously having visited the store, I remembered the walls lined with Blue Note Records, jazz albums from the 1960s and 70s. There was not a lot of clothing left in the shop, but leaning against one wall on the floor were hundreds of albums. An eclectic array of sounds and styles were represented. I was there for a couple of hours. Gary and I had met previously but connected while talking about his collection and love for music. He was surprised at my choices, running the gamut from Prince and Eric Dolphy, to Steve Arrington and Steely Dan. A side comment was made about my interest in cassettes (Figure 8). I had to finish my transaction,
end the conversation, and run off to work. Anyone who entered the store knew why we were there. I had a visceral reaction leaving that day. A couple of days went by. I was working at Clay Bay Pottery. Someone pulled up in the drive way before opening hours. A car door slammed and there was a knock on the studio’s side door. Gary stood with a box in his arms as I welcomed him inside. He handed me the box full of cassettes and somewhat sheepishly asked if I were interested in them. “Would you like more?” I remember his asking hopeful. He showed up in subsequent weeks with more boxes, dozens of cassettes. For the final installment he arrived with a box and a book. He told me about listening to each cassette; revisiting his favorites before giving them away. Each delivery came with excitement and anguish. His music curation resonated in me. Cassette tapes by Guru, A Tribe Called Quest, Sun Ra, and Public Enemy have still left an impression and are some of my all time favorites. Gary and I connected in a parallel musical universe. *Pass The Torch*, was the title of the book he left me.

“*Somebody Might Wave Back,*” (Figure 9) is a cassette archive work directly derived from the collection Gary Straub gave to me before his death. Each cassette was uniquely created by Gary. Details of an individual mixtape were notated by hand on the sleeve included inside each cassette case. Viewers activate the work through selection of a cassette, inserting it into the 1980s era Technics player, and listening through one of two Koss Pro 4x headphones. I distinctly remember Gary having a Technics SL-1200 turntable in his clothing store. This turntable is iconic in hip-hop and deejay culture, the standard for serious turntablists. The turntable or cassette deck act as vessel in a similar way to a ceramic bowl, holding their respective contents for distribution. I utilize a receiver, headphones, and cassette deck from the same time period the cassettes were manufactured and recorded. In doing so I attempt to
encapsulate a sonic identification method, similar to the way film stock from different decades reflects technology available at the time. By playing back each cassette, participants assist in the deterioration of the magnetic tape. Every pass of the tape player’s heads over the magnetic tape removes material for subsequent playback. Tapes will degenerate over time, mimicking the inevitability of all our deaths. Accompanying the listening deck is a limited edition cassette J-card take away. Details of each cassette’s contents, song choices, and dates created are included as a way to, “Pass the torch.” Playlists sharing songs by the Talking Heads, Ahmad Jamal, The Whispers, and Hall & Oates can be taken by viewers to continue Gary’s love of sharing music with others. Each booklet operates as a funerary bulletin, allowing for further investment and listening by those interested in a deeper investigation.
Other instances of accumulation have happened for me over time. After returning from a residency, I recognized that all of the chairs in my home have come from deceased people in my life. An oversized forest green La-Z-Boy with fold out footrest, resides in the corner of my living room from my maternal grandfather. It was his lounge chair while watching Green Bay Packer football games or National Geographic nature exposes. Wood and soft brown leather cover a mid-century modern Scandinavian chair from my partner’s paternal grandfather. It quickly became my go to reading or listening chair beside the kitchen table in our open floor apartment. Other chairs or stools represent more deceased loved ones, family members, and friends who are gone. Quietly these objects wait to be engaged by someone interested in sitting. These chairs unknowingly demonstrate a physical and sonic void when left empty. My realization about the furniture around me prompted a current project with a working title of “Silent Chairs” (Figure 11). Collecting a number of chairs that represent departed members of my personal circle, I think about instances where I have encountered an empty seat at a local bar or an unoccupied chair on the sidelines of a basketball court; both were meant as a memorial, shrine like in their lack of inhabitants. Investigating material combination within these chairs, I collage various items as I personify the...
deceased in an inanimate object. Burlap, seat cushion springs, and dilapidated chair backing converge in a skeletal form that is reminiscent of an elderly grandparent. Cast concrete cushion, exposed inner cotton padding, and high back seat represent an estranged older sibling. A high seated stool with legs cut, propped by two walking canes, and covered in drum kit cymbals sits precariously with anticipation. An Egyptian Revival era chair (Figure 10) has been taken apart, cleaned, and modified to represent a past childhood self. This chair was given to me, from inside a Syracuse, New York warehouse. After walking past this object in a dark corner a number of times it drew my attention and was told it “needs a good home.” This chair has lived in my studio for two years waiting. My intention for these objects is to generate a visceral response, provoking concern within the viewer as they are left with an eerie, contemplative tension without resolution. The furniture pieces act as repositories, awaiting further interrogation and manipulation.

Figure 11. Installation view of “Quintet For The Turn,” including one “Silent Chair,” meant for attuned listening and reflection, 2019.
As a collector of personal and cultural traumas, I give myself over to my sonic environment. I am a vessel of lived experience. Focusing attention on my specific aural landscape involves a great amount of participation. To listen fully, immersed in sound, is to allow yourself to be consumed by what you hear. Sound generates and destructs simultaneously. My aim is to use the affective or emotive qualities of sound and its physical presence to focus our lived present moment. Aural experience is fleeting and temporal. Using ephemeral auditory material I repurpose captured sound for reinterpretation and new imagining. I implode.


LISTENING SHEET


VITA

NAME OF AUTHOR: Adam Michael Hutchinson

PLACE OF BIRTH: Monroe, Wisconsin, United States

DATE OF BIRTH: 8 August 1987

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:
    Syracuse University
    Minneapolis College of Art & Design

DEGREES AWARDED:
    Master of Fine Art in Studio Arts, Syracuse University
    Bachelor of Fine Art in Filmmaking, Minneapolis College of Art & Design

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:
    Instructor in Ceramics, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, 2018 - Present
    Visiting Artist, Syracuse University - University College, Syracuse, New York, July 2018