In 1961, filmmaker Robert Gardner organized the Harvard Peabody Expedition to New Guinea (current day West Papua). Funded by the Dutch colonial government and private donations, and consisting of several of the wealthiest members of American society wielding 16mm film cameras, still photographic cameras, reel-to-reel tape recorders, and a microphone, the expedition settled for five months in the Bakiem Valley, among the Hubula people. It resulted in Gardner's highly influential film Dead Birds (1964), among other ethnographic works. Michael Rockefeller, a fourth-generation member of the Rockefeller (Standard Oil) family, was tasked with taking pictures and recording sound in and around the Hubula world. The Rockefeller family recently donated the archive of Michael Rockefeller’s audio recordings in West Papua to the Harvard Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati composed their augmented sound work Expedition Content (2020, 73 minutes) from the archive’s 123 tapes, about 37 hours of recordings. The resulting—for the most part imageless—film premiered at the 2020 Berlin Film Festival. Both collaborators are currently associated with the Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University. Ernst works with sound, including electroacoustic music, experimental nonfiction sound works for multichannel installation and performance, and postproduction sound for nonfiction film, with an emphasis on observational cinema. Veronika is a political and media anthropologist working in West Papua. Her scholarship engages with the theories and historiography of colonialism, decolonization, and postcoloniality.

OLIVER HUSAIN Watching your film Expedition Content—or rather listening to your film—one tries to identify the different voices. The voice of Michael Rockefeller stands out. I started to listen for his voice and try to imagine a person. Do you see him as a protagonist, or what is your take on him after you spent so much time with this archive?

ERNST KAREL It’s funny, this word “protagonist.” We never use this word when thinking about the piece, but this is maybe the second time it came up recently. I mean, Michael is obviously a focal point. Maybe the microphone itself is the main focal point, but it’s always in his hand. And his voice is always closest to it. And his decisions obviously motivate where the microphone is and his voice introduces it. But we could also talk about how messy the audio is. What a loud mess of a piece it is.

VERONIKA KUSUMARYATI What do you mean? Like the messy quality of the recording, you think?

EK The recordings are messy. The editing style is messy.

VK Yeah. But Michael wasn’t a professional recordist.

EK Right—and we kept in all of the stopping and starting of the tape and all that stuff too. Very brutal sound editing.
It also made me think of my own early student work, my sound recording experiences back then.

Funny, yes.

Michael was a student; he was new to sound recording at this time.

Yes. If he were a professional sound recordist or if it were much better done, the material would be less interesting for sure.

Maybe your re-reading of the archive was possible through the messiness to a certain degree.

Yes, I’d say that.

There is one crucial moment where he records a revealing conversation of the other crew members and they ask him if the sound is running and he says No, while in fact he keeps on recording. Why did he do that?

We have no idea. Do we?

No, we don’t have any idea. We don’t know. Actually, we don’t know because we don’t have access to his diaries. The diaries are kept by the family, the Rockefeller family. We just have this recording.

But we have most of his tape journal. There are only one or two sentences on this scene where he makes a comment about how some of the singing was good.

That’s funny.

“Some good group singing,” he says. And the other thing that’s in the journal about that sequence is that he’s titled it “Intimations of Session Number Six,” which is a peculiar phrase. I’m not sure what he means by an intimation.

What else did you work from other than these field notes and listen to the recordings?

We did extensive archival research at Harvard—the archive of the film Dead Birds, the archive of the expedition, and then the archive of Karl Heider who was the anthropologist for the expedition. And then I went to West Papua—so, yes—there is a fieldwork component. We worked together with a Hubula anthropologist and a musician to translate most of the conversations, which are in Hubula. It was a collaborative work in the sense that the Hubula anthropologists listened to all the recordings and gave their interpretation of what’s going on.

These sections of the film in Hubula where the translations are readable as subtitles are really surprising. The English conversation we just spoke about—the party scene where the Americans kind of expose themselves as creeps—is followed by a very short conversation in Hubula where the voices whisper, hushed, maybe scared voices that seem to be observations of the ethnographers.

That’s Tukum in the garden.

Yes. That’s a small boy. I think he’s featured in Dead Birds also, isn’t he?

Yes, he’s there.

Michael Rockefeller introduces this recording, it is “Tukum mumbling and talking in the garden.” It is just a small boy talking to himself, thinking aloud, being recorded by Rockefeller who most likely is not really listening for the contents of what Tukum is saying, but rather is just recording it as a sonic moment, a texture of some kind. And it’s quite striking when we look at the translation of what he’s saying “Here’s a man, here’s another one. He has a gun. Is it a gun?” It’s also unclear and left purposefully ambiguous what Tukum is referring to. But the translator felt that what was going on was that Tukum was looking at photographs in a magazine.

Ah, okay.

But the ambiguity, I think it’s productive there, right?

Yes—I think the decision to put Tukum there was really great. I think Ernst decided to put it...
there first precisely because that part makes comments about these white guys. Tukum was quite close to the expedition members because he was the son of Asokemeke, the medicine man of the Wuperainma village where they were staying. He always came to the camp. Michael made friends with a lot of children, but Tukum was the closest friend, so he always recorded him or walked with him. I think it’s very interesting, their closeness and the intimacy of the recording and what this child says in the recording.

EK We had that recording included as part of the composition before we even decided to have a visual aspect of the piece at all. When we were composing it as a sound-only piece, that section was already part of the piece, just for its sonic properties. But when we decided to add the visual element, obviously the subtitles add another dimension there.

OH When did you decide that this was going to be a work for the cinema rather than a sound work?

EK We actually always thought it was going to be for cinema but with no image at all. The cinema was always an important aspect—the left, center, right speakers of the cinema, and the relevance to film in terms of the connection with Dead Birds and the histories of ethnographic film. The cinema was always part of it. But the decision to use the projector in the cinema came actually less than a year ago, after we’d already been working on this project for a couple of years on and off.

OH You came across the images you use and suddenly everything changed?

VK The subtitles. I think the images, they came before, right?

EK I feel like that all was happening at about the same time. Reviewing to see what we had subtitles for, realizing that the subtitles added a lot, which seems obvious in retrospect. And coming across the one image in the film, which was already named in the piece by Michael saying, “Natives yelling in the bat cave.” And then realizing that we had that footage from the bat cave on our hard
drive and thinking, "Oh, look at that." And that was happening at about the same time as with the subtitles.

**OH** Why was the cinema an important space for your project from the beginning?

**EK** I feel like cinema is a great space for listening to sound works. First of all, for the very practical reasons that these are existing spaces that have comfortable seats and surround sound speaker systems.

There have been various movements—maybe not movements, but various people in various places wanting to do what’s sometimes referred to as cinema for the ear. What’s often referred to by that term is extremely elaborate sound design and fantastical manipulations of audio to create elaborate over-determined electro-acoustic manipulations or whooshes. Basically, just like conventional sound design to the extreme. And I feel cinema can also be useful for audio that’s much more understated, and is not necessarily about showing what the possibilities of studio manipulations are, but simply as spaces for listening, for long-term listening. The other thing that happens with the cinema is we have already an expectation of an attention span. We go into the cinema and you’re ready to sit there for about an hour and a half. And that’s a useful framework as well, maybe similar to a concert hall, where people expect to sit there for a similar amount of time. But it’s harder to present electro-acoustic work or recorded, pre-recorded work in a concert hall, because you have to set up the speakers and they’re all different. And so, again, going back to the very practical concerns, cinemas are all calibrated, they’re all similar, wonderful space for sound work. And especially because the sound work is directly related to the history of cinema and this particular film, *Dead Birds*, it seems relevant to bring it into the cinema.

**OH** The other aspect of the cinema is maybe the idea of the imagination. Your film appeals to that collective act of imagining something. It seems like the cinema is a perfect space where that is possible?

**VK** Yeah, I agree with that. And yeah, of course, talking about cinema and imagination—ethno-
see. Veronika mentioned the racialized images, the exotic appearance of otherness—that is remarkably absent in the sound recordings. I’m thinking of my own experience of listening to the recordings and noticing the absence of that image or the distracting appearance of otherness. It’s not that audio escapes any kind of colonial perspective or that sound is not part of the colonial project—quite clearly it is—but that it reframes our thinking from the idea of the gaze to something else, to a different kind of presence and a different idea of a lens. The microphone is like a 360-degree lens in a way.

**OH** That’s a really interesting and important idea—that an archive of sounds offers another way of reframing than a visual archive would. It would be impossible to redefine the camera footage, but with sound, it seems that you did open up the archive in a completely different way—revisiting a moment in a way that visuals wouldn’t have allowed.

**EK** There are several different ways in which working with sound points out things that are the case in image but become much more obvious when the image is removed and we only have sound. Talking about revisiting a visual archive or revisiting an audio archive—with audio, we have much more of an experience of hearing things differently every time we listen. It’s much more obviously a time-based medium. Our experience of photography is such that we feel like we can see it and we know it and we get it. We can describe it, we can freeze frame, we can point to it, we can analyze it. With audio, obviously you can’t do a freeze frame. You can only listen to it in time. You can’t do a screen grab and your experience of it in time is different every time. And that has to do with the way in which you’re listening to it, the volume you’re listening to it, whether it’s on a speaker or headphones. Even the act of setting your volume level. All these things are not just technically different. They actually lead to profoundly different experiences of reading the material. Listening is playing a big part in what kind of sense and what kind of experience you have of a piece of audio.

**OH** Veronika, as a political activist who is very involved and invested in West Papua and things happening there, how do you feel about visual representation? Is it still important?

**VK** The question of representation is still very important for so many indigenous people, I think; it is precisely because the relation of power is still unequal. Most communities that declare themselves or identify themselves as indigenous people are now in a very good position to represent themselves. And of course, we know that digital media offers cheaper and more democratic ways of access and facilities to create their own representation. And as an anthropologist, I’m also involved in that kind of project. But I think the question of history is very important here—the question of the past that has bearing on the present. One of the interesting things about the archive that we are working with is the historical value of this archive. First is that it was recorded during the transitional period of the political status of West Papua from the Netherlands to Indonesia, and a very curious involvement of the US in West Papua should not be ignored in this conversation. That’s the context of the expedition. But secondly, also the material itself and the
sound recording are valuable historical sources for the Hubula. This is not my own evaluation. Indeed, I realize the value of this recording from Nicolaus Lokobal, the Hubula anthropologist that we worked with. He said, "Oh my God, so many words, so many things that are in the recording have actually disappeared." He gave me an example of a species of sweet potatoes which is in the recording but can no longer be found in the Baliem Valley. He said that in the 1960s there used to be at least 60 types of sweet potatoes but now, some words for these types of potatoes have already gone. This points to the cultural genocide that is going on.

**EK** Like actual words in the language you mean, right?

**VK** Yeah, the words, but also the musical expressions that Michael recorded. These recordings become very valuable for them. The conversation that we have now is that *Expedition Content* is only a part of the broader project on the archive. We want to share this archive, particularly with the young generation of Hubula whose lives have been transformed by Christianity, by militarization, by so many things. I don’t know how we will proceed, because the process is a negotiation between us here in the US with the Hubula. This is something that we are trying to work out right now. Actually, they don’t want the physical archive, the actual tapes, to be returned to them. They think that it’s not safe to keep the archive there. They want it to be kept here in the US. But of course, they want access to the knowledge that was produced during the expedition. They want the translated version of the book, for instance, the field notes and so forth because they want to know about themselves.

**EK** Which is just mind-boggling to dwell on for one second—that Karl Heider’s books about the Dani as he calls them, the Hubula, have not been translated into their own language. They don’t know what he wrote about them. I mean, that’s just incredible—but of course that happens all the time, obviously.

**VK** Yeah. It’s still happening, though. As to our film, it will be screened in West Papua. We will see what they think about this. We will screen it, most probably in August for the Papuan film festival. But for that we will have to translate and subtitle the English conversations into Hubula.

**OH** Your film starts with a dialogue of the American crew members. They reflect on the purpose of their work. Someone asks, "The expedition has to attempt to achieve naturalism. Don’t you agree Bob?" Robert Gardner answers, "Not exactly." And then you leave that question hanging there, over the title sequence. Is your film answering the question?

(Veronika and Ernst laugh)

**EK** Oh boy. Well—is the film an answer to that question? No. That’s the easy part. I see that question as an overarching issue for any kind of audio-visual media. Especially in this type of work where the reference or the semiotic properties of sounds or of the sequence of sounds cannot be distinct from the aesthetic experience of them. One takes over from the other, constantly. Both are kind of constantly revolving and trading off from each other. So maybe this is an extension of Robert Gardner’s answer: not exactly.

**VK** I think we put the conversation there because it’s very enlightening. Not only because it reflects back to their mission as filmmakers and anthropologists at the time. I think the issues that they are talking about in the recording actually represent an ongoing debate in anthropology and in ethnographic cinema, which also continues in the film that we made. It is a remark about "making film for scientific purposes." I think that particular remark speaks directly to the problem within anthropology in dealing with non-textual and non-discursive media like film or sound. But it also speaks to Robert Gardner specifically and his mission to offer different ways of doing ethnographic film back in 1961. So, does the composition that we made represent that? I think our work should be situated in this ongoing debate within anthropology. Our work deals with the question of representation, with the question of scientific purpose and artistic practice. This is something that maybe all of us at Sensory Ethnography Lab have been dealing with, rather unconsciously. But yeah, I don’t think we offer any assertive answer.
I think we are part of this problem. On the one hand, we are trying to look for ways in which we can problematize ethnographic representation. This is part of the work that directly responds to the disciplinary question in anthropology. But we are also looking at the potential of non-textual, non-discursive media to convey different forms of knowledge. What I mean by “knowledge” here is knowledge as anthropology defines it and “knowledge” as simply ways of knowing. Listening to a sonic medium may offer not only different ways of knowing but also what kind of “knowing” that we can have. I think that that’s the stake of the work. 3

3 The Sensory Ethnography Lab at Harvard University is an interdisciplinary center for the making of anthropologically informed works of media that combine aesthetics and ethnography.