

Mingus is the farthest, Mingus is the most of the most.

Sonic Archive Fever: Ernst Karel and Veronika
Kusumaryati's *Expedition Content*
by **Stephanie Spray**

The majority of work on the archive to-date has engaged with image- and text-based archives, frequently calling our attention to their silences and gaps. Ernst Karel and Veronika Kusumaryati artfully and intelligently address the dearth of critical media work on the sonic archive in their newwork, *Expedition Content*, a 78-minute augmented sound piece that premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival in February 2020. Cleverly, this (mostly sound) work begins with a description of the semantic value of the image.

Expedition Content starts with a nearly four-minute conversation in which a few members of the 1961 Harvard Peabody Expedition to Netherlands New Guinea discuss the effects of filters on photographic images. *Life* magazine photographer Eliot Elisofon speaks with ethnographic filmmaker and Harvard Film Studies Center Director Robert Gardner, the expedition organiser, and two recent Harvard graduates who will be supporting the expedition, Sam Putnam and Michael Rockefeller. Michael—the great-grandson of John D. Rockefeller, founder of Standard Oil Company, and son of Nelson Rockefeller, then-governor of New York—was tasked with taking photographs and recording audio, producing thirty-seven taped hours for the expedition's audio archive.

Elisofon advises that they avoid using fog filters during the expedition, since it would alter the image in ways that would work against its "scientific purposes." He says: "the only thing the expedition can do is hope to create reality, or a sense of reality and, you know, when you start getting into semantics, what is real?" He offers his opinion of the documentary aims of their work: "I think what the expedition, in a way, has to do aesthetically is not to ever alter it so it become false, but that it becomes as natural as possible [...] to attempt to achieve what I would call naturalism, if we could use that word." Elisofon asks Gardner if he agrees, and the latter responds: "Not exactly."³³ The conversation is cut by the intrusion of another voice, distorted by radio static, which describes the origins of the tape's contents as "Cambridge, Massachusetts in America. Gardner, Harvard Peabody Expedition" which according to Karel and Kusumaryati, is a sonic rupture that is in the archival tape itself, not an editorial decision. Thereafter, the sound-space dramatically shifts to the reverberant soundscape of a village in the Highlands of western New Guinea for several minutes. We hear Hubula villagers speaking to one another in close proximity to their pigs as a small airplane passes overhead.

"These sonic breaks in time and space present listeners with a puzzle throughout the work, whereby they must critically engage with the multiple overlapping times of the sounds heard: the time of the recording, of the archive as its cataloged by archivists, of the editing of the archive itself into Expedition Content, and of the present moment as the work unfolds."

³³ Gardner's ambivalence in this response is telling, since "naturalism", or the pretence of naturalism, is not what his filmmaking is entirely known for. From the film that Gardner would ultimately make from this 1961 expedition, *Dead Birds* (1963), to his later equally acclaimed and controversial film, *Forest of Bliss* (1986), Gardner's artistry stands out, evinced in his camera movement and framing. Increasingly, with each of his films, we are frequently aware that what we are seeing is his unique vision.



These sonic breaks in time and space present listeners with a puzzle throughout the work, whereby they must critically engage with the multiple overlapping times of the sounds heard: the time of the recording, of the archive as its cataloged by archivists, of the editing of the archive itself into *Expedition Content*, and of the present moment as the work unfolds. In the first five minutes, *Expedition Content* has already presented itself as a critical archival sound work that will prod at colonial anthropology's heart. For its remainder, it examines the essential time of fieldwork, when anthropologists and documentarians alike encounter their Hubula subjects, and the sound space of the archive, where these unequal exchanges are buried. What *Expedition Content* does so adeptly is to make audible and legible those voices that have been silenced through omission.

To distill *Expedition Content*'s import to these aspects alone would underestimate the ambition of the work. It is likewise an astonishingly good listen that examines the nature of the sonic archive with sound while drawing us into the "archive fever" that Jacques Derrida famously described.³⁴ Derrida claims that we do not have an adequate concept of the archive, since we frequently consign its relevance to the past alone, and, yet, what an archive does is continually point us toward an uncertain future. Karel and Kusumaryati nudge us to

consider the implications of the Michael Rockefeller sound archive, not only for what it tells us of the past, and 1961 Harvard Peabody Expedition specifically, but as the grounds for understanding the present. The work exposes a critical juncture in Netherlands New Guinean colonial history, while prodding us to consider its continued reverberations in present-day West Papua. In the course of 78 minutes, Karel and Kusumaryati manage to transform not only how we encounter this specific archive, but what we think is possible to do with a sonic archive formally.

The Archive

Expedition Content draws from the 37 hours of tape recorded by Michael Rockefeller documenting the encounter between the 1961 Harvard Peabody Netherlands New Guinea Expedition and the Hubula, also known as the Dani, in the Central Highlands of western New Guinea. This multimodal expedition was remarkably fruitful in that it produced the ethnographic film *Dead Birds* (1963), two ethnographic monographs by Karl Heider, two photo books, and author Peter Matthiessen's non-fiction book

Under the Mountain Wall.³⁵ Sound recordist Michael Rockefeller mysteriously died later the same year, when his boat capsized on a return trip to New Guinea to collect artefacts for his father's new ethnological museum in New York. According to Kusumaryati and Karel, the Rockefellers donated the audio archive of analogue tapes to the Peabody Museum in 2005, which later sent the tapes to the Indiana University Archive of Traditional Music to be digitised.

Expedition Content activates the archive, not merely for its verbal or informational content, but as it presents Michael Rockefeller's own fumbling attempts to use his microphone. As I was listening, I wondered at times if Rockefeller was even listening. It seems certain that he was not monitoring the sound as he recorded much of the time, since the levels are occasionally hot, or clipping. At other times his descriptions of the sounds heard are impoverished. Rockefeller is revealed increasingly as an unreliable guide in 1961 New Guinea, which at times sounds present, immediate, or accessible to us, and, at other times, is completely lacking because of mistakes Rockefeller made during his recording. Describing his recordings as either "occupational sounds" or "sounds of nature," Rockefeller labels much of what he records either in advance or after recording, describing phenomena we purportedly will hear, or have heard, but occasionally, either due to recording malfunction or negligence, there is no recorded sound to hear or we hear something other than described. A couple of times, Rockefeller catches his mistakes and re-labels. With no image to distract or preoccupy us, the inclusion of these actual erasures call our attention to the materiality of the tape, while also allowing us time to imagine what other erasures might be present in the archive.

In *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida writes about the temporality of the archive, which he describes as containing "both the promise of the future" as much as a recording of a past and, thus, each archive "carries an unknowable weight".³⁶ This weight does not carry a negative charge, however, but instead

"inflects archive fever or desire" as it opens the archive to the future.³⁷ Derrida argues that an archive is therefore never complete, since we cannot know all of the meanings it will ultimately contain.

Karel and Kusumaryati's *Expedition Content* brings to life the Rockefeller sound archive to call our attention not only to the colonial past of West Papua, but to engage us with disciplinary and institutional critiques. This extends to the Film Study Center at Harvard University, which Robert Gardner founded, and the Harvard Peabody Museum, both institutions that Karel and Kusumaryati have collaborated with or worked within. Although Lucien Castaing-Taylor took the reigns of the Film Study Center at Harvard University in 1997, and later founded the Sensory Ethnography Lab, evidence of Robert Gardner's influence and legacy are tangible in these spaces. When I was a graduate student at Harvard and active in the Sensory Ethnography Lab, Ernst Karel was the Assistant Director of the Film Study Center at Harvard University (2007–2018). Occasionally, when I would go to his office to check out equipment, he would show me an old trunk filled with equipment that had apparently been used on Gardner's expeditions.³⁸ As an anthropologist and filmmaker trained at Harvard, Kusumaryati too must have felt the weight of Gardner's legacy in these spaces. Her 2018 dissertation "Ethnography of a Colonial Present: History, Experience, and Political Consciousness in West Papua" directly addresses the temporality of colonialism and continued state violence in West Papua. Given Karel and Kusumaryati's relationships to Harvard University, the Film Study Center, and West Papua, they are engaged arguably in a kind of "insider ethnography," which is the application of the methods of ethnography, in this instance sonic, to a context that is one's own. Although the institutional critique is most evidently levied at expedition members, it implicitly points to the broader colonial context that enabled the Rockefeller archive in the first place. *Expedition Content* will contribute to future interpretations of the body of work emerging from the Sensory Ethnography Lab these past several years.

³⁵ Peter Matthiessen, *Under the Mountain Wall: A Chronicle of Two Seasons in the Stone Age* (New York: Viking Press, 1962).

³⁶ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 24.

³⁷ Derrida, 30.

³⁸ For my film *Manakamana* (2013) my co-director Pacho Velez and I used Gardner's Aaton, the same camera that was used for *Forest of Bliss* (1986), as well as other films show by Film Study Center and Radcliffe Institute Fellows over the years. All of this is to say that Gardner's presence was, in fact, tangible.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

The Archive, Augmented

Nearly twenty-three minutes into the piece something surprising happens. A flash of blue awakens us to attend to the first subtitles of the piece. A Hubula woman speaks to Rockefeller, addressing him as “little brother” and asks him when he’d arrived. He does not respond and the tape continues to roll. She laughs and says, “this is how we wash sweet potatoes,” before admonishing him to move farther away. She continues and comments on her work, at times for his benefit, and then asks him, yet again, to move farther away, although apparently he either does not understand or ignores her directive. Subtitles continue for some of the remainder of the work, punctuating it with translated texts for songs and exchanges between Hubula people. Although much will likely be said about the one moving image shot that rolls about an hour into the piece, which is an odd kind of thrill to see in a work that otherwise eschews representational images, it is nonetheless a mysterious inclusion. If anything, its enigma awakens us to the opacity of the archive yet again.

Expedition Content then cuts to the sound of raucous expedition members as they party. We hear them as they drink, parody jazz musicians, discuss sleeping with some of Hubula women while their husbands are asleep, and make racist jokes. At one point Elisifon says, “What, does this sonofabitch got a recorder going? Have you got the recorder going?” which Rockefeller denies. Elisifon evidently knew that these conversations would tarnish their reputations, and yet this raucous section ends with Rockefeller, who knowingly recorded it all, telling an extended racist joke that elicits joyous laughter from the expedition party.

When Rockefeller’s boyish voice returns to describe more occupational sounds, his mask has been removed, as has that of the entire expedition party. Elisifon’s earlier concerns about the expedition’s “scientific purposes” have been irreparably undermined, and we can re-examine the fruits of their labors—from *Dead Birds* to *Under the Mountain Wall*—for what they are: imperfect and tainted works of art made in complicity with Dutch colonial money and protection. Nearly sixty years later, with the very support of Harvard University, the academic institution that educated some of

the expedition members and, likewise, gave credibility to Gardner and his expedition team’s efforts, Karel and Kusumaryati engage the Rockefeller archive to encourage us to hear West Papua’s colonial history in the archive. With this they suggest that we imagine other futures.

Karel and Kusumaryati give the final subtitled speech of *Expedition Content* to two Hubula children or adolescents, who discuss the strangers among them. Like Rockefeller, who identified and described what he was hearing, they seek to identify the foreigners they find surrounding them. They say,

This is a man.

This one too.

That one is white, wearing glasses.

One of them encourages the other to sit still and be calm. The speakers continues,

This is the big man here

One more, here!

Look, another one

He’s holding a gun

Ah a gun?

That one is not

Look at this one

The one in front looks very arrogant.

Coda

While the credits roll, we hear the forest. As we have for much of the piece, we continue to hear the tape itself as it punctures the “sounds of nature.” Our hearing is filtered by our knowledge of the expedition party’s unabashed racism and the violent colonial apparatus that enabled it in the first place. We understand that the “naturalism” that Elisifon posited as their aesthetic aim before the start of the expedition was always an illusion, one that *Expedition Content* will not entertain.

