

Random Access Memory: Personal Collections and the Poetics of Discovery

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The American artist and bohemian Harry Smith collected many things: Ukrainian Easter eggs, discarded 78s, found paper airplanes, Seminole textiles. Every surface in his room at the Chelsea Hotel in New York City was covered with stuff, some rare, some random, and Smith would protest if anyone dared disrupt his disorder. There was a method to the madness.

Smith's best-known creative legacy was culled from one of his many collections: *The Anthology of American Folk Music*, a six-LP box set made up of obscure recordings of folk, blues, and country songs from the dawn of the music industry, the late 1920s to early 1930s. Chosen by Smith from his vast collection of around 20,000 out-of-circulation 78s, the *Anthology* was released on the Folkways label in 1952. Released when the recording industry was barely in its infancy, but nevertheless was already in a period of upheaval as the era of 78s gave way to vinyl LPs, the *Anthology's* outlook was eclectic and its impact was significant, reviving songs and styles and careers. Described by Robert Cantwell as an "enabling document,"¹ the *Anthology* was instrumental in kick-starting the mid-century folk revival in the United States and ushering in the new youth counterculture that followed it.

Smith was not really an archivist or an ethnographer as he is often described. He was not an expert on “folk” as a genre. Choosing songs that at the time most professional musicologists and folklorists would have rejected, the *Anthology* embodied the work of an artist and enthusiast, rather than an expert. His selections reflected his personality—unconventional, erudite, mysterious—and rather than follow scholarly conventions or industry norms, Smith followed his ear and his own interests and tastes. He valued the forgotten, the exotic and mysterious, and said that he selected songs not because they met certain criteria of a genre but “because they were odd.”² It was the oddness and eccentricity of the collection that came to be valued by its listeners and why the *Anthology* could make music that was recorded just a quarter of a century earlier sound as if it were from another planet to the young people who encountered it.

What was new about this collection of old recordings was that it reconfigured musical history through its reproduction, rearrangement, and repetition. Recorded culture could be a living culture. Its power stemmed in part from offering a particular genealogy—Cantwell called it “a curriculum in mystical ethnography,”³ one that was not definitive or representative but instead committed to promoting its own worldview. “The whole purpose is to have some kind of series of things,”⁴ Smith said. A collection, he believed, was a tool he could use for “programming the mind.” Like some kind of cultural alchemist, Smith turned disparate regional and minority styles from across the United States into the soundtrack for the urban avant-garde. It was access to part of this collection and its eccentricities as well as Smith’s own mystical interpretation that enabled new possibilities and forged new living traditions and communities, through a carefully curated encounter with artifacts from the past.⁵

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I resurrect the story of Smith and his *Anthology*, its dissemination and its cultural impact, to draw attention to a collection that is at the heart of this exhibition: the personal collection of audio art amassed by the artist and curator Francisco López over decades as part of his own practice and participation in a global community of artists, collectors, and makers and their work. A collection is many things, literally—thousands of artifacts in this case—as well as figuratively; it is part document, part index, part resource, part scholarly assemblage, part memory theater, part enabler of scenes, part serendipity, part unfinished business. Every collection is at once a set of data, a creative expression, and a possible wellspring for unknown future use. If we consider the *Anthology* as an analog antecedent to today's networked collections and distribution practices, it reminds us that boundaries, storage, reproduction, and circulation have always been culture-making activities. All media was always already social. It also reminds us that in popular music cultures, personal collections have a long history of influence, and that our analog past has shaped many of the ideals in our networked present. Communities of experimental audio artists are also shaped and informed by their experiences in other creative communities, be they DIY music scenes or artist-run galleries. We do not leave our histories behind. To consider the poetics of discovery in the age of the internet and mobile technologies is to consider the affective dimensions of how we encounter, experience, and use collections, and why new ideals of authenticity seem to emerge around modes of discovery, storage formats, and circulation at a time when data is abundant, access is easy, and attention is imagined as a scarce commodity.

In this era of abundance and accessibility, we've come to expect all the songs, all the books, all the maps, all the art, all the games, all the movies, all the data to be available on demand. We're told that someday soon all the fridges, park benches, and front doors will join them in one big Internet of Things. But the internet was never really just about things or data or nodes—recall that its very definition is

that it is a network of networks. So perhaps more transformative than access to particular artifacts, is access to multiple and competing ways of gathering, ordering, understanding, and experiencing cultural data. New social and cultural possibilities and formations arise when highly personal collections and other forms of ad hoc archiving, arranging, and interpreting cultural data become widely accessible. The use of a personal collection to seed this exhibition is not about the collector or about the experience of a particular group of works or artists; it draws attention to the multifaceted nature of experimental audio as a creative practice and community of exchange and inquiry. Instead of the individual and the work, this approach emphasizes the collective and generative practice.

López is quick to tell me that he does not identify as a collector and suggests that his vast collection of micro-editions is almost accidental, an unintended accumulation of audio art marking decades of intense exchange between himself and other artists around the world. Yet this ad hoc archive is more than the sum of its parts: it is its own kind of social network, a register for the exchange of ideas and works and a partial index of relationships between participants in the scene. To highlight the social nature of the archive is not only to ponder the process of its generation, it also points to and speculates on the existence of thousands of companion collections, thousands of alternate ways of knowing and dreaming scattered across the globe, each generating its own magic encyclopedia of social networks and audio experiments, each offering an opportunity for what David Novak refers to as “authentically remediated experience,”⁶ a quality that might be thought to be missing from a more scholarly assemblage.

While networked access to collections and archives are often celebrated, this abundance can also be a cause for lament. When everything is accessible, what deserves your attention? How can we possibly make sense of an abundance of overlapping and

incomplete collections let alone all the relationships they index and all the artifacts they hold? Will ubiquity undermine the magic of discovery and the value of experience? It is in this context of digital abundance, in the sea of data and tangle of networks, that we see the rise of new ideals of authenticity build around experiences of navigation, encounter, and discovery. We seek refuge from distraction in the analog and obsolete and follow the desire lines drawn by the recently discarded. We long to reengineer serendipity in the face of algorithmic prediction and yearn for what Novak called “blind encounter with pure mystery.”⁷ These are human problems, not machine-learned. It is here, in the fuzzy realm of affect, that the personal collection is valorized as a creative and humane technology, one that helps us navigate the vast sea of data and might serve as a balm for the anxieties we experience about information overload. No matter if the wayfinding is unintended—any route through will do. Recall that collections are dependent on the creation of boundaries—what’s in and what’s out—and it is through the imposition of limits that we forge ahead.

In this exhibition, López seeks to curate a social audio experience without recourse to physical objects or relying on the rhetorical possibilities offered by various recording formats and technologies. No boxes with blinking lights or dusty vinyl to fetishize; instead López is aiming to create the conditions for a blind encounter with audio. You are asked to stop and just listen. There is a method to the madness. There will be no easy way to discern whether what you are listening to is part of López’s collection or if it was commissioned by López for the show—genealogies are living things, they cross and mix and you will bring your own histories of listening with you to this experience. While López’s emphasis is on the experience of audio as immaterial and ephemeral, by situating access to this personal collection and other audio art in the physical space of the museum, it also rematerializes social listening practices, by creating a new limited context for its access and use. In doing so, listening in this

space opens up this flourishing global underground of experimental audio practices to new minds, new ears, and new genealogies of listening. The physical space itself functions as an attention technology, generating new opportunities and new contexts for deep listening and encounters with mystery. The oddness is the point of it all.

¹ Robert Cantwell, "Smith's Memory Theatre: The Folkways Anthology of American Folk Music," *New England Review* 13, nos. 3–4 (1991): 364.

² Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007), 75.

³ Cantwell, "Smith's Memory Theatre," 365.

⁴ Harry Smith, interview with John Cohen, *Sing Out!* 19, nos. 1 and 2 (April–May and July 1969), cited in *ibid.*, 373.

⁵ For further discussion of Smith's collection, see Margie Borschke, *This is Not a Remix: Piracy, Authenticity and*

Popular Music (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 147–55.

⁶ David Novak, "The Sublime Frequencies of New Old Media," *Public Culture* 23, no. 3 (2011): 615.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 614.