

Museum of...

Museum of Portable Sound

Louise Gray keeps her ears to the ground for the museum that comes to you

Where Anywhere. The Museum of Portable Sound (MPS) is stored on an iPhone 4s. “I carry it with me at all times,” says John Kannenberg, a sound artist and researcher who is also the museum’s founder, director and chief curator.

What A museum of sounds collected from all over the world, including museums themselves. “It’s an experience,” says Kannenberg.

Opened November 2015, with a grand gala at the London College of Communication.

Collection It is made up of digital field recordings that exist on a single mobile phone. Despite its unusual format, the MPS follows the structure of more conventional museums, with permanent collection galleries and four major themes – natural history, science and technology, space and architecture, and art and culture

– with 21 sections on more specific topics. Three other field recordists have contributed to the permanent collection: London-based Cristina Sousa, Mike Hallenbeck from Minnesota, US; and Khaled Kaddal from Alexandria, Egypt. The collection also has a few physical artefacts – Kannenberg’s favourite is a 1989 Ukrainian radio.

Highlights “As a sound artist, one of the main focuses of my field-recording practice has been making recordings inside museums for the past 20 years, and I’ve collected some great examples,” Kannenberg says. “My recording of a fire breaking out and the subsequent evacuation of the Guildhall in London is unique.” He singles out some examples of evocative museum recordings: rain on the skylights at the Museum of Broken Relationships in Zagreb, Croatia; the “incredible chaos” of the Las Vegas Pinball Hall of

Fame Museum; and an 18th-century musical clock in need of winding at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. There are historic recordings, too: the museum’s rituals and events gallery contains a recording from the Pride Parade in San Francisco of a lesbian marching band singing Going to the Chapel, the year gay marriage was legalised in California, an anti-austerity protest from Greece in 2010 and the sound of the crowd in Alexandria the moment it was announced that the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, had stepped down during the revolution in 2011.

Help at hand Kannenberg is helped by a curatorial assistant, Cristina Sousa Martínez.

Budget Self-funded, with free admission. The museum has begun selling memberships and, like more conventional venues, it has a well-stocked gift

shop that sells branded bags, T-shirts and umbrellas, or rather “portable environment manipulators”, as Kannenberg likes to call them. “The museum received a generous donation from someone who saw me speak once,” Kannenberg says. “We are hoping to apply for some grants soon.”

Sticky moment Given the museum’s format, ambient noise can pose a problem. “My first simultaneous group visit, using a five-pronged headphone splitter, happened last summer at an outdoor cafe in Lisbon,” Kannenberg recalls. “Shortly before the visit began, a group of noisy French tourists descended on the cafe. Luckily they dispersed of their own accord.”

Survival tips “Always remember to charge your phone,” Kannenberg says.

Visitors In 2016, around 300 people experienced the museum at venues that included sites in Leicester, Aarhus, Denmark, and a recent Museums Showoff event in London. “This number also includes one visitor who has made a return visit,” Kannenberg says. Visitors make an appointment to listen to the collection via the museum’s website and a time and place to meet is arranged, usually at a cafe or inside another museum. “I bring the phone and a printed copy of our gallery guide, which contains all the object labels and didactic panels of text,” Kannenberg says.

Future plans The MPS is developing an education arm that will offer a course called Listening to Museums, and a series of one-day workshops. Kannenberg and his team are also working on a book project titled Mixtapes of Remembered Sounds, which they aim to publish by the end of 2017. Kannenberg hopes to create an international network of museums across the world that can all be held in the palm of your hand.

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www.museumofportablesound.com



Above: the on-screen gallery guide for the Museum of Portable Sound

Left: Professor Angus Carlyle of the London College of Communication cuts a ribbon to launch the museum, which was displayed inside a glass vitrine at the opening gala