

Artist Rutherford Chang on the art of collection



July 7, 2017 - Rutherford Chang is an artist, collector, and the third-ranked Game Boy Tetris player in the world. Chang works with well-known pieces of culture, devising systems to collect, edit, or otherwise recontextualize them to reveal underlying meaning. He has an interest in obsessive subcultures, including record collectors and metal hoarders, often adopting their practices and taking them to absurd extremes. Chang is based in New York City and has spent time living in Shanghai and Beijing as well. He is interested in buying your first-pressing copy of the Beatles' *White Album*.

As told to Nick Yulman, 2420 words.

Tags: [Art](#), [Process](#), [Inspiration](#), [Anxiety](#), [Collaboration](#).

You have a large collection of the Beatles' *White Album*. How did your collection begin?

I have 1,760 copies. When I got my second copy, I saw that it was totally different from the first copy I had—it had aged and become this artifact that told the stories of where it's been—and that they'd all be these unique objects. The more I got, the more I could see how different these once-identical objects had become. Also the original pressing was serialized so it becomes this finite edition where there's over three million copies. It's this perfect thing to collect where it's actually impossible to collect them all.

Did you know right away what this project would become?

I didn't know where it was going when I started other than that I wanted at least enough to really see the differences between them. Then it just kept going and I can't stop. The first time I exhibited it was when I had about 700 and I arranged them in the form of a record store that people could visit and browse—like a normal record store except it's all the same record arranged by serial number. It took about five years before I had enough to fill a room. As you flip through them, you see how they've become these unique objects that have aged and become this collective artifact.

The show was called [We Buy White Albums](#). I would actually buy copies from anyone who brought one into the store. A lot of people did. Some wanted more money than I was willing to pay. Some brought copies that were not first pressing and I rejected them, but I got a lot of good copies also.

This was an unveiling of something you'd been doing in private for a while. How important was that social interaction of having people come in to listen and offer you their copies?

The social interaction in this or any other project is interesting because it adds a random variable in the equation. Basically, you don't know what's going to happen. When visitors came, I asked them to play a record from the collection and I would record the record as they played it. At the end of the two months, I had about one hundred recordings of different copies of the same record and I layered them together and re-pressed it as new vinyl, which is like a hundred different copies playing simultaneously. I used the social interaction to help me choose because often I don't know how to make a decision myself.

Were a lot of the people who came out to see this record collectors?

A lot were because I think this touched on something that they do, but even more extreme. I'm basically doing what record collectors do except focusing it on a very particular item. I understand their sickness. I guess I am a record collector.

Did it take a while to come to terms with that?

Yeah, it took going to some record fairs and people going like, "You're the guy with the *White Albums*. Holy shit, I'm going to bring my wife here. She thinks I'm crazy."

Do you think of this as a performance, like trying on a persona?

I suppose, but it was pretty natural. It wasn't like I was trying to act like a record collector, I was doing it. I wasn't acting like a Beatles freak, I was becoming one. It's an art piece, but I did actually buy all these records. I'm not trying to make a statement about their culture. I'm participating in certain cultures as an insider outsider. I guess that's what cultural anthropologists do.

You often work with iconic pieces of culture. What are the benefits and challenges of working with something that already comes with so many associations?

I usually work with material that has some kind of cultural meaning that people are familiar with already. I interact with it to rearrange it in a way that's going to reveal something more about its nature. The materials I use are pretty accessible—things that people have a relationship to in everyday life. I guess some people still don't consider some of the stuff I do to be art. That's fine as long as people can interact with it in a meaningful way.

For instance, the [Alphabetized Newspaper](#), a piece I made a long time ago, was a front page of a *New York Times* rearranged alphabetically. Every word of every article was literally cut out and re-pasted together in alphabetical order. When you read it in that rearranged order, you can observe a lot about the way the language is used. You can still, more or less, understand what the articles are about—it's very familiar content—but to read it in that format you see it in a new way. I think of *Alphabetized Newspapers* as my first real art piece that is still relevant. It is related to everything I've made afterwards—rearranging this material in this very simple way.

You also play Game Boy Tetris.

I realized I was good and [I started recording my games](#) and live streaming them in this world of competitive video gaming where people don't really play Game Boy Tetris anymore. I got really into just focusing on the game and the real simplicity of it and the whole world in the framework of Tetris—seeing the metaphors for life and other stuff in the game. Obviously, I was trying to get the top score, but I was more interested in the process of doing it publicly and seeing the reaction of other people. I was number two and now I'm number three.

When did this go from just playing Game Boy Tetris to an art piece?

When I started actually recording and streaming everyday, that's when I decided. Because then it was a public performance in a way. It's all been online, I haven't gotten that much video-game world feedback other than this guy who came out and beat me recently.

There's also an aspect involving Apple co-founder Steve Wozniak?

Yeah, he was number one a long time ago. He used to write these letters to [Nintendo Power](#) in 1991 boasting about his top score. I did some stuff like that too when I beat him and he heard about it apparently. He left a comment on a news article about the project. He had claimed he had gotten higher scores, but I'll believe him when I see him stream it live on Twitch.

People often focus on the obsessive quality of your work. What does that mean to you?

I don't set out to create something that's obsessive, it kind of just happens. It would be easier if it wasn't—if some of the projects weren't so tedious. That just happens to be how it comes out. A lot of the actual work that I'm doing would be considered a waste of time in the normal sense of work. I guess I'm not afraid of wasting time.

I think it's okay. A lot of what people do is waste time anyway.

Do you think there's a difference between the obsessive approach you take and the extreme focus of somebody who's trying to master any art form?

Probably not. I guess you could say it's really stupid things I'm learning to master—like learning how to cut out portraits really straight—but in a way it's just like a craft. It's just what's involved in making it happen. It's also what I know how to do. I don't know how to paint or whatever—I wouldn't even know what to do.

What are the qualities or skills that make you good at what you do?

Maybe organization or being strict or persistent. I think of myself as a minimalist hoarder. There are so many things you can collect and so many ways that you can collect them. I have pretty strict rules about what I would collect. It's how I choose to do it that makes the collecting interesting: organizing it using a system like the alphabet or time—something that is removed from the normal way that you'd think an artist would approach something. Not emotional. A way of removing myself, in a way, that still lets you dissect or rearrange whatever it is that you're working with. I'm not making aesthetic choices during the process. I don't know how to. I don't trust my own aesthetic choice.

For a while now, you've split time between New York and China—Shanghai and Beijing. Does the place you're living affect the work you're making?

In terms of the process, not really. Some of the material is Chinese culturally. Like a piece about Andy Lau, a Chinese pop star. People in America don't even know who he is and he's a superstar in Asia. This guy has been in over 100 Hong Kong movies and he is often a tragic hero. His character dies a lot, so it's a compilation of every death performance chronologically. You see the actor die over and over again in different roles and see him age as he performs all these different roles ranging from contemporary cop to an ancient Chinese swordsman, jumping back and forth throughout time.

Another example is this piece called Cheng Zhang De Fan Nao. Living in China, I often heard people describe a show they watched when they were kids, *Cheng Zhang De Fan Nao*. I had no idea what that was until I found a DVD in a store and it was *Growing Pains* dubbed into Chinese. It was one of the first western TV shows allowed in China after the cultural revolution. A lot of people around my age grew up watching that show in China and that was their first impression of American culture. I grew up in America watching that show too. I thought that was interesting, so I had a bunch of my friends in Beijing, who watched that show growing up but didn't really speak English, re-dub the first episode of *Growing Pains* in broken English—so none of the jokes really came through and it became this absurd show.

I think changing environments gives you some perspective to see things from other cultural eyes. This is not just for China. Anywhere, if you take a step back and you observe, the culture becomes weird and interesting.

It seems like life and art blur often together for you. What are some other things that you're doing right now that could become projects?

I keep plenty of stuff from everyday life. I have every receipt I've received arranged chronologically from the past twelve years. Every time I get a receipt I keep it, a lot of people do it. I keep it kinda just as a journal, not for taxes. I've been doing it for a while, but I don't know what it is other than something for myself at this point. If it can mean something on its own instead of just a documentation of my life—if it can have a life on its own then it can be made into a piece. Like the *White Albums*, once it got to a certain point it could exist on its own. It's not my collection anymore.

Do you have any new collections in the works?

I'm going to start hoarding pennies. Pennies made before 1982 are 95% copper. The value of that copper is worth more than one cent so a lot of people hoard the pennies. It's worth like 1.65 cents, so metal hoarders get tons. You can just go to the bank and be like, "Give me \$100 of pennies." 10,000 pennies—that's a lot. You break open the rolls and then you sort them: after 1982, before 1982. Then you return the other ones to the bank and you get more and just keep doing it until you have just tons of copper. It tends to be people who think that currency's going to collapse, all that stuff.

If you wanted to realize any value, you'd need tons and tons of copper. It's also illegal to melt pennies because it's currency. So you can't melt it and sell it as copper. Hoarding it, in a way, it's like you're buying 1.7 cents of copper for one cent and it's still worth one cent. You could always take it to the bank for one cent, but these people are hoarding it for another reason. It's just interesting. Sure, you're making money doing it potentially, but it's insane too.

So why are you hoarding pennies?

I've just been doing it casually when I get change—just out of interest because I started watching these videos on YouTube that the penny hoarders put up. It just seems like, "Wow, what if I got a ton of these things? What if I started doing the bank thing?" Also I've been thinking about what I could do with melting them even though it's illegal. The penny is this thing that we all have in our pockets. It's the lowest common denominator, it's like junk, it's like nothing.

So this is something that you're dipping your toe into and testing out?

I think so, I just want to see what it looks like to melt the stuff. Maybe it would be cool to make something in copper. I don't know if it'll ever become anything because I have no idea what I'd make out of it other than I'm interested in that hoarding process, and that there's a whole culture of it. The penny is potentially going to be discontinued soon so it's timely in a way. If I don't do it now, I probably won't have a chance to.

Do you see these hoarders as kindred spirits?

Not totally because a lot of these people have weird ideas, but I understand the logic behind it. It's crazy, but it makes sense too. It's not just insanity. Some claim it's not bulky, but come on. \$100 of copper pennies, 10,000 pennies—that would weigh 68 pounds. Pretty bulky I'd say.

How many *White Albums* is that?

That's a lot of *White Albums*. That's about 50 *White Albums* worth of copper.

Recommended by Rutherford Chang:

[Bank of Japan Currency Museum](#)

[Berlin National Mint](#)

[Chase](#), [Bank of America](#), [Wells Fargo](#), and [Citibank](#) for getting copper

Name

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Vocation

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Fact

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