

## **Collecting; some notes on a practice**

By Jesse Houlding

I first started thinking about collection as an art practice after seeing work that relied on the strategy of collecting objects and displaying them in a grid. I began to wonder how the act of collecting could constitute meaning, and if this collection and display was a conscious decision on the part of the artist, or if they were simply repeating a strategy that illustrates our “ordering impulse” - which is the conscious (or subconscious) attempt to impose order on the perceived disorder of a chaotic world. I realized that collecting as an art practice itself might represent a psychological negotiation; a manifestation of an attempt to create order.

The two aspects of this practice that interest me are how the use of the grid as a display structure creates meaning, and the distinction between the artistic practice of collection and the neurotic compulsion to collect.

### **Power of the Grid**

One of the key structures used in the display of collections is the grid. The grid as an ordering system has its roots in the Cartesian system. The authority that is imbued within the grid is used to maximum effect in artistic display that has its own deep history in the Enlightenment and the discovery of the New World. Several historical factors give the grid display structure its power, and all work to reinforce each other. The publication of Newton's Principia Mathematica and Darwin's Origin of Species was extremely influential and had the profound effect of shifting the way time was viewed. The rigorous approach to quantifying the laws of physics in the Principia was adopted by other disciplines and helped formalize the many emerging empirical and social sciences, such

as Anthropology and Ethnology. The theory of evolution was hotly debated, and was generally misunderstood by Darwin's contemporaries (as it is now) and a skewed 'social Darwinism' emerged which, along with the new fields of Ethnology and Anthropology was used to help make sense of the 'discovered' cultures of the New World. As a result of this confluence of ideas, time became secularized, changing from a chronology of religious events and a distance from salvation to a scale measuring a trajectory of progress toward an industrialized civilization - privileging the Western/European paradigm as the ultimate goal. Collection and display of specimens (plant and animal, as well as human) were the primary tools of Ethnology and Anthropology that reinforced the notion of a trajectory and relied heavily on the 'empiricism' of the Cartesian coordinate system.<sup>1</sup> The grid as a display structure is loaded with these connotations, and a practice that relies on this strategy must address the ways in which this history creates meaning in the work.

### **Collection and Psychology**

The second aspect of collection as an art practice is how it can be understood from within a framework of clinical psychology. Much has been written about the psychological basis of collecting of transitional objects by children to relieve separation anxiety.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to consider the ways in which collecting as an artistic practice may appeal to us because we identify in the work our own deep-seated responses. Collecting can also become neurotic or compulsive; we are all familiar with people who have spent a lifetime amassing a wide array of objects, from miniatures to saltshakers. But what separates this compulsive form of collection from the artistic practice? I believe that relinquishment is necessary to distinguish the artistic practice. This relinquishment is

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph synthesizes the ideas of several authors (Fabian, Clifford, Foster, Thomas, Highwater )

<sup>2</sup> Gamwell, Subkowski

the act of display which may involve the narrowing of the collection, i.e., choosing which objects to display with the goal of selling them.

### **Collecting and Repetition**

If collecting is a psychological response to chaos and a sense of disorder, then repeating acts must also fall into the category of responses as well. My own understanding of this part of my artistic process is exploring the possibility that repeating an act may at some point yield a new result. I find the potential exciting, since there is a chance that something new will be discovered, and at the same time a sense of order is maintained in that the outcome does not in fact change. What remains (in my case) is a collection of the output of these 'experiments', which can serve as evidence of the process and may be visually interesting in its own right. But this collection is problematic as well because it is not a collection in the sense that I have previously described; rather, it is a *by-product*, not an *end-product*, a distinction that is significant and has as much to do with the intention as it does the physical manifestation of the experience. While there is no meaningful way to separate a collection based on the output of a repeated process from a collection based on the choosing or gathering of objects, both artistic practices are manifestations of the ordering impulse. Both provide a visual record of our attempt to negotiate the border between the known and the unknown, of imposing order in a chaotic world.

\*Note: Bibliography available on request