

Collecting *or* classifying?

Francis Rousseaux

IRCAM, Centre Pompidou, place
Stravinsky, 75004 Paris, France
francis.rousseau@ircam.fr

Thomas Bouaziz

ECE, 53 rue de Grenelle
75007 Paris, France
tbouaziz@ece.fr

Abstract. Informatics and AI claim that the world is made of objects organized into classes (taxonomies, ontologies,...). In this paper, we explore another idea: we structure our material relationships by collecting objects within collections, which are never as static as classes.

1 Introduction

At the beginning of *La Symphonie Pastorale* by André Gide, the good pastor, having taken in Gertrude, tried to reassure his spouse, whose anxiety is premonitory. He justifies his remarkable interest for the young blind by the particular devotion due to those secluded in infirmity. When later his wife wonders how the pastor comes to neglect even his own children, he claims to be following the Gospel according to Matthieu, which says that "every sheep of the flock, taken separately, is in the eyes of the shepherd more precious than the rest of the flock taken together".

But can a shepherd set aside a sheep that he already keeps away from the herd, to take even better care of her in the following days? Isn't the shepherd already unable to see the rest of the herd otherwise than as a petrified whole? It must be said that Mathieu's metaphor says nothing about selecting the privileged sheep... Thus the love of the pastor for Gertrude grows inexorably, soon conflicting with the legal categories that allowed their meeting: evangelical devotion, conjugal fidelity, filial tenderness, or religious dogma. The promising metaphor of the herd "which sheep are all more precious than the rest of the herd" did not last long. As if Gide wanted to show that no operational fiction, as subtle or as sophisticated as it may be, cannot hold out long against reality, which breaks apart any middle ground under the violent tension of two attractive poles: the forced singularity of an always immediate actual experience (described by Gide as love), and the compulsively re-arranged order of conceptual categories, which is always local, and which figures in *La Symphonie Pastorale* as moral and spiritual engagement. Is this audacious tentative to articulate organic life to intellectual and spiritual life, by a figure irreducible to the one and to the other, definitely presumptuous and vain?

From here, I will call *collection* this specific figure, which the present article means to study. We will show that: 1° This acceptance of the word collection is close to its usual meaning; 2° That a collection differs from the notions of ensemble, class, series, set, group, or clutter but also from that of organic whole or family; 3° That a collection is the institution of a metastable equilibrium between singularity and category, just as other concurrent fictions such as fashion, crises, choreographies, plans, liturgical cycles, scientific projects, or instrumental gestures.

2 Jorge—reconstitution of an initiatory meeting

My meeting with Jorge Helft last spring in Buenos Aires is not foreign to my interest for the collectors' posture. I had met Jorge in Paris, after we had translated together one of Borges' poems. Jorge had talked to me in great length about his meetings with the author of *A History of Eternity* and in the end, he had invited me to see his Borges collection in Argentina.

The profusion of artworks displayed at Jorge's remind me of Gérard Wajcman's analyses (page 89 of the *Catalogue de l'exposition inaugurale de la Maison rouge*) on the status of excess in collections: "Excess in collections does not mean disordered accumulation; it is a constitutive principle: for a collection to exist—in the eyes of the collector himself—the number of works has to be greater than the number than can be presented and stored at the collector's home. Therefore someone who lives in a studio can very well have a collection: he only needs to have one piece that cannot be hanged in his studio. That is why the reserves are an integral part of a collection. Excess can also be noted at the level of the memorizing capacities: for a collection to exist, the collector just needs to be unable to remember all the artworks he possesses. The collector should not completely be the master of his collection".

As he invited people to dinners, famous or unknown artists, actors of the political or cultural scene and personal friends, Jorge enabled the artists to become known to the people who could help them professionally, therefore making his reputation stronger on the arts scene, as well as making his collection more valuable, and bringing himself closer to the pieces that were being created.

Later, I understood Wajcman better, when he writes that "collecting implies in itself a responsibility towards the artist. Among collectors, it is a common trait that buying a piece of art from someone means accepting responsibility for this artist." Under my eyes, from being a collector-seeker (hunter), Jorge became a collector-finder (fisherman), and to this end was developing his own reticular logistics, throwing nets, constituting a network. "The scene of a collector is not his own apartment, it's the world. The main part of his collection is not at his place—his collection is to be, still scattered across the world, and every gallery and every fair is a way for him to go and find his future collection" (Wajcman, page 29).

With his Borges collection, Jorge had soon become the best collector of the world on this topic; who could have found it worth it to be his competitor? People from around the world told him when an interesting piece became available... and sometimes a famous American university made him an offer for his whole collection.

I was so fascinated by collectors by then that I asked Jorge if I could interview him on the topic. He told me about his hunt for works, the places where he lives haunted by artworks, the intimate ritual that he sometimes establishes with the artworks, the danger that one piece may abolish another, or the whole collection, but also his vision of the collection as an artwork in itself, or the impossibility that he would ever give away his entire collection in exchange for a singular work of art—unlike the pastor in love with Gertrude.

A collection is far from a simple juxtaposition or reunion of individual elements. It is primarily a temporary correlate of an initiatory ritual made sacred by time. Adding works, or revisiting a collection keeps altering and re-constituting it, leaving it always halfway between the original series of juxtaposed intimate moments and a permanently organized class of objects. Unlike an organic whole, a collection only exists for each of its parts, and unlike an ensemble, it does not exist as a normative or equalizing unity; it is productive if in tension between singularities and categorical structure.

Collecting is creating an artwork with artworks, hence the ultimate dream of collectors to bequeath their collection as foundations, in the hope that they could be baptized "Collection of Mr. X" (Wajcman, page 38 of his *Collection*).

3 Apostoli—Inaugurating a collection

My career as an art collector was inaugurated a few weeks ago, by acquiring two paintings from a young Greek artist of Albanian background that I met on the island of Hydra the day of my arrival. I did not spend a day there without going to his home to see a number of paintings that he set in sequence on a large easel, light by the Mediterranean light, and perfumed by jasmine and bay trees.

The liturgy of looking at paintings was greatly facilitated when I accepted the invitation to stay at his place. As Gérard Wajcman writes, thinking probably of Gertrude Stein (page 28 of *Collection*), "If nobody ever looks at "a collection," it is because it is not a collection of artworks, but an indefinite series of singular objects, an artwork + another artwork + another artwork..." Apostoli handled the artworks with a musical and ritual precision, careful that each painting was shown only when needed and only when the specific occasion allowed it to be understood. For the artist, the collection of his own works is like Matthieu's herd: "Every painting on the easel, taken separately, is more precious to the painter than the rest of his collection". But in that case, the election of the next painting to be presented was naturally prescribed par the exhibit/procession, series were never set a priori, and a specific painting never made us forget the rest of the collection.

So Apostoli is in love with his collection, only when he confronts his works one by one, as he is reconstituting his collection, which he does wishing for the next piece of art. When no sheep is set apart, the pastor is more concerned with the future sheep, the one that will join the herd and alter it. The collector, at this point, is interested about what his collection lacks, about its virtual development. Gide's pastor might have overlooked this crucial point: the biblical pastor must live his mission as an apostolic mission, his ultimate goal is to win new disciples by converting them.

When I was about to leave Apostoli, I bought two large paintings from him, and thus started the fantastic epic necessary to bring them back to France. My impressive "hand luggage" was finally flown in the baggage hold, and the paintings were finally safely hanged in my apartment. Selling these paintings stimulated Apostoli in two ways: it encouraged him to develop an artistic life in France, first by planning an exhibit in Paris. It also stimulated him to paint the painful absence of these two paintings and thus create a new one.

I understood that it is through the repetition of intimate lived moments that a collection is created. By this gesture is instituted not only the *same*, which unifies the collection through the similarities supposedly going through the collected objects, but also the *object* nature of the specific things that constitute the collection. Collecting is therefore part of an initiatory journey, between what was lived and what can be communicated, and thus becomes a sacred activity, just as creating.

The process of reconstitution regenerates the coherence of the collection. If the reconstitution is not well done, the collection can soon be abandoned, or dispersed. A collection ceases to exist as something else than a mundane correlate as soon as the collector ceases to be interested in its development. Then he stops repeating the acquiring gesture or the reconstituting gesture for himself or his intimate friends. These two gestures have the same meaning. The reconstitution gives better balance to the heavy tendencies of the collection, makes new relationships appear between artworks, and institutes new similarities which later influence the logic of acquisition. New objects become part of the collection as "different," and they become "same" only later, because they have in common to be different, thus being part of what Jean-Claude Milner calls a paradoxical class. It is rather easy to spot individual cases of collections that were abandoned. The collection sometimes appears to have been a *fake*. A question was especially obsessing me: can a collection of *immediacies* be a real collection?

4 Investigation on a late vocation

My friends were very surprised when I told them that I was becoming a collector. It is true that I throw away books that have not made a great impression on me, just as CDs that I do not listen to very often, fearing the intellectual dispersion that the multiplicity of objects inspires me... I wish I could have expressed what I feel when objects, such as gifts, intrude in my environment, as well as Andy Warhol, quoted by Jean-Pierre Criqui: " I live completely in the future, for when I eat a box of candies, I cannot wait to eat the last one. I do not even want to try the others, I want to finish all the candy, throw away the box and be done with it." The doubts expressed by my friends provoked me to think more about my suspicious calling to become a collector. My investigation revealed the following traits, which are far from the best foundations for my sudden passion: Probably to be able to collect love stories, I have been engaged for a long time in a collection of *immediacies*. To establish a relationship of seduction, one needs to appear as a virgin, and therefore needs to carefully get rid of all compromising objects, which means of all objects, because they are all compromising; the posture is self-aggravating: how can someone collect something else than immediacies when one has started to collect immediacies? First, it would probably ruin the collection of immediacies and deny it completely, and second, one would have to face the fear of realizing that it would have been better to start collecting long ago what one starts collecting now. Collecting mundane objects always seemed inelegant to me, and somewhat despising. I felt like the position of the dandy collecting immediacies was very comfortable in that respect. Indeed, a collector always despises somehow what he does not collect. Collecting immediacies was a way to prevent hierarchizing objects.

To be able to stay entirely within the immediate, intense and intimate present, I thought I could prevent time from constructing itself, by preventing it to lay its foundations anywhere, by killing in the egg any emergence of an embryo of a collection. My approach was mnemonic, and consisted in constantly collecting immediacies. A collection of immediacies is not really a collection, because among immediacies, the play of differential similarities is hollow and inconsistent. But letting immediacies play, and let their changing relationships fade, seemed like an excellent heuristic to take time off the beat and tire it out: memory without correlates does not allow for a game of reconstitution. I was thus faithful to immediacy, even if it implied avoiding to collect mundane objects. Because collecting, in the sense of reconstituting a collection, as Mathieu elaborates his herd, is an art of time.

The synthetic nature of an ensemble of objects presented to be seen as a collection is different from the nature of the ensemble that is constituted and shown by the collector. Indeed, the collector does not juxtapose objects, he puts together elements of remembrance, to be prompted by objects. Walter Benjamin, quoted by Jean-Pierre Criqui writes: "Everything that is present to memory, to thought, to consciousness becomes a base, a frame, a pedestal, a casket for the object possessed. The art of collecting is a form of practical recollection, and, of all the profane manifestations of proximity, it is the most convincing."

References

1. Benjamin, W.: Paris, capitale du XIX^e siècle. Le Cerf Paris (1989)
2. Cavell, S.: Le monde comme choses. In: Cahiers du Musée d'Art moderne, n°69, (1999)
3. de Galbert, A.: L'intime — le collectionneur derrière la porte. In: Catalogue de l'exposition inaugurale de la Maison rouge, Fage Paris (2004)
4. Wajcman, G.: Collection, Nous Paris (1999)
5. Warhol, A.: Ma Philosophie de A à B et vice-versa. Flammarion Paris (1977)