

“Things I Can’t Live Without”

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What defines a group of objects as a “collection of art”? In the most basic sense, a collection is the multi-faceted reflection of the identity of the collector. It comes together because, for some reason, the collector desires those objects and identifies with them. But what more precisely constitutes this desire? “Things I Can’t Live Without” explores the conflicting impulses that drive the collection of art and reflects some of the identities contained in the stunning Vanmoerkerke Collection.

Within the Vanmoerkerke Collection, the belief that more is better sits uneasily along side the conflicting conviction that less is better. “Maximalism” competes with “Minimalism.” As a result, this collection is driven by – and reveals—a rather double- handed set of desires.

On the one hand, the collection is fueled by an insatiable desire for objects. If one Bernd and Hilla Becher water tower photograph is good, several typologies are even better. If a single Alighiero Boetti tapestry is powerful, an entire wall of them is more impactful. This type of collecting is endless. There is never too many of one thing. Desire remains unfulfilled because there is always the possibility of more of the same to fill out the set. Or to put it another way, you can see the work of art best when there are more examples to see.

Yet there is something that keeps collecting from becoming mere hoarding. The art of collecting, the collecting of art, has a counter desire, which recursively critiques acquisition. On the other hand, then, collection is also selection. You can only see the work of art best when you have fewer works to look at. The one perfect object in the room will say it all. The Banks Violette sculpture stands alone almost in perfection. But the problem lies in the “almost.” Desire in this form is also unfilled because the collector is on a quest for the absolutely perfect object, and yet that search for the perfect object is endless. The work of art aims to achieve perfection, but always falls short in the eyes of the collector.

These two conflicting, impossible desires drive the Vanmoerkerke Collection and are represented by the differing approaches to installation in the two buildings. Building One focuses on “Maximalism” and the desire for more. Building Two explores the force of “Minimalism” and the desire for selection. Within each building, the installation provides a more detailed interrogation of the conceptual juxtapositions that result from these differing desires.

Building One: The Seduction of Excess

Temporality and objects

One might say that as viewers we can't help but acknowledge the obvious temporality of a work of art; it was created in a particular time frame, exhibited in another. If we take the example of the large industrial structures that Bernd and Hilla Becher are so fond of photographing— water towers, factories, and collieries-- they all have a historical specificity, an industrial use in a certain moment in time.

However, the work of art and the work of collecting can erase this temporal specificity. The Bechers' army of water towers tramples our sense of time. The very force of the repeated image dislodges it from temporal specificity in our viewing experience. The objects, displayed as Typologies, take on a certain timelessness through the insistent repetition of formal display.

If the Bechers use formal repetition to destroy the temporality of the work of art, On Kawara employs structural repetition to make the viewer hyper-aware of the work of art's temporality. In a sense, for On Kawara there is nothing but time in the work of art. Here the work of art displays graphic representations of time that cite very particular moments in the past. But exactly why a particular moment in time is important is nowhere explicit in the work. The references are perhaps personal, perhaps merely mechanical, with the full importance of the exact time inaccessible to the viewer. We are left wondering whether it is the insistent, graphic recording of time that matters most for On Kawara.

Uniqueness and Contexts

Both Haim Steinbach and Ashley Bickerton upset our expectations of what art could be made out of, much in the way Duchamp did with his Readymades. But this is not to suggest that the impulse behind each artist's work is the same.

Steinbach's use of mass produced objects, on the surface, bears the closest resemblance to Duchamp's work. Steinbach is not afraid to re-contextualize everyday objects, kitschy souvenirs, and children's toys. However, that re-contextualization inevitably constitutes a highly defined and ordered space. The collecting shelf and the defining frame do not contain the usual objects that we define as "works of art." What is collected becomes art but *because* it is collected and ordered in a particular way by the artist.

By contrast, the force of Bickerton's work comes not so much from the found Readymade objects that he uses but more from the way he draws upon the Readymade images that float around popular culture. There is not necessarily anything unique about the images contained within Bickerton's work; their very banality speaks to a manufactured exoticism that doesn't exist. Viewing his works in the context of the art gallery, the closer we interrogate the layered images, the less they seem like high art and the more they begin to evoke a Club Med advertisement. His work leaves us with the uncomfortable question: are we looking at art or kitsch? Bickerton turns the responsibility for answering over to the viewer.

Excess and meanings

If Bickerton shifts the responsibility for determining whether an object is art to the viewer, Robert Longo's "Men In The Cities: Final Life" shifts to the viewer the task of determining whether the work of art has any real meaning at all. Longo mixes media, forms, and genres to such an extreme that the viewer may think that they are being shown everything there is to see in art. Acute attention to detail in the drawings is juxtaposed with a bold, angular mass projecting from the wall. Figuration bookends abstraction. The two-dimensional shoulders the precocious three-dimensional sculptural projection. The restraint of black and white contrasts with the colour of bloody crimson. The figures may seem familiar to the art insider, or their gendered anonymity could be more profound to the neophyte. The projected mass resembles the outline of skyscrapers, or then again maybe its pure abstraction is more forceful. In the end, the viewer is pulled in almost every direction. Longo's work, which at first seems so full of meaning, ends up defeating any meaning at all through its sheer excess of conflicting impulses.

Words and Pictures

Longo does, however, leave one thing out of his piece: words. From Barbara Kruger's perspective, that may not amount to much at all, if indeed "A Picture is worth more than a thousand words". Her often used palette of black, white, and red, alongside a retro found image evocative of commercial advertising posters, almost goes overboard illustrating the point of this rephrased cliché.

The massive display of Alighiero Boetti tapestries goes a step further. For Boetti, words are not just secondary to images; words practically disappear and become meaningless, consumed by the bold colour blocking that tends to turn each letter into an abstract part of a pattern. Most excessively, Philippe Parreno's "speech bubble" balloons empty out all actual speech from the bubble. The viewer is simply mesmerized by the shiny gold material.

Works of art and commodities

Significantly, Parreno's gold balloons wouldn't be the same, in say, blue. The gold bespeaks a certain luxury and appropriates Andy Warhol's floating silver pillows, upping the ante in the precious metal sweepstakes. In the process, Parreno's piece becomes a riff on the commodification art. Warhol understood the role of art in the market place all too well, and Parreno follows in his footsteps.

The same could be said of Andreas Gursky. His work here addresses the dual role of art as a luxury commodity and art as the representation of luxury commodities. We desire the beautiful objects Gursky photographs in the Prada stores, and then we desire his photographic representation of those same objects. Desire and commodification multiplied.

Jeff Koons takes the commodification of art to a self-conscious extreme with his reproduction of a Hennessy advertisement, turning the advertisement itself into an art object. "Hennessy, The Civilized Way to Lay Down the Law" is a clear effort to show that luxury is a brand, albeit one embedded in the cultural laws of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Koon's piece strips away all pretensions from art as somehow excluded from the luxury brand market. Just as LVMH uses an appeal to civility, exclusivity, and luxury branding to sell a mass market cognac, the art object has entered into a luxury market place that will even pay a premium price for a re-contextualized advertisement, irony included at no extra charge.

If we find the excessive commodification of art something of a sin, Elmgreen and Dragset's "The Unholy Trinity" provides separate confessionals for artist, gallerist, and collector, each of whom plays a different but mutually dependent role. But of course, the notion of confession is merely an illusion: there is no one behind the curtain to confess to. The viewer is merely imagining that the participants in the market place would like to rid themselves of their consumerist sins. Art will potentially continue to be fetishized, ordered, and displayed in the capitalist market place, whether anyone confesses or not.

And yet the work of art is not a mere capitulation to capitalist commodification. This installation repeatedly questions whether collecting is the celebration or the critique of the commodification of the work of art

Formal originality and appropriations

While Steinbach and Bickerton appropriate Duchamp's notion of the Readymade for their own purposes, Louise Lawler goes a step further and makes Duchamp's Readymade the very subject of her photograph. While On Kawara incessantly frames temporal moments, Lawler frames On Kawara's temporal framing.

Lawler's project is not Sherrie Levine's or even Richard Prince's, where the appropriation of the work of art is a rather straightforward reproduction of the image. They simply challenge the way in which we privilege the uniqueness of the art object and hold onto notions of attribution. Lawler's more complex mode of appropriation both captures works of art in context and submits them to formal framing. On the one hand, we may see the "original" art object in its specific context and interpret it as such. This can even include a reminder of the commodification of art, in the case of photographing Duchamp's shovel in the Phillips auction gallery. On the other hand, there is an abstract beauty in the composition of her photographs, where the art object becomes part of the abstracted formalism of Lawler's composition.

Lawler also provides us with an appropriate transition to Building 2. Her work, shown in the context of "Things I Can't Live Without" most directly breaks down the opposition between Maximalism and Minimalism. She confronts the neat division between the two desires that drive collecting by confusing our interest in the excessive serial re-contextualization of works of art with the careful edit that frames the "original" work of art into another, singular piece.

Building Two: The Seduction of Selection

Presence and Absence

Jules Olitski's painting, "First Love - 9", seduces with whiteness. Almost. At the same time, the viewer can't help but be drawn to the colour around the margins. While whiteness overwhelms the centre of the image, colour starts to creep into view at the edges of the frame. The desire becomes conflicted. If we take the title seriously, is our first love "whiteness" or is it marginal colour? As viewers in search of perfection, we are suddenly caught between the purity of whiteness and the possibility of that attraction is being compromised by the introduction of colour. As a result, Olitski's image questions our loyalty to a particular desire for perfection. We desire the purity of whiteness, at the same time that our gaze is also drawn to the edge, titillated by the possibility of colour.

Rosemarie Trockel's four-part, white knitted wool on canvas object offers a different perspective on the limited colour palate. Her white palate focuses our attention on the subtle textural changes within the work, where shade, resulting from the knitted surface undulations, creates the only relief from the creamy whiteness of the yarn. The micro focus on the subtle changes of surface variation is desirable and captivating, at the same that it seems to disrupt the perfection of the white surface.

In contrast to Olitsky and Trockel, Rudolf Stingel's minimalism has an air of irony. There is an inescapable tongue in cheek quality in his work. Stingel flattens out the represented object, turning the chain link fence, for instance, into a one-dimensional pattern. However, rather than asking the viewer to concede the profundity of this insight, the banal object, the mass produced ubiquitous chain link fence, seems almost unworthy of such careful, close study. Once again, the perfection of the object becomes questionable. Have we been disingenuously lured into a lengthy contemplation of an object that has very little to say? The artist just may be laughing at us; the joke may be on the viewer.

Depth and the minimal surface

Gerhard Richter makes the viewer question the depth of the surface. In "Cut 896-6", using a small surface area and a limited colour palate, Richter achieves a visual tension between the layers of paint that support the shrinking surface. The result is that the more minimal the surface, the more we question its depth. We wonder what lies hidden beneath the surface. Richter constructs, even in the tiniest canvas, the unresolvable lure of the palimpsest.

Jacob Kassay, by contrast, attempts to minimize both surface depth and content within the frame. He removes so much content from the work of art that it becomes almost vapid. Kassay's work is a sort of minimalist take on Parreno's

"Speech Bubbles (Gold)". The attraction lies precisely in the fact that the work is made of silver, even if it offers little else than the shiny appeal of a precious metal.

Christopher Wool creates a layering of surfaces using a complex play of materials, mixing media in unexpected ways: enamel on linen in one instance, acrylic and oil on aluminium, in the other. Wool's layering effect is much thinner than Richter's, with Wool trying to achieve the maximum number of physical layers with the most minimum of depth. But Wool adds yet another layer of sorts: conceptual questioning also sits uncomfortably on the surface of his work. For instance, does "Untitled (P563)" represent a graffiti tag that needs decoding, or is it pure graphic abstraction? Is "All that Jazz" an abstracted mood piece, or is it a clichéd image composed of "all that jazz" of minimalism?

Irony and the minimalist impulse

Much of Ed Ruscha's work could easily have been included in Building 1. His emphasis on formal serialization aligns with that of the Bechers. His insistent repetition of structures, whether gas stations, vacant lots, pools, or parking lots, serves to erase the temporality of the image in much the same way that we come to understand in the Becher's typologies. However, there is a conflicting minimalist impulse in his work, which like Stingel, is self-consciously ironic.

Using a minimal number of ideas within each individual piece, Ruscha, can ironically engage the viewer. For instance, "The Teepees" and "Step On No Pets" critique two different types of Romanticism. "The Teepees" takes on the romantic vision of the American West in the manner of Edward Curtis's photography. Curtis and others like him manipulated photographic representation to create a picture of a way of life in the American West that never really existed. "The Teepees", by contrast, captures an historic sense of impending doom: Western settlers on the verge of destroying Native Americans and their culture. And yet, does it? Does the image totally escape the genre in which it stands in critical relation? Is it actually just another Romantic citation of an iconic Native American image?

"Step On No Pets" sets out to tame a cornerstone of Romantic philosophy: the Kantian sublime. The towering mountain peaks, a quintessential example of how the sublime overwhelms the individual viewing subject, in Ruscha's painting is overwritten with a silly anagram that diminishes the viewer's feeling of powerless. Or does it? Are we still drawn primarily to the large image of the mountain, almost failing to see the words or notice their anagrammic form? Neither image entirely escapes the generic moorings of Romanticism. Wedded to the trope of irony as we are, we are never quite sure whether or not we should take these images seriously.

The viewer's memory should also pull Lawler back into Building Two, alongside the Ruschas. Her work, "Not Cindy" frames Ruscha's "Humans" in the context of a woman sitting in a chair with her back to the viewer. Ruscha's painting plays on the word "Humans" against a very non-human backdrop of silk taffeta. With its open-ended title, Lawler's image takes Ruscha's word play at its word. Is the person depicted in the photograph NOT Cindy Sherman, despite the resemblance? Or is the NOT Cindy a reference to the fact the painting depicted in the photograph is NOT by any Cindy but rather is a work by Ed Ruscha? The memory trace of Lawler's

image, re-contextualized in Building Two, could be re-title as "Not Ruscha". Lawler makes it possible to frame an ironic image ironically.

Singularity and the force of form

Banks Violette needs only one object to overwhelm the room and the viewer: "Pentastar". The work of art looms over us, practically forcing out anyone from the room. Its massive form is inescapable; we almost can't look away. The subtitle of the work, "in the style of Demons", evokes the menacing nature of minimalism and allows Violette to emphasize that the minimalist is not also the minimally impactful. Strangely enough, we could call the work perhaps even sublime. The singular emphasis on the force of size, evocative of Richard Serra's sculptures, creates new spaces that force us to rethink our relationship not only to the art object but also to space itself.

The Future of Collection...

These are the things the collection can't live without today. However, the continual play of the desire for Maximalism alongside the desire for Minimalism will assure that there is some tomorrow when the collection will be different, a yet to be determined collection of things I can't live without tomorrow.