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A Typology of Collecting

Uli Sigg

The true collector is an artist, squared. He chooses paintings and hangs them on the wall. In other words, he paints himself a collection.

Marcel Duchamp

The softer the science, the more advisable it is to open a subject with an enlightening quote of an authority in the field. Yet in contrast with what Duchamp's name is commonly associated with, this essay does not attempt to limit or de-limit what art and artist may mean. It also does not analyze whether the roots of collecting may be phylogenetic, whether they originate in human instinct, in greed, in a gaping void, in a desire for refinement and self-cultivation, in the brain stem or from emissions of endorphins. Such subjects are left to ethnologists, psychoanalysts, art historians, neuroscientists, and others. This essay simply uses the term "collecting" to denote accumulating things with a logic, so as to create meaning beyond what the single collection item does contain in itself. The author defines a simple typology of collecting, drawn from comparative viewings of numerous collections, publicly or privately owned, lavishly displayed or under poor conditions, accessible to everyone or presented in secrecy, located all over the planet.

The "I Like Art" accumulating style

The "I Like Art" accumulating style is the most common type practiced among holders of artworks. It is indeed a mere accumulation of artworks kept together by a specific liking, or possibly taste, of a buyer, at least present at the time of acquisition. As a style, it is normal and legitimate. Anyone buying art enters this stage, starting with an empty wall and some money in the pocket. This is the first stage, namely to buy simply what one likes. It is a kind of bracket contained in one's self rather than a coherent concept. Most buyers remain there, although some with very large accumulations.

The "Investor" collecting style

This is self-explanatory, its purpose being clearly Return on Investment. This does not imply a value judgment—all collecting is equally legitimate. This style requires specific market expertise and is usually pursued with the help of consultants, collecting often by ear rather than by eye. Investor collecting strategies emulate sophisticated patterns known in the financial industry: high risk "Venture" with very young artists or "Early Stage" emerging artists, investment in mature artists with liquid market, big-ticket masterpieces considered safe, and combinations thereof may form a portfolio.

The "Status" collecting style

The "Status" collecting is the type that as of now has begun to proliferate worldwide. It gathers the must-haves from the global mainstream formed by the 100 or so artists who appear everywhere, whose names are listed in all the auction catalogs, whose works fill the art fairs, museum exhibitions, ever more the museum collections, and now inevitably many collectors' homes from New York to Jakarta. While this collecting style may require less thought, it does drain considerable resources and has one resounding effect: that these collections from New York to Jakarta do in the end look very much alike. Between collection visits, the discourse can then only be whether this was the larger Richter or that a more rebellious Basquiat compared to the ones viewed in the last location. If Richter and Basquiat are mentioned here, it is not to cast doubt on their being great artists. They cannot be blamed for being everywhere—it is not their fault. But it makes for ever more uniform and therefore monotonous collections. A variant of the "Status" collecting is to accumulate only the so-called masterpieces as defined mainly by auction catalogs. If gifted with deep pockets and armed with professional advice, anyone can do it. It may even prove to be financially very rewarding if one timely captures the tides of the market favor. In today's world, this collecting style indeed provides much desired status. It is exclusive in that it allows for easily readable distinction and differentiation from the know-nots within the high society, not to mention from the lowland of the have-nots.

The "Focused" collecting style

Then there is "Focused" collecting. What is a focus? It is a core idea, a concept, a logic that binds the works, which otherwise remain random disconnected dots. It leverages single works to create additional meaning through their togetherness, and therefore advances comprehension. To choose the focus is the crucial decision for any collecting. It is having a focus that marks the difference from just amassing art works. It does not matter what the focus is—to collect only squares, or images of dinosaurs, Renaissance drawings, cartoons, a certain atmosphere, certain processes, indeed anything... For any collector, this is a very difficult decision to take since it implies exclusion and discipline in view of things very tempting. Nevertheless, it gives a collection a distinct character and what we may sense as a "soul."

The "Web" collecting style

If one wants to perceive collecting as an iterative process, or if one would even want to construct a hierarchy amongst collecting styles, then the most complex way is weaving a collection as a web. That is to say, having decided on a focus, to collect works that web the fullest context, works that shed light on, explain, and open up further spaces to best represent and illustrate the core idea. Thus works are charging each other up in ways they could not have when isolated from this context. And very importantly, it is not simply about lining up masterpieces like a string of pearls. Masterpieces indeed, but in contemporary art attributions as such come and go; there is nothing older or more outdated than an auction catalog of fifteen years of age. "Web" collecting is just as much about finding the pieces which may go unattended, or ascribed to artists considered second tier at times—which in itself is subject to change over time—to fill the perception gaps, to narrate the underlying subtexts and to ultimately bring a collection to the fore.

Still, to do full justice to a collector remains futile. One would need to know in depth about the collecting process and the full potential of the collection universe available to a collector, then one would also need to consider the constraints. Which research efforts were undertaken and which were not? What were the works available for choice at a given moment and which works were not

selected? What financial resources were available to achieve the actual result? Where those failures made invisible rest, what are they, and how numerous? And many more issues...

Every collection is a process materialized. It is a distillate of the collector's vision, imagination, intuition, and passion, of research efforts, of the opportunities seized, of the resources made available, of hard work, and of the lack thereof: after all, truly similar to an artist's work. Duchamp may have gotten it right.