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Editor's Introduction

The history of collecting is not the account of how groups of already-finished, inert things are organized by individuals and institutions, so much as a process by which these objects are being constantly produced, reconfigured and redefined. Collecting is a performance. Objects caught up in this system not only move through time but space too, crossing geographical and cultural boundaries, making ethnography and anthropology crucial tools for exploring this ever-changing social life of things. It is not surprising that with recent interest in the reception of art and the ever-increasing search for 'context' that the history of collecting has become a fashionable topic in Art History, with a major journal, numerous colloquia and many PhD dissertations adding to our knowledge, especially of the history of the social and economic aspects of the subject. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, editors of a recent set of essays, *The Cultures of Collecting*, articulate an important shift in emphasis away from the traditional art-historical category of 'the collection' which has often served to occlude the performance of the collector. They view the 'act' of collecting as a psychological as well as an institutional practice, presenting 'a narrative of how human beings have striven to accommodate, to appropriate and to extend the taxonomies and systems of knowledge they have inherited'.¹

The essays published here also deal with particular persons and their things but with a more specific focus. The term 'Other' in *Other Objects of Desire* refers to the contemporary notion of sexual difference. Studies by James Clifford and Michael Taussig of how modern westerners first collected so-called 'primitive' art have shown how much images have served just as effectively as texts or laws to construct categories of racial otherness. As yet there has been relatively little exploration of the relationship between collecting and even more hotly contested terrains of difference in contemporary culture – gender and sexuality. It might be argued that it is only modern Western discourse that has placed what it calls sexuality in a more distinctly privileged relation to our ideas about identity and knowledge than it ever did before. However, this makes it all the more important that we understand how such notions pervade our critical methods and assumptions about the past. Naomi Schor writing in Elsner's and Cardinal's volume justly criticizes Jean Baudrillard's 1968 essay, also reprinted in that book, for viewing the history of collecting as 'unquestionably male'.² While issues of gender have been enormously productive in our discipline in recent years, gender and sexuality tend to be understood as things we see *in* images rather than as inherent in the very structure of relations through which images have been

inherited, bought, sold, exchanged and enjoyed. It is perhaps this last term – enjoyment – that has been the most difficult to come to terms with for art historians, fearful of the unscientific lapse of ‘jouissance’, and yet it seems to me that pleasure – not as a passive and merely optical response but as an active, productive and shaping stimulation of all the senses – is the fundamental experience at the foundations of the act of collecting. Uniting the collector with the object collected – it is productive pleasure felt in the body that binds the connoisseur to the gesture of the brushstroke and the philatelist to the sensation of the serrated edge.

A related term which seems to me crucial to any understanding of the relationship between persons and things, but which hardly appears in either the historical or theoretical discussion of the history of collecting, is the word desire. Judith Butler has described a fictional unity of sex, gender and desire in the dominant heterosexual model of what she describes as the oppositional or binary gender system, which ‘presupposes not only a causal relation among sex, gender, and desire, but suggests as well that desire reflects or expresses gender and that gender reflects or expresses desire’.³ In exploding this myth and showing how gender is performative and imitative, Butler has opened up the possibility of an historical staging of gender, sexuality and desire that is not contained by the neat binary of male/female. One of the key questions that this collection of essays seeks to address is why the history of art collecting so often confounds the apparent coherence of the binary sex/gender system. By controlling who has access to material and symbolic resources this system has clearly had important consequences for the predominance of men as collectors throughout Western history. But at the same time the collector’s desire has often seemed to strain the limits of the heterosexual matrix and to problematize the logic of oppositions structuring it. It is not just that the unmentionable nature of same-sex desire has often meant that the subject had to communicate the ‘secret’ in a coded language, but the fact that this language was a system of objects. What could not be said could be spoken through things. The modern category of art was inextricably bound up with gender, so that while its creation was aligned with active male procreativity, its appreciation tended to be associated with the passive feminine. Every schoolboy art lover ran the risk of being a ‘queer’ (at least where I went to school).⁴

Once we accept that the history of sexuality is less about biological impulses than constructed cultural myths, ideas and images, it becomes highly relevant to the history of collecting, since the urge to possess often involves an object choice in psychological as well as material terms. Unfortunately, this has been explored only in terms of a narrow, and in my view unproductive pathological model. The very title of Werner Muensterberger’s recent book *Collecting: An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives* suggests this. Based on the Winnicottian theory of objects as substitutions for traumatic damage to the ego in early infancy, this presents the (usually male) pervert’s private stash of art as his shield, substitute and fetish. In reducing art to a symptom or a cure it fails to integrate the social with the psychological impulse to collect, let alone account for the type of object collected.⁵ The cliché of the homosexual art collector is unfortunately also bound up with this dubious model of art as sublimation.

Oscar Wilde describes this model, not without irony, in his description of the predilections of that arch-aesthete Dorian Gray, for whom the 'treasures, and everything that he collected in his lovely house, were [to him] a means of forgetfulness, modes by which he could escape, for a season, from the fear that seemed to him at times to be almost too great to be borne.'⁶ If the nineteenth-century model of the collection was the closet, today the spectacular display of the self through objects makes every collector queer. According to the contemporary gay writer Neil Bartlett:

We are all collectors. Our rooms are not decorated to announce our occupation or our family status; they are not really 'domestic' interiors. They need reflect nothing but the tastes of their owner, the pleasure he takes in his life, his ability to choose and arrange his possessions. Think of the sequence of rooms through which your seductions have taken you, the living rooms, the bedrooms, and how their contents have impressed you, how they have been as sensual and as significant for you as their owners themselves.⁷

Bartlett's chapter entitled 'Possessions' in his imaginative reflections on the Wilde trial, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, provides a thoughtful introduction to this issue. He notes that

each of Wilde's heroes is a collector, a connoisseur. They love to do nothing more than to recite the list of their treasures, to sort and catalogue them. Imagine a room ... *some dark antique bronzes contrast with the pale gleam of two noble Chrsi crucifixi, one carved in ivory, the other moulded in wax. He has his trays of Tasie's gems, his Louis-Quatorze bonbonnière with a miniature by Pettitot ... one can fancy him lying there in the midst of his books and casts and engravings, a true virtuoso, a subtle connoisseur turning over his fine collection.*⁸

Pictures and photographs of collectors amidst the things they collect have always seemed fascinating to me; how they, as subjects, seem subject to the objects of their desire – joined, contained, might one even say imprisoned by them. I can see this uncanny reversal in an old photograph of Dr F. Ruhmann, a Viennese collector of ancient glass at the turn of the century, and more famous images of Gertrude Stein framed by her Picassos. Whether it is Elton John swamped by hundreds of pairs of Glamrock shoes or a Berliner called Stefan proudly sitting amidst his Barbra Streisand memorabilia in a German publication about the lifestyles of gay men – what all these views of collectors suggest is the passionate display rather than the 'disease' described by Muensterberger.⁹ The medicalized notion of perversion being linked to certain aesthetic forms goes back to the earliest definitions of homosexuality in the late nineteenth century. Havelock Ellis, in his 'The Nature of Sexual Inversion', included a section on 'artistic aptitude' among 'inverts'. He cited scientific studies by pioneers like Magnus Hirschfeld in Germany listing paintings and sculptures which especially appealed to the recently invented category of the homosexual. Prominent among these artworks are representations of 'St Sebastian, Gainsborough's Blue Boy,

Michelangelo's slave etc'.¹⁰ Ellis's location of the invert by tastes, predilections and professions goes even further when he writes that 'Dr Kiernan informs me that in Chicago, inversion is specially prevalent among barbers, and he adds that he is acquainted with two cases among women-barbers, a relatively large proportion.' The following papers, delivered at a one-day conference organized through the Lesbian and Gay Studies Project in the Center for Gender Studies of the University of Chicago in April 2000, do not touch on the topic of the prevalence of homosexuality among the city's nineteenth-century female barbers. Our location in Chicago was important, however, in that it inaugurated a whole series of conferences generated by a recently established group at the university.¹¹ Presenters and participants at the conference did not aim to label various collectors as perverts in the tradition of medicalizing discourse, but rather to liberate the collector from the prison house of his or her possessions by rigorously historicizing their desire.

As the collector of this collection of essays there are 'things' and themes that I desired but was unable to obtain. One of them was a paper: 'Gertrude Stein: Collector and Collectable' by Katherine Stimpson, who was unable to deliver her promised paper due to pressing duties as a Dean at New York University. All the other speakers I asked were able to come and contributed to a vital discussion. They were asked to consider a group of issues and questions. What differences are there studying this topic in the pre-modern period before the notion of homosexuality (first used in 1869) gained currency? How was collecting certain types of object linked in the nineteenth century with nascent notions of perversity? How can historians and art historians utilize research on gender and sexuality to describe the function of objects in private and public spaces? Is the phallogentric drive of the collector's desire the main reason, apart from the obviously economic one, for the limited role played by women in the history of art collecting? How are these paradigms of collecting, display and accumulation played out in today's lesbian and gay worlds? From the objects amassed by the very 'first' connoisseur of art, Jean, Duc de Berry, up to the images available to everyone on today's internet, our conference opened up these issues for discussion.

The first essay is my own, which opens the chronologically ordered series by examining the problematics of understanding pleasure as an historical category of experience and of labelling a fourteenth-century person as a 'homosexual'. Through a detailed visual analysis of some very well-known images I try to find other ways of understanding the first great collector in Western art, Jean, Duc de Berry, from a viewpoint which incorporates not only his insatiable appetite for beautiful jewels and manuscripts but also his infamous infatuations with younger males of lower social status. Rebecca Zorach's essay is also about pleasure. It represents a pioneering attempt to rethink the female as collector and collected object within the libidinal economy of the French court during the sixteenth century. Taking as its starting point the famous 'nipple-tweaking' *Gabrielle d'Estrées and one of her sisters* in the Louvre, Zorach rethinks the way bodies and desires were commodified – not only through paintings but also through the new medium of prints. Although 'imagining a more complicated viewership' including powerful women at court, Zorach shows how the collector's fantasy was gendered male in the Renaissance.

Two essays by colleagues from Germany take us into the eighteenth century. Christoph Vogtherr's richly documented and highly original essay examines one particular site of male fantasy – that of Frederick II of Prussia's Sanssouci Palace. Depictions of love and displays of bodies are analysed in terms of a deliberate programme which combined a variety of erotic images, mainly of women, with groups of works that reflect on unfulfilled love or express this ruler's longing for romantic male love. Veronica Biermann's similarly ground-breaking essay looks at another powerful historical personality as a collector of objects sometimes redolent of same-sex desire – Queen Christina of Sweden. This monarch's love of Italian painting and certain mythological subjects is shown to articulate far more complex tastes and interests than clichés about lesbian collectors merely being imitations of masculine power might at first suggest. Whitney Davis's wonderfully wide-ranging essay next in this volume does not present a single case study but is rather an ambitious overview of the entire 'modern' period between 1750 and 1920. Introducing carefully chosen examples and many previously unpublished sources, Davis shows how the history of art as a sequence of things was constituted out of homoerotic desire, introducing the fascinating issue of the private versus the public or social in his discussion of a number of nineteenth-century collectors. Davis brings out the continuity between what we have already seen was the pre-modern idea of the 'unspeakable' and what was subsequently visually erased. In modern culture homosexuality had to become invisible or 'clandestine'. Deborah Bright's essay makes a fascinating contrast to what Davis describes, as she shows how, in 1969, a single modern artist – Andy Warhol – did not maintain his domestic space, in what she describes as 'a stage to mirror back to himself an image of mastery', but rather played a more socially recuperative and defiant game of collecting and display that was inherently public rather than private. Richard Meyer's essay describes a quite different performative personality, a master of the postmodern male ego, whose strategies of collecting and display seem to erase any barriers between the private and the public – Robert Mapplethorpe. Showing how this self-styled gay photographer utilized his own collection of mission furniture as props in some of his most 'infamous' images of New York homosexual subculture, Meyer addresses issues of identity and subjectivity crucial in contemporary lesbian and gay studies. Unconstrained by the tyranny of the textual that so often weighs down essays in Cultural Studies, Meyer deftly uses the visual skills of the art historian to explore how style can become metonymic of sexual lifestyle in ways that even Oscar Wilde never imagined. What unites all these contributions to this special volume of *Art History* is their commitment to the powers of the pictorial to shape historical experience. This is also brought out in the epilogue provided by Adrian Rifkin, whose paper on collecting images on the internet provided a fitting climax to our Chicago conference. Locating desire within the new medium of the electronically transmitted image suggests something close to Foucault's premonition of art totally freed from the limits of objecthood and ownership, free to play and ultimately to pleasure us all.

How can we recover the games of the past? How can we relearn, not just to decipher, or to appropriate the images imposed on us, but to create new images of every kind? Not just other films or better photographs, not

simply to rediscover the figurative in painting, but to put images into circulation, to convey them, disguise them, deform them, heat them redhot, freeze them, multiply them. To banish the boredom of Writing, to suspend the privileges of the signifier, give notice to the formalism of the non-image, to unfreeze content and to play, scientifically and pleasurably, in, with and against the powers of the image.¹²

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January 2001

Notes

- 1 John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, *The Cultures of Collecting*, London, 1994, p. 2. Other recent studies include: Maurice Reims, *Les collectionneurs: De la curiosité du goût, de la mode et de la speculation*, Paris, 1981; R.W. Belk, *Collecting in a consumer society*, London, 1995 and S. Pearce, *On Collecting: an Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition*, London, 1995, with further bibliography.
- 2 Naomi Schor, 'Collecting Paris', in Elsner and Cardinal, op. cit. (note 1), p. 257 criticizing Baudrillard's essay which appears on pp. 7–24. See also R.W. Belk, 'Of Mice and Men: Gender Identity in Collecting', in *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, ed. S. Pearce, London, 1994, and Bjarne Rogan, 'Collectionner-Mode Masculin et Mode Féminin', in *Mécènes et Collectionneurs: Les variantes d'une passion*, ed. J.-Y. Ribault, Paris, 1999, pp. 341–51.
- 3 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, 1990, p. 22.
- 4 For the early history of this trope of same-sex eroticism that Wilde, following Lord Alfred Douglas, expressed in the phrase 'the love that dare not speak its name' and which was known in Latin as the *nefandum* or the unspeakable, see Jacques Chiffolleau, 'Dire l'indicible: remarques sur la catégorie du *nefandum* du XII au XVE siècle', *Annales*, 45 (1990), pp. 295–6 and Jonathan Goldberg, 'Introduction', in *Reclaiming Sodom*, ed. Goldberg, London, 1994, p. 5.
- 5 Werner Muensterberger, *Collecting: An Unruly Passion: Psychological Perspectives*, London, 1994.
- 6 *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in Oscar Wilde, *Complete Works*, op. cit. (note 4), p. 111.
- 7 Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde*, London, 1988, p. 178.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 174.
- 9 See the photographs in Matthias Frins, Elmar Kraushaar, *Männer. Liebe. Ein Handbuch für Schwule und alle. Die es werden wollen*, Berlin, n.d., which was sent to me by one of the contributors to this volume, Christoph Vogtherr.
- 10 Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion*, London, 1897, p. 260.
- 11 As one of the founding members of the Lesbian and Gay Studies Project I have been pleased to see over the past seven years what was just one of the many 'workshops' grow into a vital part of intellectual life at the University of Chicago. This coordinates graduate and undergraduate courses, provides fellowships and brings together faculty and graduate students from all departments to exchange ideas. Later in the year 2000 the Project hosted another, much larger conference on Lesbian and Gay History, organized by Professor George Chauncey of the History Department. I would like to take this chance to thank George and his co-chair Beth Povinelli from the Department of Anthropology for their encouragement throughout, and David Churchill, the student organizer of the Spring conference, as well as the Art History Department, the Smart Museum of Art and the Center for Gender Studies for their support.
- 12 Michel Foucault, 'Photogenic Painting', in Gérard Fromanger, *La Peinture Photogénique*, London: Black Dog, 1999, p. 89.