



# CONTEMPORARY COLLECTING

OBJECTS, PRACTICES,  
AND THE FATE OF THINGS

Fig. 16

EDITED BY  
KEVIN M. MOIST AND DAVID BANASH

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY



# Contemporary Collecting

## Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things

Edited by  
Kevin M. Moist  
David Banash



THE SCARECROW PRESS, INC.

*Lanham • Toronto • Plymouth, UK*

2013



Published by Scarecrow Press, Inc.

A wholly owned subsidiary of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706

www.rowman.com

10 Thornbury Road, Plymouth PL6 7PP, United Kingdom

Copyright © 2013 by Scarecrow Press, Inc.

*All rights reserved.* No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote passages in a review.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Contemporary collecting : objects, practices, and the fate of things / edited by Kevin M. Moist, David Banash.


pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8108-9113-5 (cloth : alkaline paper) — ISBN 978-0-8108-9114-2 (ebook)

1. Collectors and collecting. 2. Collectors and collecting—Social aspects. 3. Collectors and collecting—Psychological aspects. I. Moist, Kevin M., 1969– II. Banash, David C. AM231.C66 2013 790.1'32—dc23

2012050180

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992. Printed in the United States of America.

This book is dedicated to collectors past, present, and future who show us the many things in our many worlds, and in doing so help keep alive the experience of wonder.

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

# Contents

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	ix
<b>Part I: Collecting in a Virtual World</b>	
1 Meditations in an Emergency: On the Apparent Destruction of My MP3 Collection <i>Marcus Boon</i>	3
2 Collecting, Curating, and the Magic Circle of Ownership in a Postmaterial Culture <i>Matthew James Vechinski</i>	13
3 Searching for Cap'n Ernie's Treasure Chest: Collecting and Sharing the Lost History of Live Local Television Genres <i>Phillip J. Hutchison</i>	31
<b>Part II: Changing Relationships with Things</b>	
4 Virtual Life and the Value of Objects: Nostalgia, Distinction, and Collecting in the Twenty-First Century <i>David Banash</i>	55
5 Memory, Desire, and the "Good Collector" in PEZhead Culture <i>D. Robert DeChaine</i>	67
6 Suited for Nothing: Collecting Secondhand <i>William Davies King</i>	81

- 7 The World as Things: Collecting Thoughts on Collecting 99  
*Stanley Cavell*

### **Part III: Collecting and Identity, Personal and Political**

- 8 From the Attic to the Mallpark: A Collection's Transition from  
 Private to Public in a New Professional Baseball Stadium 133  
*Stephen P. Andon*
- 9 Collecting "History in the Making": The Privatization of Propaganda  
 in National Socialist Cigarette Cards 151  
*Mechtild Widrich*
- 10 "The Record of a Life": Nation and Narrative in Victorian  
 Women's Collections 173  
*Terri Baker*

### **Part IV: Collecting Practices and Cultural Hierarchies**

- 11 Distraction and Display: The Curiosity Cabinet and the  
 Romantic Museum 195  
*Sophie Thomas*
- 12 Collection and Parody: Taliesin and House on the Rock 213  
*Mary Titus*
- 13 Record Collecting as Cultural Anthropology 229  
*Kevin M. Moist*

Bibliography 245

Index 263

About the Editors 273

About the Contributors 275



# Acknowledgments

Thanks to the Popular Culture Association (PCA). An initial impetus for this book came from the Collecting and Collectibles division of the PCA; several of the chapters here began as presentations at the annual Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conference. Thanks to everyone who participated in those panels over the years and to Ron Bishop for passing the baton. Thanks to Chris Nasso and everyone at Scarecrow Press for supporting the project. Special thanks to Stanley Cavell for generously allowing us to republish his essay in this collection. Thanks also to Judi Hardin, Mark and Amy Mossman, Andrea Spain, Bill Reader, and Jennifer Streb for unwavering and generous support throughout the project. Extra special thanks to Kevin McFadin for the cover collage.

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

# Introduction

*So let us not be hasty in arriving at very firm conclusions about what our relation to collections is, hence what relation they may propose concerning our bond with the world of things as such.*

—Stanley Cavell, “The World as Things”

Practices of collecting have always played a central role in human culture, at the heart of our meaningful relations with objects. Ancient religions collected sacred objects imbued with magical powers to negotiate the hazards of this world and the next. When art became secular, the wealthy collected paintings and sculptures to display their power and taste. The rise of science gave birth to cabinets of curiosity, vast and varied collections of objects that sought to capture and control the scope of the natural world. The advent of the modern museum codified and ordered such anarchic assemblages, even as growing numbers of individual private collectors continued to amass collections of both “high culture”—great art, books, porcelain, bones, shells, and insects—and the odd and ephemeral products of mass manufacture: toys, cereal boxes, and trading cards. Collecting is, moreover, not just a matter of history, institutions, and eccentrics; nearly every child makes collections of anything from stones picked up in a yard to expensive toys bought by parents. So collecting is both deeply enmeshed in the basic processes of cultural meaning and found in the roots of almost every personal history.

Specific forms of collecting develop and decline along with broader shifts in societal institutions, patterns of knowledge, and technologies of production and communication. We are currently living in the midst of one of those extended periods of metamorphosis, as new digital media increasingly virtualize our experiences of the world and at the same time make available seemingly every possible kind of cultural object via the Internet. The accompanying changes in society, culture, and

the economy are radically reshaping the meaning of things and our relationships with them. Collecting continues to grow in popularity even as contemporary society becomes increasingly virtual and fragmented. The status of objects may be changing, but people's meaningful attachments to them have only become stronger.

Collecting is a consistent and growing presence in popular culture, as evidenced by television programs such as PBS's *Antiques Roadshow* or "reality shows" like *American Pickers*. In the online world, websites such as eBay simplify and speed up access to items of all kinds, new and old, profound and mundane; at the same time, collecting activities have begun to move into purely digital spaces, with users collecting everything from MP3 music files to "friends" on social networking sites. In tandem with popular collecting passions, institutional collectors are also updating themselves for the new environment, as library catalogs go online and museums use new technologies to help generate record attendance for exhibits of their more traditional collections.

The emergence of collecting as a unique topic of study is relatively recent. Although the importance of collections has been clear in the sciences and humanities for several centuries, serious attention has only gradually been focused on the social and cultural significance of collecting practice. Collecting is an inherently interdisciplinary topic, and important writings have come from a number of perspectives, most often as stand-alone pieces tied to particular writers' backgrounds—for example, philosopher Walter Benjamin's musings on his book collection in the 1930s or anthropologist James Clifford's reflections in the 1980s on the role of collecting in shaping our understanding of art and culture—rather than being integrated into a wider study of collecting itself.

Given its current popularity, it is not at all surprising that quite a few books about collecting have been published in recent years; an Amazon.com search on the subject turns up more than nineteen thousand results. The vast majority are price guides for collectors, or "how to" instructions for collecting particular types of objects (antiques, etc.), rather than scholarly investigations of the topic. There have been a few academic overviews from particular disciplines, such as business scholar Russell Belk's *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (1995), psychologist Werner Muensterberger's *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (1995), and museum scholar Susan Pearce's work on institutional collecting; as well as several anthologies, including *The Cultures of Collecting* (1994), edited by Jon Elsner and Roger Cardinal, and *Acts of Possession* (2003), edited by Leah Dilworth, which view collecting in a more historical perspective. The goal of this volume is to build on the best aspects of all that work, reassessing the nature of collections and collecting practices in light of ongoing changes in society and culture.

*Contemporary Collecting: Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things* assembles twelve new scholarly essays and one key reprint that situate and articulate collectors and collections in our contemporary context, as well as discussions of older collections and collectors that show how our changing world finds new meaning in their legacy. What do the practices of collectors, surviving collections, and new and emerging



fields of collecting reveal about our contemporary world and our changing sense of the past? Collectors and their collections force us to consider our relationship to objects, as the collector's obsession, scope, practices, and care cast into dramatic relief the role of objects in our lives. From a cultural perspective, collecting is a barometer of and a window onto the nature of those broader developments. The essays gathered here capture collecting in its many varied forms—and the state of our thinking about them—at a moment of significant transformation.

The book is organized thematically into four broad areas. The first section, "Collecting in a Virtual World," grapples directly with new types of collecting generated by and through new technologies, both changing the objects people collect and creating new kinds of collecting practices. Marcus Boon considers, in the form of his accidentally deleted MP3 music collection, what it might mean to collect "things" that exist not as physical objects but as endlessly replicable patterns of data, including new social and legal control issues that are created along with them. Matthew James Vechinski reexamines the status of book collecting in the social media era, describing how websites such as Goodreads add new layers of online interactivity atop what once seemed a fairly solitary activity (reading), in the process perhaps altering the nature of the activity itself. Phillip J. Hutchison looks at how new media processes of connectivity and digitalization make it possible for private collectors to share ephemeral content from the early days of another medium, television. He explores the significance of fan websites that remediate seemingly lost local entertainment programs from the 1950s to the 1970s for new viewing communities gathered not around the electronic hearth, but a digital one.

At the same time, those new technologies and practices also transform our access to traditional collections and, just as important, what those established collections might mean as we interact with them in new ways. Part II investigates from various viewpoints our "Changing Relationships with Things." David Banash argues that thinking about collecting can help us understand the ways that contemporary consumer culture and new virtual technologies alter the roles of objects in our lives. The very existence of a luxury collectors' market for deluxe reproductions of quotidian objects such as vintage pencils, he says, indicates that the status of "things" has entered some new phase. D. Robert DeChaine writes about another seemingly disposable object—PEZ candy dispensers—that has developed a considerable collector constituency, showing how collectors' relationships with such "trivial" items grow from the same play of memory and desire as those with more respectable and "serious" objects. William Davies King is a recognized connoisseur of the unvalued and thrown away (he calls them his "collections of nothing"); here he reflects on his own collections of secondhand suits and water bottle labels in terms of both consumption and collage, providing an object lesson on the potential for idiosyncratic perspectives to illuminate the ambiguities of our relations with things. The seemingly endless variety and common underlying principles of those relationships are subjects of Stanley Cavell's celebrated essay on collecting and philosophy (first published in 1998), which analyzes the thought of various important philosophers—Emerson,



Wittgenstein, Heidegger—in terms of both their outlooks on the existence of things in the world and the ways their philosophies can be seen as collections of ideas about the world.

In thinking about how collectors relate to the things they collect, several of the essays in part II touch on the main topic of the third section, “Collecting and Identity, Personal and Political.” Stephen P. Andon explores the tension between personal and public collecting through the story of a baseball memorabilia collector whose huge private collection becomes part of a professional team’s new consumer-oriented “mallpark.” Andon describes how the personal and historical meanings the objects held as part of their original collection are stripped away as the items are reworked by the team’s corporate marketing and public relations strategies. Mechthild Widrich examines the crossing of personal and political aspects of collecting in the form of cigarette trading cards in Nazi Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. The commercially produced cards were already a popular collectible among young people, and the National Socialists coopted the form with cards that told stories promoting the Führer’s great deeds—privatizing propaganda via consumer goods aimed at young collectors. Terri Baker addresses the role of gender in collecting, noting that it is often and incorrectly seen as a male activity. She illustrates the importance of women collectors in Great Britain and the United States during the Victorian era, both on a personal level, asserting their own individual identities through their collecting, and through the contributions their collections made to contemporary narratives of national identity.

The final section, “Collecting Practices and Cultural Hierarchies,” approaches collecting both as an expression of the meanings and values we ascribe to objects and as a process through which those meanings are created. This is perhaps most obvious and most commented upon in terms of public museums’ role in setting the boundaries of the “official” culture they represent. The essays in this section, however, show that this process also takes place in less official types of collecting and in ways that can at times challenge those very hierarchies. Sophie Thomas looks all the way back to the late eighteenth century, a historical moment when the older “cabinets of curiosity,” and their attitude of fascinated wonder about the collected objects displayed, were giving way to the more orderly and rationalized modern museum. Thomas shows how, through their surprising juxtapositions and demand for active participation, these older types of collection and display prefigure in many ways the current collections discussed in part I. Mary Titus tells the tale of Wisconsin tourist attraction House on the Rock and its creation by founder Alex Jordan Jr. as a mockery of famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright’s nearby Taliesin. Titus argues that Jordan’s house, a disorienting, rambling structure containing an overwhelming array of illogically arranged collections of varying authenticity, works as a carnivalesque, postmodern parody of Wright’s high modernist aesthetic and has a number of parallels with today’s popular culture. Kevin M. Moist concludes the volume with some thoughts on record collecting and its role in both defining and undermining the canons of popular music. Moist focuses on four collector-run, independent record labels

that specialize in reissuing recordings from times and places well outside established musical centers, discussing the ways their releases have been redrawing the maps of consensus music history.

It may be noticed that no specific definition of collecting is included here. This is not an oversight, but rather a recognition of the caution expressed in the epigraph from Stanley Cavell that opens the introduction; especially in light of the diversity of collecting examples discussed herein, any simple definition is bound to be partial and limited. Similarly, we have resisted providing too much interpretation of the individual chapters, beyond the thematic arrangement and shared conceptual concerns described previously. Attentive readers will undoubtedly discover a wide range of connections among the essays on their own, an experience that should be part of the enjoyment of any collection, and one we would not wish to preempt.

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

# I

---

## COLLECTING IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY

FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY



# Meditations in an Emergency: On the Apparent Destruction of My MP3 Collection

Marcus Boon

*For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intimated in that image.*

—Walter Benjamin, “Edouard Fuchs: Collector”

## THE ANGEL OF HISTORY AS A COLLECTOR

Walter Benjamin ironically celebrated the figure of the collector, noting that such figures only become intelligible at the moment of their extinction. He didn't exactly say why the collector should have been on the verge of extinction in the early 1930s, but given the emphasis on ownership in the essay, it's not difficult to connect it to Benjamin's thoughts on mechanical reproduction, because if private ownership sustains the object as a set of historical traces that travel, in commodity form, from bookstore to bookshelf to auction block and back to bookshelf, mass reproduction destroys the aura of the object, an aura that is not entirely separate from the “set of historical traces” that Benjamin described. If the collector is nourished not by generic books but by particular “copies of books,” the very technology of mass reproduction that makes these copies also inundates and finally dissolves the aura that makes them collectible. Benjamin's texts on collecting were written during a period (1931–1937) when the lingering possibility of socialist revolution radicalized this split within the collectible object: Benjamin would reluctantly give up the pleasures of private ownership of his collection for the liberation of the masses.<sup>1</sup>

Benjamin's meditations on book collecting, and his study of collector/archivist Edouard Fuchs are well known. But the figure of the collector has significance in his work beyond these specific texts. The *Passagenwerke* is itself a collection the purpose