CHAPTER SEVEN

COLLECTING IN A POST-MODERNIST WORLD


Between the Acts (Woolf 1978: 133)

INTRODUCTION: MAKING EXHIBITIONS OF OURSELVES

The cultural logic of late capitalism, to use Jameson's (1984) phrase, has penetrated the world of objects, of those who collect objects, and of those institutions - particularly museums - whose business is objects, for just as mature capitalism, that characteristically European use of Europe's own inheritance, generated a world of objects whose use and value was carefully regulated by accepted social parameters, so post-modernist late capitalism has, from its own entrails, produced a world in which the multiplicity of objects float free in a culture landscape in which boundaries seem to have dissolved.

The main strands in the bundle can be sketched out relatively easily. In classic Marxist terms, the workers are now further than ever from the product and from participation in the whole cycle of production and consumption. The job market becomes yearly more complex and fragmented as employment stability disintegrates and more work is linked to computers and satellites which breach the once restrictive time-space barriers. With this has gone a similar instability of aesthetic. As Harvey puts it:

The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a post-modernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms.

(Harvey 1989: 156)

As a result, we are

so far removed from the realities of production and work in the world that we inhabit a dream world of artificial stimuli and televised experience: never in any previous civilization have the great metaphysical preoccupations, the fundamental questions of being and of the meaning of life, seemed so utterly remote and pointless.

(Jameson 1989: xviii)

This pointlessness has been provided with its own philosophy in the post-structuralist writings of men like Baudrillard, Barthes, Derrida and Foucault (for a good discussion see Harland 1987). For Foucault the operation of power in the modern state is all-pervasive, running up and down society at all levels and linking the whole together. Power and knowledge are much the same thing, and they in their turn are linked to ideas like 'truth' and 'reason'. Power is exercised as an intentional strategy, but because it is everywhere, it is not linked, as Marx thought, with one particularly oppressing group. It cannot be clearly located in a distinct and manageable set of personal relationships, and consequently individuals, enmeshed in power relationships like flies in webs, have no hope of extricating themselves by normal processes, because these would simply set up more of the same.

The semiotic argument arrives at much the same conclusion. In language as in all other forms of communication, including material culture and institutions like museums, the link between signifier and signified has been severed. To put it another way, there is no reason why the meanings which have traditionally been attached to anything should continue to be attached; meaning is what anybody cares to make it. Signifiers, objects and exhibitions among others, can trigger off a large range of meanings within the minds and feelings of those who experience them, and since the inherited signification of the past - roughly the consensus of meaning resulting from history - has been demoted, there is no way of judging between the validity of these experienced meanings. As Baudrillard has put it, 'today especially the real is no more than a stuck pile of dead matter, dead bodies and dead language' (1981: 103). For Baudrillard there can be no reality, no meaning and no history, for what is history but a way of pretending that meaning exists?

In our relationship with the material world, the philosophical and social uncertainties of the post-modernist period have produced a reflexive state of mind in which the old hierarchies of value seem less secure and are perceived as social constructions rather than as explanations of natural truth, while the various kinds of popular culture and the material collections which come from it, traditionally given a low ranking in the judgemental hierarchy, are correspondingly taken to be orders of interest in their own right. The result of this across the collecting scene in terms of what we
might call the institutional practice of collecting has been an interesting threefold mixture.

Collections which have come to us from the earlier periods are attracting considerable attention as historical documents in their own right, particularly as displays mounted in museums by whom the material is held. Equally, and again the principle agents are the museums themselves, there is much anxiety about how collections of twentieth-century material should be assembled as the material documents of our century to those who come after. Finally, there is the immense scope of popular collecting by individuals who keep their collections largely in their own homes. The psychological and social basis of this is of great interest and importance, and will be considered in Part Three of this study; what concerns us here is the way in which such collecting is emerging, gradually, into institutional recognition and so into acknowledged practice. Each of these three topics needs examining in turn; what binds them together is a collecting eye now turned not to the vertical structures of the hierarchy, but to the spreading landscape of human society and the human heart.

**MATTER FOR REFLECTION**

The desire to see collections and collecting as of significance in their own right, as constructions which ask to be unravelled and understood within their own terms of reference, has given us an extremely interesting sequence of exhibitions in which an inward-turning museum gaze attempts to demonstrate upon what premises material has been selected for accumulation over the last four centuries or so and how the museum as collection-based institution has come about. The genesis of this activity was the exhibition and accompanying conference mounted in 1983 by the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, in order to celebrate the tercentenary of the opening of the museum in 1683. The Tradescant Collection was researched, redisplayed (Figure 7.1) and published (Macgregor 1983) and the conference volume (Impey and Macgregor 1985) discussed a European-wide range of similar collections which, as we have seen, belong within the cabinets of curiosities and related traditions and stand at the origins of many of the great European museums.

The efforts of the Ashmolean have concentrated attention upon the extent to which the study of early collections, and so of course of all collections, can throw light on our relationship to the material world, and the way in which we create our understanding of ourselves and our surroundings by selective manipulation of this relationship. The early modern collections, in particular, are now perceived as what they are: important moments in the history of thought through which the characteristic modernist gaze of material analysis which yields truth by physical comparison and inference took much of its shape. A number of similarly self-reflexive exhibitions have followed the Ashmolean one, like that entitled *Birds' Eggs* (1992) at the Oxford Museum of the History of Science (in the old Ashmolean building) which gave us the opportunity to see what is probably the world's oldest collection of birds' eggs made by John Pointor (1667-1754) in the first half of the eighteenth century, which he used to teach a course at Oxford on natural history and *materia medica*.

The point made at Oxford has been taken by several of the major museums of northern Europe, whose collections are broadly similar. In 1992 the Historical Museum, Amsterdam, mounted the exhibition *Distant Worlds Made Tangible* which displayed the art and curiosities in the collections made between 1585 and 1735 by wealthy Dutch burgurers. In 1993 the National Museums of Denmark put on an important exhibition entitled *Museum Europa: An Exhibition about the European Museum and Europe*. *Museum Europa* was described as...
an exhibition about the European Museum and about Europe herself, both as concept and reality. With this exhibition, the National Museums of Denmark wishes to illuminate the relationship between European thought as expressed through science, art and philosophy, and the museums of Europe, expressed in their methods of classification.

The way a museum exhibits its artifacts always mirrors the march of time. We see the objects of the past through the eyes of the present and only understand the past by the amount of light it sheds on our own present time. Therefore the ways of display found in the European Museum are as vibrant and alive as, for instance, the narrative styles of European literature or the painting techniques of European pictorial art.

(National Museums of Denmark 1991: 3)

*Museum Europa* was therefore intended to ‘exhibit’ the exhibition itself by displaying examples of the epoch-making changes in the methods of exhibition, beginning with the first encyclopedic collections and ending with the ‘imaginary museums’ of today, where objects are transferred to computer screens from databases, regardless of where they may be found in time or space (National Museums of Denmark 1991: 4). In this exhibition the objects themselves determine the arrangements in order to show how collections can reflect a cosmology and how the grouping of objects creates meaning. The whole enterprise was intended to be an examination of the museums as an idea (p. 7).

In order to achieve this the Museum drew on its rich collections, which include the surviving 2,000 or so objects in the Royal Kunstkammer, the first inventory of which dates from 1674, and which itself included material deriving from the collections of Olaus Worm (d. 1624). The physical appearance of the exhibition was that of a montage, a fragmented presentation of history open to more than a single interpretation. Accordingly, the exhibition morphology is not linear, but a labyrinth in which the visitor was allowed to make his own discoveries. To achieve this, the gallery was divided into seven areas, in which four areas showing historical phases were accompanied by the Introduction Room which showed medieval treasures in boxes and chests, The Collector which showed a bower-bird with its ‘blue collection’ in a wood, children collecting at a beach, and a book collector at his desk, and the Gallery of Paintings which showed paintings of collectors and collections (Figure 7.1). *Museum Europa* represents the grand gesture of self-reflection, coupled with an important statement of the significance of the collected world in the history of European consciousness.

A similar desire for self-examination and the assertion of significance is shown in the projects mounted by a number of regional museums in Britain. In 1992 Jersey Museums Service put on *From Whales to Winklepickers: A

*History of Collectors and Collecting in Jersey.* This demonstrated the Jersey collections and collections in relation to themes like ‘The Classics’, ‘Art’, ‘The Empire’ and ‘Evolution’. In May 1992 the Tolson Memorial Museum Huddersfield (Kirklees Museum Service) opened its *Waxwings, Waistcoats and Wooden Legs: Collectors and Collections in Your Museum* exhibition (Figure 7.2). This has sections on the origins of the museums’ collection, what the museum has collected, and why it has done so. There are displays of specific collections of bottles, stamps and cigarette cards, and sections

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**Figure 7.2 Plan of Collections Gallery, Tolson Memorial Museum, Huddersfield, 1992**
on the core of collections and the uses to which they are put. Two sections consider ‘What objects tells us’ and ‘What objects don’t tell us’, where attention is drawn to the selective, generally middle-class, view that surviving objects give us of our historical past. The tone here is that of a museum service explaining itself to its public, and the emphasis is therefore rather upon the way the collections are managed and used rather than upon the presentation of an intellectual framework within which the collections can be understood. The importance of exhibitions like those at Huddersfield and Jersey lies in the way in which they focus attention upon collections and the collecting process.

All this museum activity bears a close relationship to similar reflexive—some would say narcissistic—efforts much on the minds of some contemporary literary critics, pointing up the similarity between the analysis of written narrative and that of narrative constructed from material culture. Here, as in the museum, we see a textually self-conscious and critical approach to fiction in which the reader (or viewer) becomes a collaborator instead of merely a consumer, and reader and writer understand the responsibilities which the better-understood complexities of interpretation require.

As Hutcheon has put it:

The artist reappears, not as a God-like Romantic creator but as the inscribed maker of a social product that has the potential to participate in social change through its reader. Such an acknowledgement of the power of language is also an acknowledgement of the potential for ideological manipulation by the wielder of that language. The best way to demystify power, metafiction suggests, is to reveal it in all its arbitrariness.

(Hutcheon 1980: xvi)

Her ‘power of language’ is for museums and collectors the ‘power of objects’ and her ‘metafiction’, essentially fiction which reveals the nature of fiction, is our meta-exhibition, exhibitions of collections which reveal the nature of themselves.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: OUR COLLECTIVE SELVES

One of the sections in the Huddersfield exhibition was called ‘Growing Collections’ and was concerned with recent acquisitions. One very particular, but very important, aspect of the whole late-twentieth-century collecting debate is the question of how museums should go about selecting and accumulating material from the twentieth century, and especially from the second half of the century, so that these collections can represent our time to those people of the twenty-first and later centuries who will (we must suppose) come after us. The kernel of the argument revolves around the difficulties implicit in selection and representation which, however self-conscious and open the process may be, will inevitably involve lop-sidedness and bias.

One approach attempted to find a path through the difficulties by concentrating upon issues which are visibly and clearly important in the neighbourhood in which the collecting museum works. As King puts it very clearly in relation to the People’s Palace Museum, Glasgow:

You have to decide what the issues are for your own locality. The Falklands War was not an issue for Glasgow, in the same way as it was for Southampton or London. Glasgow’s war in Argentina took place in 1978, when Ally’s Tartan Army was routed in the World Cup Finals. In the aftermath, we were able to acquire quite a variety of souvenirs at bargain prices for the museum collection. This may seem to some to be a facetious outlook, but in a country which is politically effete, football often assumes a disproportionate cultural importance. In comparison with the heated fervour generated by the 78 World Cup, the ’82 Falklands War had the aura of a distant B-movie media event.

(King 1985–6: 4–5)

King goes on to detail some of the popular culture which can and should be collected in contemporary Glasgow: new shops and their immediate predecessors (‘the Patisserie Française, née City Bakery’), city Christmas decorations, the material culture of the Peace Movement and the 1984/5 Miners’ Strike, comedian Billy Connolly’s stage costumes and material relating to pop and folk music. As Mayo puts it, drawing on her experience in the Division of Political History at the Smithsonian, collecting contemporary historical artefacts requires a great ‘leap of faith’ (1984: 8) because political problems can never be solved to everybody’s satisfaction and yet material must be selected if museum collectors are to do their job.

Another way is to steer through the theoretical problems by admitting cheerfully to bias on the grounds that how a late-twentieth-century museum curator sees contemporary collecting is itself part of the history of our time, and consequently endowed with its own interest and significance. When in 1990 the Victoria and Albert Museum mounted the exhibition Collecting for the Future: A Decade of Contemporary Acquisitions, it became clear that the museum sees itself as collecting on the basis of aesthetic, technical and historical criteria arrived at, essentially, on the strength of curatorial interests and taste. By 1992 the Museum had opened both the Twentieth Century Gallery and the European Ornament Gallery. The Twentieth Century Gallery features Doc Marten boots, Lycra leggings, the Bic ballpoint pen: ephemera treated as art because of its design qualities and its ability to define the essentially political tastes of an era.
Collecting in Practice

In 1992 the European Ornament Gallery featured a display of 'outrageous, charismatic and kitsch ties' by inviting all and sundry to send in ties for display. The London Evening Standard for 19 March 1992 told us:

London's temple of style, the Victoria and Albert Museum, is playing host to the worst that the British male and his dubious sense of fashion can throw at it. Men - and women - from all over the country have responded enthusiastically to the V & A's appeal for outrageous, charismatic and kitsch ties. Every day, parcels containing more examples of bad taste arrive at the museum's new European Ornament Gallery.

(Evening Standard, 19 March 1992)

Claudia Bigg, a member of the museum staff, was quoted as saying 'One man said he had 2,000 but was forced to stop buying because he was spending too much money' (Evening Standard, 19 March 1992). Here we have the national 'Temple of Style' as the Evening Standard put it, exploring contemporary popular taste through the medium of a standard late-twentieth-century piece of male clothing, and doing so by inviting popular collectors to send in their own accumulations for display. The demotic spirit of the age comes into its own here, as collected objects, politics and institutions come together.

ONLY COLLECT

Like the ties exhibition, the Victoria and Albert Museum's Collecting for the Future exhibition, with its Objects for the Collector section showing objects like David Shilling hats, craft pottery and Aldo Rossi coffee sets, which, although sold for use or decoration, are manufactured above all to be collected, made an explicit link with contemporary collecting being carried on outside the museum walls. The same link was at the heart of the People's Show Project launched by Peter Jenkinson at Walsall Museum.

In 1990 Jenkinson conceived the idea of a People's Show, which would put on display in the museum collections formed by private individuals in their own homes. The first People's Show gathered together some 16,000 objects by sixty-three collectors from diverse backgrounds. The display packed out the museum's walls, floors and ceilings and included collections of neckties, eggcups, international hotel soaps and gambling machines. Further People's Shows have taken place since 1990 throughout museums in the Midlands. The Walsall show attracted much attention in regional and national media, where it linked up with the enormous superstructure of collectors' fairs, magazines and clubs, all of which support the popular collecting which is one of the most interesting and significant aspects of contemporary culture.

Collecting in a Post-modernist World

The notion of what is collectable ranges from recognised antiques (that is, those pieces which are more than a century old), to discarded contemporary bric-a-brac, or even contemporary material bought in a normal market outlet. The collectors hunt in antique shops, car-boot sales and mail-order magazines, but also in ordinary shops carrying contemporary commercial stock. Their interests are served by enterprises like the BBC's Antiques Roadshow and its various spin-offs, Miller's magazines, trade papers like Antiques Trade Gazette, which are often read by collectors, and a large range of magazines.

A characteristic magazine is that issued by Marshall Cavendish entitled What's it Worth: The Complete Guide to Everyday Collectables. The first issue appeared in the winter of 1993. It features articles on blue and white china, men's pocket watches, teddy bears, first aid for wood, comics and rocking chairs. Each article is lavishly illustrated and is backed up by inserts on 'Dealers' tips', 'Close-up on trade marks' and 'Tomorrow's treasures'. Each individual piece shown has a price-guide tag attached to it: prices range from under £5.00 to over £5,000. The emphasis is on becoming knowledgeable enough to find one's way about the collecting world and to avoid being made a fool of in a world presumed to be full of pitfalls.

CONCLUSION

At first sight, post-modern collecting, like the post-modern world, might appear to have abandoned the old cultural parameters of the long term in favour of eclectic freedom, both personal and material. Notions of classification and relationship, including those where value judgements are implicit, seem to have been subverted in favour of idiosyncratic assemblage which has no point of reference beyond individual quirks of partiality. The breakdown of traditional material structuring can be linked with the dissolution of other traditional social parameters - the family, authority, law and order, and so on. This is accompanied by the now-inevitable agony on the part of the professionals involved, here museum curators, who embark on honest endeavours to come to terms with the new world.

But what abides is the clear propensity of European individuals to define themselves and their cultural relationships in material terms. Viewed from this angle, popular collecting reinforces long-term habits and attitudes; now more people collect than ever as post-modernist capitalism and its cultural freedoms opens up more and more material to the collecting gaze. Perhaps (perhaps!) many European individuals are in some important ways more 'free' than they were, but they are using this freedom in traditional ways in the aggressive accumulation of goods, in the cherishing of material relationships and in individual assertions of sense and meaning.