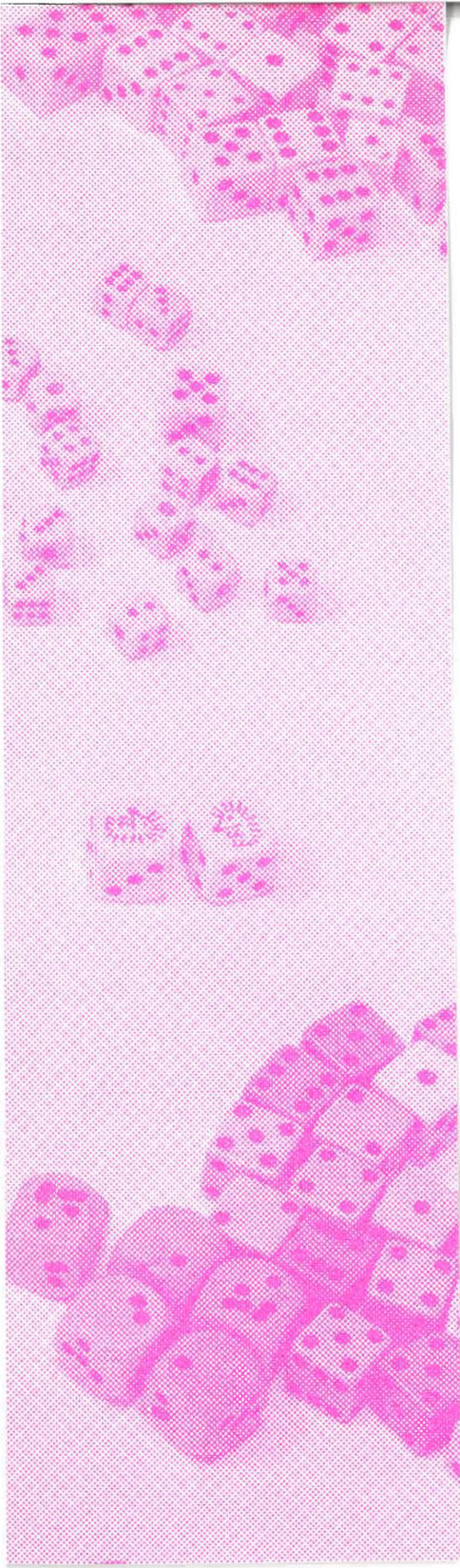


Collective Affinities: Personal Collections from the Bennington College Community

September 17–November 23, 2024

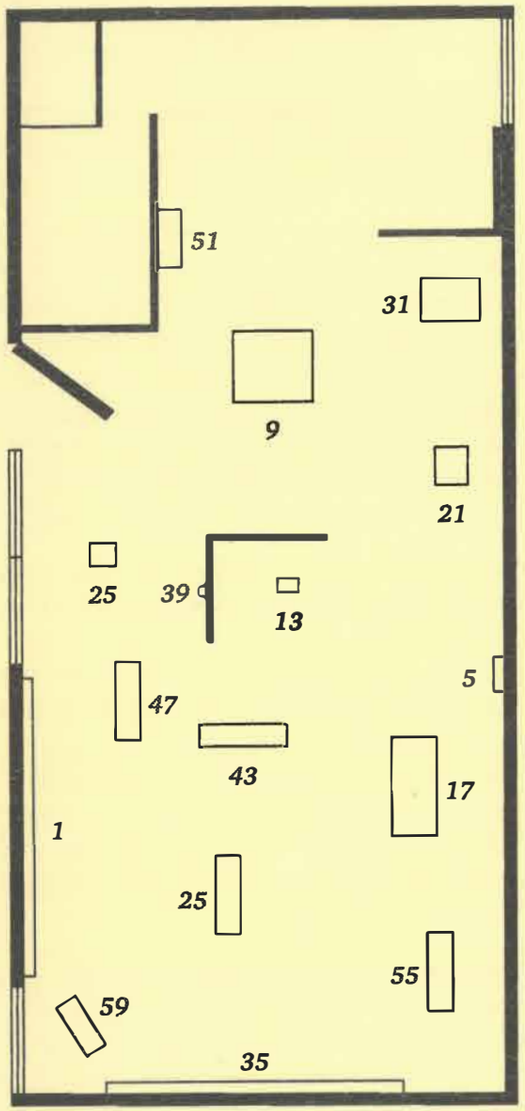
"Collective Affinities" brings together idiosyncratic collections of Bennington College faculty, staff, and alums to highlight and examine the pleasures and social functions of collecting.

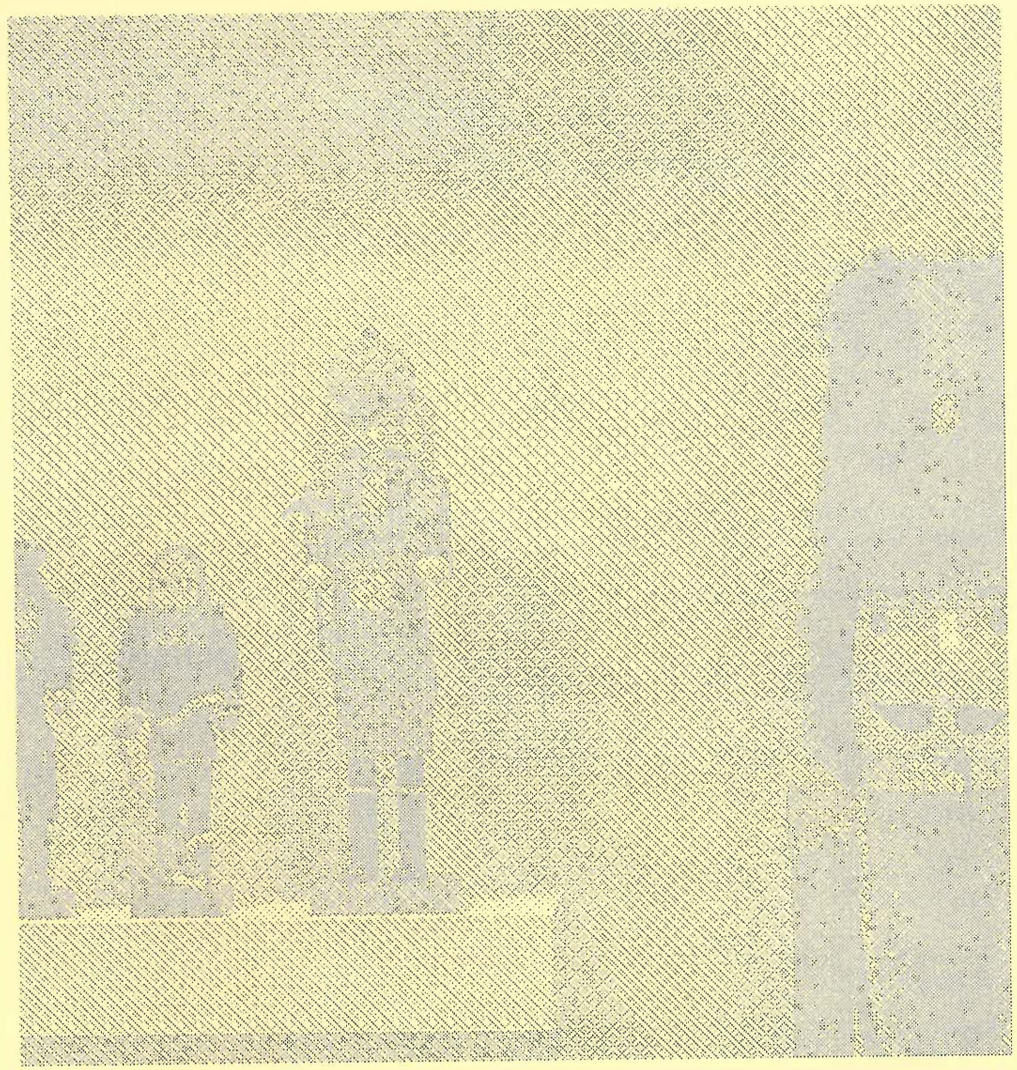
A central theme is how collections come into being. While most collections are intentional —manifestations of professional or personal interests and obsessions— others are more inadvertent, happening to us through gifts, inheritance, or chance. With curiosity about the different and potentially shifting functions of collections, objects in the gallery explore topics including the custodial role of institutions; collecting as interaction with urban and natural environments; collections anchored in family narratives; and the diaristic aggregation of stuff over time. Various in origin as well as content, the sixteen collections on view invite reflection on how we engage with history, material culture, and our surroundings.

In considering the act of collecting, Collective Affinities draws inspiration from the German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). A passionate collector himself, Benjamin saw the collecting impulse, at its core, as a desire to reconcile the chaotic "dispersion" of things in the world. "The collector," he wrote, "brings together what belongs together; by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time, he can eventually furnish information about his objects." The exhibition also speaks to some of Benjamin's personal fascinations and wide-ranging subjects as a writer, including objects such as dolls, toys, books, and ephemera; activities such as urban wandering, shopping, and travel; and, philosophically, his sense of nonlinear time and his conception of history as a "constellation" of past and present that informs the future.

Extending the exhibition's community focus into the curriculum, Bennington students collaborated to produce this catalog. Members of the seminar "On Collecting: Writings of Walter Benjamin," taught by Usdan Gallery director and visual arts faculty Anne Thompson, wrote about individual collections on view; students of "Best laid plans: an introduction to design," taught by visual arts faculty Farhad Mirza, designed and printed this publication.

Contents





Hail, Cracker, Hail!

Dalia Bermack

"Shout and sing to the wooden King;

Hail, Cracker, hail!

Where is the nut could resist the might

Of thy powerful jaw, with its screw so tight?

Woe to the finger would test its bite!

Hail, Cracker, hail!"

– Heinrich Hoffmann, *King Nutcracker and Poor Reinhold, 1851*

A

The collector is often characterized as the expert, the obsessive, he who possesses deep and intimate knowledge of his collection; our image of him is of one who collects with a fierce intellectual fascination, or else by dint of some congenital condition (whereby he becomes impotent if not kept within a certain radius of his objects).

But when speaking of collecting, do we speak only of psychology? Must we reduce the phenomena of collecting to only that claim which is staked by the intellect? Moreover, is it necessary that a collector be knowledgeable about, or even interested in his collection?

B

It seems to me that the relationship between collector and collected is physical as much as psychic. Perhaps mere proximity is sufficient to make a collection, in spite of the disinterest of the collector. Surely the genesis of a collection can come from outside the will of the collector—a collection sometimes can seem to have arisen inadvertently, or else from something not unlike the will of God.

I

"No."

– Brent Harrington, An Email To Me

It is thus that Brent Harrington appears, through a haze of light, as the anti-collector. His nutcrackers are a collection born not from the whims or neuroses of the collector, but rather of the collected; the little wooden soldiers seem to accumulate around him, as if of their own volition. His situation demonstrates not only the spacial element of collecting, but also how a collection can gather like vines around even

an unwilling host. He received his first nutcracker as a boy, about four or five years old. A whimsical gift from one's parents has the capacity to spiral like a nightmare into the ether. They never stopped coming. He now has close to 50, having since become the subject of a sacrificial ritual in which he is given several each year.

II

"Oh, you're thinking of the nutcracker!"

– Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities, 1930*

The nutcracker, among other toys, was once an outlet of creativity for wood carvers, and indeed a sign of craftsmanship, prior to industrialization and the mass production of toys. Walter Benjamin, in his essay "The Cultural History of Toys," mentions this and the *"simple beauty in Sonneberg's wooden dolls."* It would thus make sense for a typical collector to seek rare or valuable nutcrackers.

Brent's nutcrackers, however, are not antiques, objets d'art, or even singularly crafted. They don't reside in what Benjamin has called the collector's "magic circle" because Brent likes the way they feel, appreciates their history, or is amused by their various silly adornments—by no means is he an enthusiast; they are there simply because they are, because they virtually always have been. There is no sensuous pleasure associated with them, nor is there any particular discomfort. The quality they bring to his life is impalpable, in fact imperceptible —but also indispensable.

Thus Brent's brand of collecting is neither tactile nor optical; it is mystical.

III

"Should one laugh, should one shrug the shoulders? They'll still be playing with dolls in their old age."

– Linke Poot, *The Bear, Reluctant, 1919*

The transformative element of collecting is evident with Brent and his nutcrackers, insofar as the utility of the toys is (for the most part) dispensed with. The nutcrackers are, of course, stripped of their nut-cracking duties, but they are also relieved of another function: that is, save for a few at a time, they are not for play or even decoration. Stowed away in boxes in Brent's basement, they retain a certain purity; there is minimal utilitarian value linking them to the collector, the link they retain is of a mystical nature. Each new nutcracker, suffused with the memory of a friend or relative, is assimilated into this furtive covenant.

IV

"Imagine you woke up every morning and heard the same song on your alarm, and then one day the song was different."

– Brent Harrington, An Email To Me, 2024

Can a true collector conceive of a world devoid of his collection? He at least cannot conceive of its subsistence. To the collector, the collection is the spell holding the order of the world aloft, the divine strand which threads together the luminous objects of the firmament of history.

V

Brent's bears the mark of a true collection, in which the distinction between collector and collected nears a total breakdown. The nutcrackers are like a part of him. He wrote, in an email to me "[the collection] is unquestionably a part of my past, present and likely future, but much in the same way that my arms or legs are associated with me. I did nothing to acquire them, they were sort of always there, and I am sure I would feel different if they no longer were." He has habituated himself to them such that their absence would signify a disorder of the highest degree. It is not irrelevant that, to Benjamin, a collector is one who has so habituated himself to disorder as to mistake it for order.

VI

"Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them."

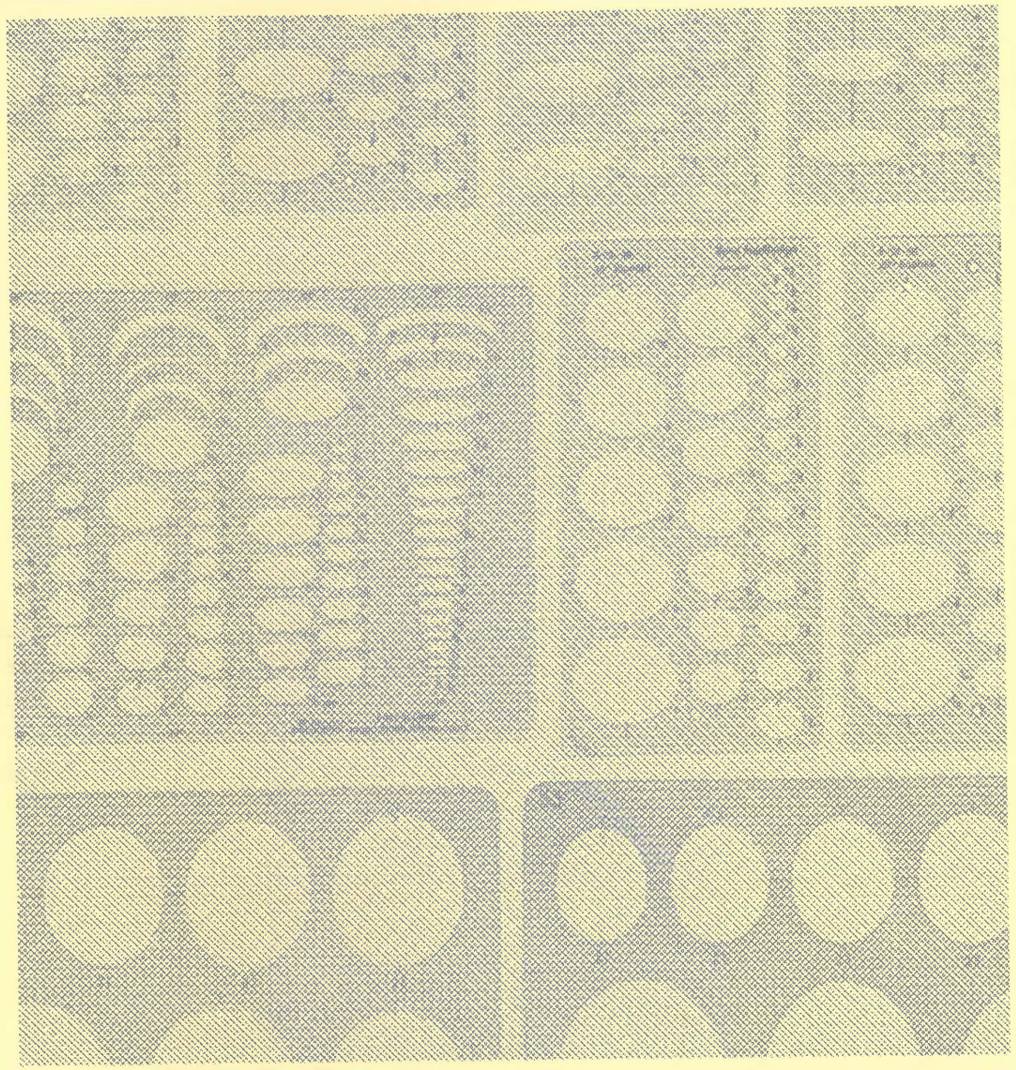
– Walter Benjamin, Unpacking My Library, 1931

That Brent can hardly imagine himself without his nutcrackers does not mean that they have no life exterior to him.

I am thinking of the nutcracker grill chef delivered anonymously to his doorstep, accompanied by a photo collection of the same nutcracker at various destinations in southern Appalachia. All of the photos are accompanied by text, in impact font, seemingly written by the nutcracker. He visits a waterfall, takes a dip in the chattahoochee, winds up in the emergency room and is even handcuffed in what looks like a jail cell.

The grill chef did not come alive once in Brent's possession. It lived before him as a tourist and will likely live on after him.

Not one submits to the other. Their bond is the result of a line of physical and psychic associations too persistent and too strong to ignore.



The Architect as Collector

Hollis Churchill

I. The Architect

"The collector actualizes latent archaic representations of property."

– Walter Benjamin (1936)

Donald Sherefkin, a practicing architect since 1983 and a Bennington College professor until 2024, profoundly impacted my architectural studies. Known for his insight and pragmatism, Donald contributed to *Collective Affinities* by displaying his collection of ellipse drawing templates, essential tools throughout his professional life. Spanning decades, some templates date back to his high school years, while others were obtained from an illustrator who moved to digital design. These templates symbolize the transition from analog to digital, capturing a period in architecture when hand-drawing was integral.

II. Templates and AutoCAD

"Property and possession belong to the tactical sphere. Collectors are people with a tactical instinct."

– Walter Benjamin (1931)

Donald's templates, made of durable plastic, are tactile tools that offer precision without damaging paper. The older stencils' warm hues add a comforting aesthetic to the drafting process. Despite the prevalence of digital methods, Donald prefers hand-drawing, believing it retains the artist's touch, unlike digital designs that remove evidence of human involvement. AutoCAD, launched in 1982, gained popularity but wasn't accessible to budget-conscious users until the 1990s. Although digital drafting improved productivity, Donald argues it cannot replicate the personal, expressive quality of hand-drawn work.

III. What Makes a Collection?

"Our modern life... has created objects: its suits, its pens, its Eversharp pencils... Our era fixes its style every day. It is right before our eyes. Eyes that do not see"

– Le Corbusier (1923)

Donald's templates prompt the question: does he see himself as a collector? Unlike traditional collectors, Donald accumulated his templates out of necessity, not passion. "I began buying ellipse templates for the purpose of making architectural drawings,"he notes, appreciating them for practical uses rather than as cherished objects. Walter Benjamin's reflections on collecting emphasize that a true collection

transcends functionality, creating a relationship with the objects. In time, Donald's view of his templates shifted from mere tools to cherished artifacts, forming a meaningful collection rather than a mere compilation.

IV. Analog versus Digital

"By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent..."

– Charles Baudelaire (1863)

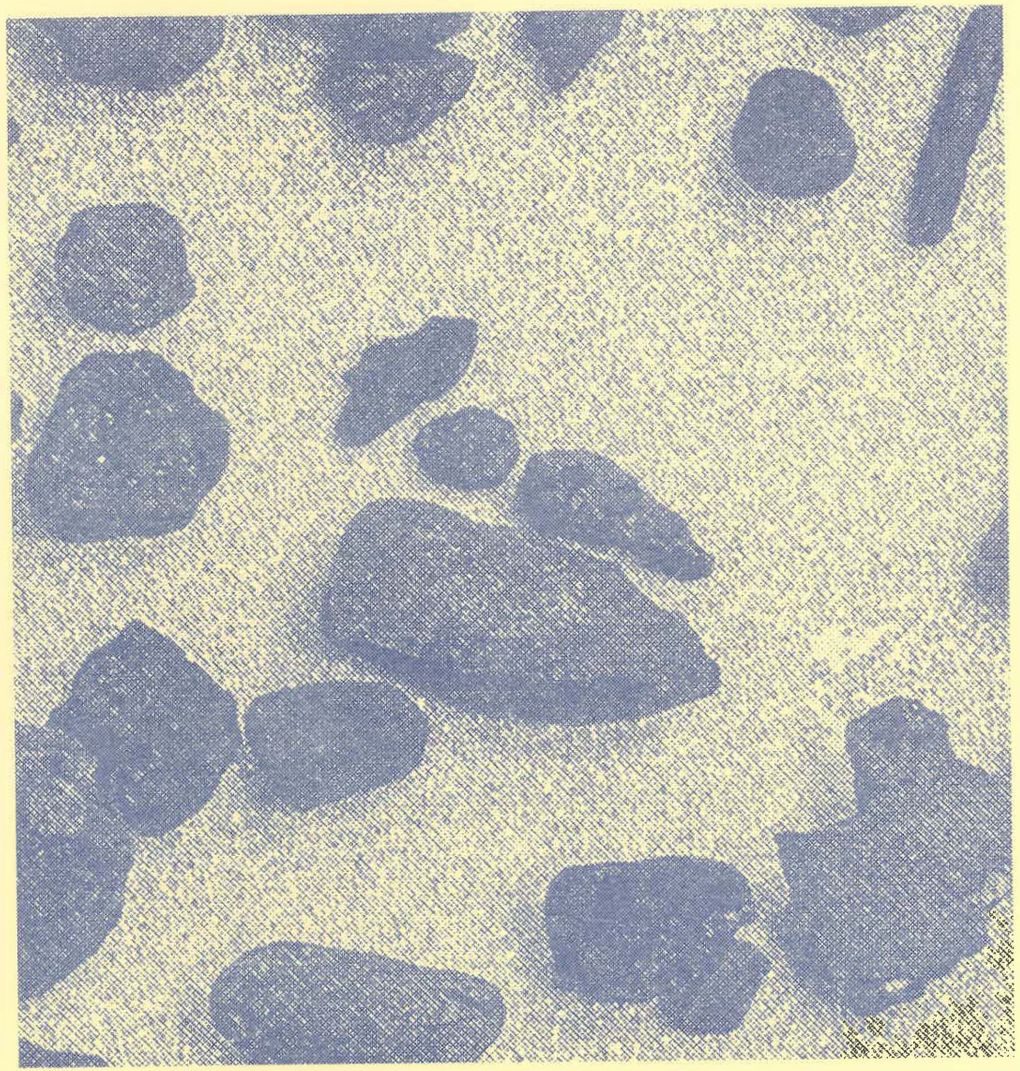
The analog-to-digital transition has significantly impacted Donald's view of his templates. He is drawn to the tangible, vintage appeal of tools that reflect a time when architecture was crafted by hand. The templates, now artifacts, evoke a period in design with an emphasis on imperfections and uniqueness. Donald's appreciation for these qualities aligns with Benjamin's idea that a collector values objects for their ability to preserve a way of seeing. The templates serve as relics of past architectural practices while prompting reflection on how digital tools alter both creation and perception. Donald's templates bridge past and present, analog and digital, underscoring the enduring importance of physical tools in a digital age. His collection, initially utilitarian, now represents a blend of practicality, nostalgia, and artistic expression, illustrating the transformation of tools into treasured artifacts.

V. Benjamin and Collecting

"Collecting is a form of practical memory, and of all the profane manifestations of 'nearness,' it is the most binding."

– Walter Benjamin (1936)

Benjamin suggests that collectors rescue objects from time's relentless flow, giving them new context and meaning. Donald's collection, in this light, is an act of preservation, maintaining a connection to tactile, analog processes as digital methods prevail. His templates not only preserve his personal history but also highlight the values of an era when architecture relied on hand-crafted precision. Donald's collection invites us to question whether technological progress necessarily equates to artistic satisfaction, reminding us that true collecting preserves a deeper meaning within the items collected.



Tangibility of Experience: John Umphlett's Fossils

Carrie Colley

Every summer for the past 28 years, sculpture artist John Umphlet and his family have visited his in-laws in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He disappears onto the beach, sometimes walking for miles at a time, in search of fossils particular only to that area. His interest began with a curiosity about the odd gray lumps of rock that other beachgoers were overlooking in their search for more visually appealing shells. He became fascinated with how "strange and humble" the fossils look, how they feel in his hand, how they sound when tapped together. They make a distinct clicking sound which varies depending on the purity of the fossil itself—in a way, John's collection of fossils is also a collection of potential sounds.

John doesn't think of himself as a collector. He also doesn't think of his fossils as being a collection, but rather more of a 'collective': his interest is not in preserving the perceived value of the fossils, but in appreciating and continuing their life. For instance, John also collects the used metal body parts discarded from his family's mortuary business. His interest lies in the inherent soul of things, or in their evidence of previously existing life, not in their exhibitionism.

John has a tendency to collect raw materials; usually discarded, but still very valuable: scraps of metal, panes of thick glass, a huge chunk of graphite he's been chipping away at for decades for use in electrical components. Once, he obtained a variety of sewing machines from a friend and ended up using them in an art piece. It appears that John tends to see objects in any state of being, in their own ways, as raw materials, each with their own life and potential. He gave the example of a window being shattered: "in a lot of ways, it's comforting to know I know more about this piece of glass now than anyone prior to its breaking—this particular piece— so I'm closer to redefining how it can have a new life or a new purpose, or be discovered in another piece of sculpture, or something like that." John views his fossil collection as entirely separate from artwork. Perhaps if it became a piece of art the collection would become too static, too preoccupied with statement.

Philosopher, cultural critic, writer, and chronic collector Walter Benjamin, who inspired the *Collective Affinities* show, shares John's sense of the importance to be found in the seemingly mundane: in his essay "Theses on the Philosophy of History," he writes that, *"nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history."* This notion extends to the importance of collected objects, which hold a piece of their time within them and so can be used to construct or to reconstruct a collective history—in other words, *"[c]ollecting is a form of practical memory"* ("The Collector").

On the process of collecting and what a collection accomplishes, Benjamin writes:

> *[w]hat is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. ... It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection. And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch ... from which it comes.* ("The Collector")

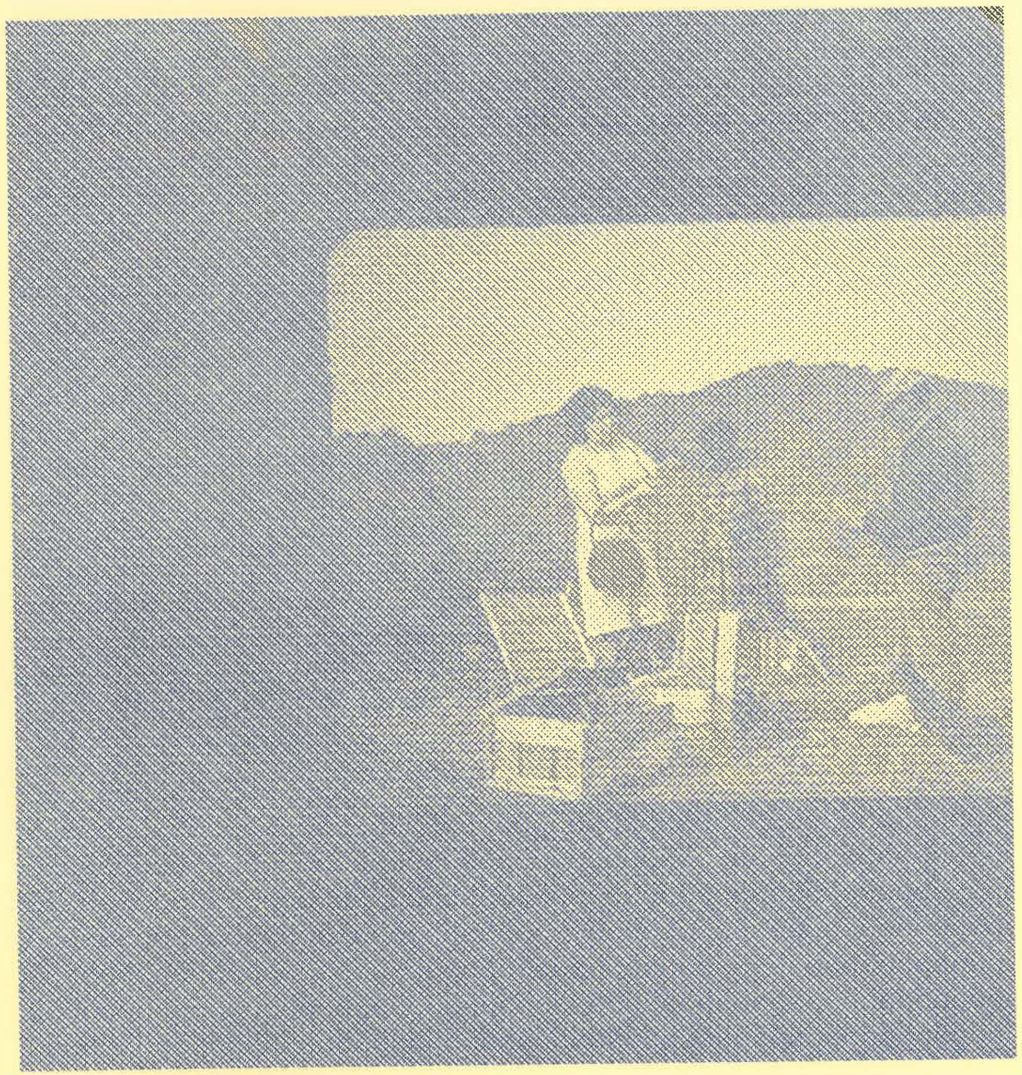
Through this lens, John's collecting of fossils is something of a historical bringing together of disparate parts which would otherwise serve a different function: he removes them from their geological, and previously animal, life and delivers them into a new life of the humanly sensorial and experiential. Thus he brings their history forward into ours, merging the ancient with the present, the unreachable with the tangible.

Most participants in the gallery show had nothing to do with how their collections were displayed, but John had a distinct vision: the fossils laid out evenly—he didn't want any of them highlighted more than the others—on a platform, low to the ground, on a bed of tiny glass beads. This display invites the viewer, if they wish to examine the fossils more closely, to enact his process of collecting by bending down as if towards the surface of the beach. The glass beads, of course, mimic sand, but they also throw light onto the fossils in interesting ways, mimicking the way John was initially able to spot them in the sand. During his long walks, the process of collecting can become exhausting; he can't pick up every single one. It's often a matter of, as he said, "do I have enough strength to bend over for that one?" John's fossil-collecting process becomes meditative, highly focused, singular. When dumping the fossils out of the containers in which they live in his home, John was surprised to discover that he could remember each one of them—not the moment he picked it up, not where he was exactly, but the fossil itself. Each fossil he'd chosen to pick up had a certain feel in his hand, a certain texture or shape, a certain sound.

According to Benjamin, this kind of experiential connection to an object is integral to collecting. For the collector, *"[e]verything remembered and thought, everything conscious, becomes the pedestal, the frame, the base, the lock of his property...as he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired."* ("Unpacking My Library"). This is certainly visible in John's collecting practice: there is a tangibility to the experience he undergoes when investigating a certain fossil. The memory conjured is not of a time or place, but of the senses.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the fossils, as a collected object, hold a kind of power over the collector; not only to exhaust or to captivate, but also in the fact that they had to be fabricated by enormous forces over incredible amounts of time. John is humbled that they are something he couldn't possibly make. "If I could do that," he said, "maybe I wouldn't pick them up anymore." They remind him how small, how comparatively powerless, humans are: "we think we're just so all knowing and have control—[but] we're just so temporary."

Though he can't fabricate the fossils, John is highly interested in their extreme durability. After a day of collecting, he bakes them in 500-degree heat in order to sanitize them, and they remain unscathed. He said that if, hypothetically, he ever were to utilize the fossils in an artistic way, it would probably be in terms of exploring or highlighting this durability; here, again, a thinking of the fossils as a kind of raw material waiting to be redefined and explored. In his artistic practice, John is often interested in this idea of taking a body or an element of life to its limits by placing it under extreme duress, such as in performance sculptures like IDA, flipping one over a bush, and Greatest American Hero. In his essay "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin writes that *"[t]here is in the life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order,"* which, if you know John and his work, is entirely applicable. He may not think of himself as a collector in the traditional sense, but he certainly is his sporadic acquisition of raw materials, his interest in re-piecing them together, and of course, his utter fascination with them.



Slide Photography Sliding In and Out of Obscurity

Lorelei Kurowoski

In a darkened corner of Usdan Gallery, a slide carousel flips through amateur photography of holiday parties, portraits, and sports, among many other types of imagery, from the 1950s to the 1990s. Now considered obsolete, slide film gained popularity for its accessibility to the general public during the 1950s, the boom of mass-market availability of cameras. Up until that point, cameras were still an uncommon possession, even with the Kodak Brownie released in 1901. This new, midcentury iteration of film technology was affordable and high quality: slide images retained clear detail and vivid colors, perfect for the era's increasing travel culture. Slides were good for people's personal art and documentation, but they also could be marketed as tourist souvenirs. Capital buildings, natural landmarks, and famous artworks were all common selections for prepackaged slides for purchases. While not initially released, the first digital camera was invented in 1975 by Steve Sasson, marking the beginning of the end of slide photography's cultural relevance. Once affordable digital cameras were released, the widespread use of digital cameras accelerated the decline, finally finished off by the smartphone's built-in camera. With none of the additional financial costs from acquiring film and developing it, the smartphone was the perfect replacement device for amateur photographers. Eventually, the ability to create slides at all ended as the companies discontinued the technology. Now all that is left is a surplus of the slides themselves and a small amount of carousels, vintage equipment no longer widely available.

Olivia Saporito's expansive collection of slides began with her inheritance of her own family's slides. She spoke about how she has always been drawn to analog technologies, so the outdated nature of the objects is an essential factor in this collection's continuous expansion. She never considered herself a collector or collected much as a child either, and yet she now possesses over 10,000 slides, continuing and increasing the original collection. Her process of collecting them involves searching through different environments—estate sales, garage sales, and online resources. Slides are readily available and often sold cheaply in large batches, with 200 slides going for $20. Many people seem keen to get rid of them. And slide lots include a broad range of subject matter: the sentimental amateur photography of neighborhood streets and pets, the professional photographs of government landmarks and landscapes, even original art. When asked about her experience with sourcing slides from physical locations like vintage shops opposed to online stores like ebay, she explained, "...I think they are different—online is more of a mystery as to what you'll be getting, and in person you do get to look at each slide, so I'd say both are great."There is no preference for any particular source, only more possibilities, and the experience of collecting is a part of it. The act of collecting is a participation in the world around you; there is no guarantee

that any slides will be at an estate sale, for example, so Olivia must immerse herself in order to find what she is searching for.

When we spoke, the eventual fate of the collection was discussed given the context at the core of this collection, meaning the responsibility of a collection passed down to others. If the slides are passed down to anyone, Olivia wants the archival element of the collection to continue. The meaning of the collection will always change when it is passed down; the standpoint each owner will be at from the beginning of their collecting is informed by the context it came with, and her collection is the perfect example of this. This collection began as an accumulation of personal family history and family members' photography, and Olivia has taken it to new heights regarding the scale and range of subjects. There are oftentimes specific themes and a vetting process to adapt the collection to what is currently drawing her in, as Olivia continues to identify different categories such as types of architecture or different positions people pose in.

Walter Benjamin saw his collecting of books as an almost metamorphic process, described in his work "Unpacking My Library," where he breaks down the nature of collecting and the relationship between the collection and the collector through his observations of the process. He writes, "... *the acquisition of an old book is its rebirth.*" Once slides enter Olivia's collection, they become transformed into something new, removed from the original intention behind their creation but nonetheless continuing in their relevance and artistic possibilities, reborn through Olivia's archival motivations and art. The intention behind her collection has a similar effect as the camera described by Benjamin in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction": *"Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway."* Olivia's collection takes an obsolete and, to some, unfamiliar medium and transforms it into something that can be understood and appreciated in a new way in the current culture. It removes the kind of mysticism that surrounds vintage or analog objects, similar to Benjamin's ideas about photography removing the exclusive aura of art. To him, the camera democratized art by distributing works that could previously only be seen in person in a specific location. Photographs meant that anyone could engage with art, via reproduction, from anywhere and whenever they wanted. Olivia's collection itself is proof of this through its position as a method for seeing personal memories and past worlds experienced by the previous owners. The slides connect the past to the present. In Benjamin's words, *"The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture."* For that reason, Olivia's collection of slides is more than just an aggregation of objects but also a collection of memories from hundreds of people.

Who collects thousands of pieces of luggage?

Cianna Lee

Maurice Hall's obsession with luggage started around 2011, after he got divorced and began traveling more. "I think the luggage is a symbol of that joy [of traveling], that freedom, that sense of, you know, this is important that I take [the luggage] seriously." He began to purchase pieces that he loved for their quality and elegance but above all their utility. "If I buy them, it's because I really am excited to use them."

Over the years, Hall has accumulated what amounts to a luggage collection, with hundreds of pieces including hard-case, leather, and nylon suitcases, shoulder bags, briefcases, and portfolios. Most are adorned with his monogram, MLH. The Collective Affinities exhibition includes a small selection: eight pieces from TUMI, a brand Hall especially likes, and bags from brands Balmain, Hugo Boss, Coach, and Carl Friedrik, and an unknown Italian artisan.

A collection is often imagined to be something a person is proud of, something they went out of their way to amass and display. Maurice's luggage collection doesn't follow that model. He never intended to create a collection yet his luggage nonetheless can be aligned with Walter Benjamin's idea of a collection, explored in his essay "Unpacking my Library," in which he writes, *"What else is this collection but disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?"*

Maurice's collection grew slowly, and over time he became known as a luggage aficionado. At first, he would buy one piece at a time—until a trip to China. After buying a suitcase for the journey, he found an additional bag that he adored. "It was the first time that I bought two pieces together. Because initially, I thought the responsible thing to do is to just buy one piece, and then [if] you miss the other piece, too bad. In buying two pieces, it opened up a whole space in my head that said, 'You can actually buy more than one!' And not be ashamed of it!" After this, the collection grew quicker. "At one point in time, I kid you not, I had (when I lived in Pennsylvania) a closet, like a full closet...FILLED with luggage, and I called it my closet of shame." When he moved to Bennington, he ended up giving some of his collection to his family and friends.

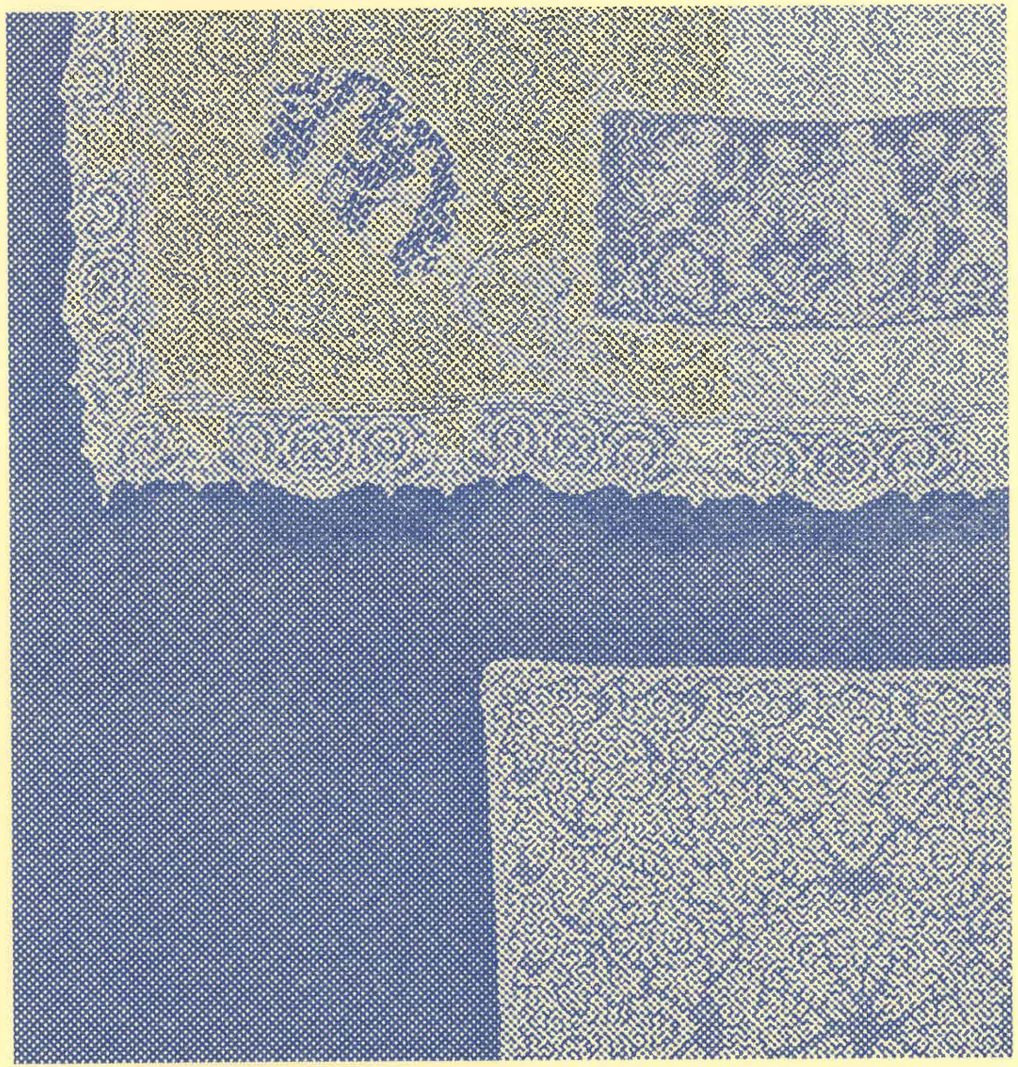
While spending so much money on luggage and having so many of them has, at times, seemed shameful, Maurice found that having his things included in the Collective Affinities exhibition changed his perspective. "Seeing the display made me realize that, yes, while I may be a little bit crazy for having all the luggage...this was a thing that I had chosen to collect. I hadn't realized it was a collection, but it is."

On the other hand, Maurice seems to have always felt some pride in his collection. He enjoys looking put together when he travels, which high-quality luggage helps him do, and he feels proud that he knows a lot about luggage in general. "Part of the reason why it's such a special collection [to me], is because of the beauty. The beauty of the materials, the aesthetics of it, the simplicity but the elegance of it, AND the fact that it connects with something that for me is really important, which is travel, cross-cultural exploration, all that stuff."This affinity for elegance and beauty drew him towards the brand TUMI, where he went often enough that managers started calling him about the latest designs and deals.

Maurice's luggage also helps him connect with people. When shopping, he can get to know sales people and artisans and learn about their cultures while doing so. One time, before a trip, he compromised and bought the cheapest bag on the shelf, and the zippers broke before he boarded the flight. When he landed, he found a TUMI store and was able to get a discount after telling his story. Years later, when he went back to that store, the manager recognized him and gave him another significant discount. He says he received the discount not so much for being a return customer, but more because of the way he expressed his enthusiastic love of the brand. "I still use that bag!"he said.

His love of luggage also helps him bond with his friends and family. When his aunt asked him to get her something she might like, he spent months keeping an eye out for the perfect piece. "People now associate me with leather bags that are nice, so people either tell me, 'Look, Maurice, at what I bought!' or ask me 'I'm gonna buy something, what do you think I should buy?' or for friends I will gift them leather pieces."The collection has really become a part of him and the way people see him.

As of late, Maurice has slowed down his collecting, only buying one or two bags a year. He mentioned that shopping as a form of therapy for him has run its course —though he still loves the bags he has. Summing up what he really wants people to take away from experiencing his collection, he said, "Craftsmanship, beauty, travel, cultural appreciation, relationships, finding uniqueness in a consumer-driven world---all of these things are values that I think this all represents."



Collections Through The Lens of Costuming and Design

Lil Gael Montevecchi

Charles "Chip" Schoonmaker is a former Bennington professor who taught costume design from 2011 to 2024. He continues to have a robust career costuming for Off Broadway and Broadway productions, as well as for television. He has collected small amounts of vintage trim for constructing garments and been gifted doilies, napkins, and other textiles, but everything displayed in the gallery was acquired through purchasing linens at auction in June 2023. He feels like they are a little too fancy for everyday use, and he told me that most of the drawers in his house in Western Massachusetts are filled with tablecloths. He keeps some of them in bins under beds as well. Chip explained that as a costume designer he'd "always been interested in beautiful fabrics" and that he loves to go to fabric stores, despite the fact that many have now transitioned to being online storefronts. He told all this to me over the phone, while sifting through boxes of shoes—looking for the perfect pair for the show he's currently costuming. (He remarked under his breath, "I'm hating all my shoes. They're just not right for this show!")

The handspun linen sheets in *Collective Affinities* were used in Chip's "Work, Work, Work" class. He wanted to discuss the history and farming practices of these materials in pre-industrial North America, and these sheets served as examples for his students. Chip estimates that the lace tablecloth is likely Edwardian, and that the appliqué piece is "Belgian or possibly Asian." Chip's collection is directly connected to his work, and he said that he definitely considers it to be a functional one, despite the fact that he sometimes thinks he has too much. He told me that he probably has about one hundred vintage tablecloths, seventy-five sets of napkins, and innumerable doilies. I spoke with him about his experiences searching for textiles, costuming, and his wider experience with collecting. A small note: My own interest in this topic is the potential feminist lens through which linen and lace-making could be viewed through. It was often thought of as "woman's work" or a pass-time for bored housewives. The importance of this artform is often overlooked for these reasons, and this negates the history that is often encoded in these materials. Embroidery, lace-making, and weaving often told a story and gave women a chance to enter a historical dialogue that they were often otherwise barred from.

I. Chip On Auctions

Q: Could you say a little bit about your experiences with auctions?

A: I think one of the first things I found at an online site was at this auction house called Skinner. They have a location in Boston and one west of Boston. I was shopping for a show, a musical called Nine. I was looking at Ebay and other sites, and something popped up at this Skinner auction, and it was—do you know who

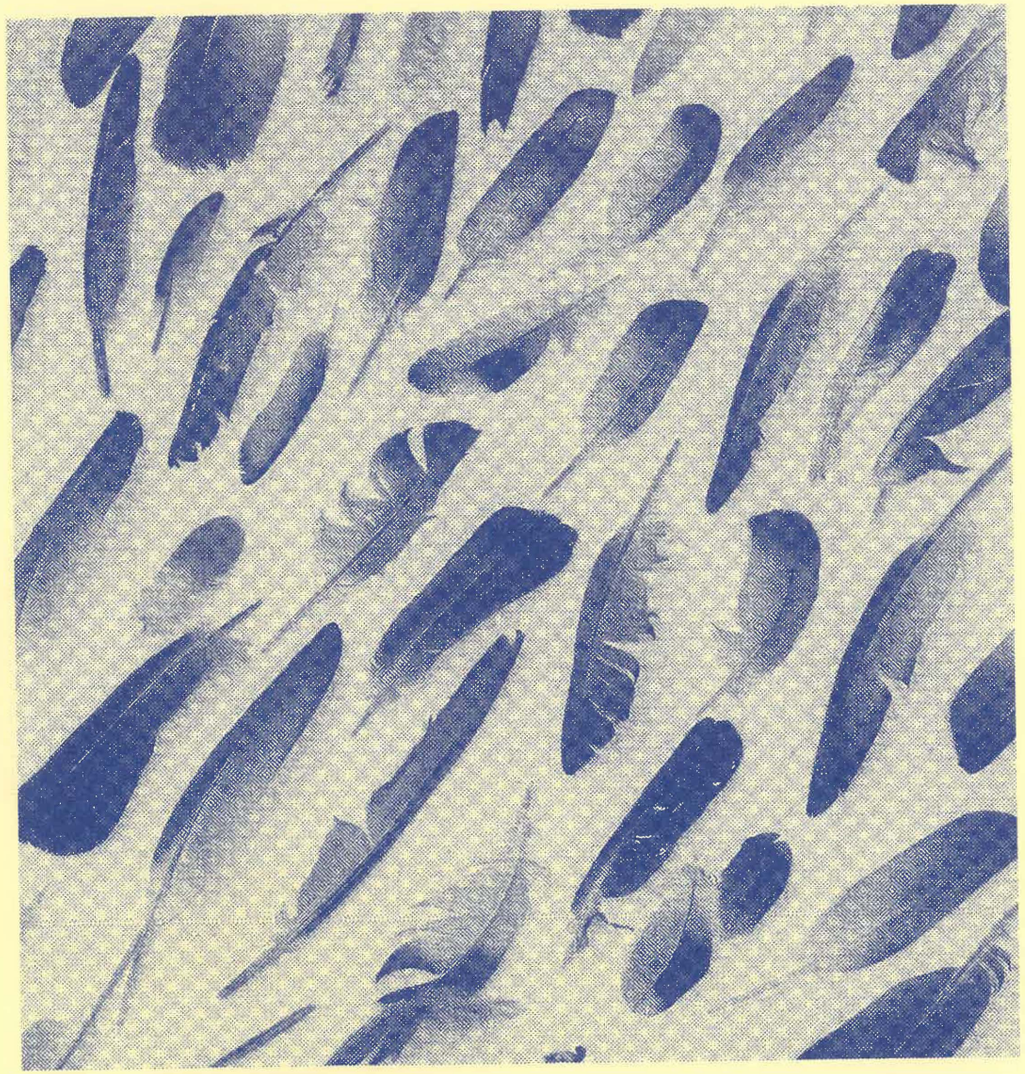
the designer Mary McFadden is? (I didn't...) She was pretty big in the Eighties and Nineties, well anyway there was a Mary McFadden dress, and a couple skirts. I'd never done it before, but you could bid online, you had to register and give them some information. I think for the Mary McFadden dress, I did like a minimum bid and I got it! I used it in that show and so then I started cruising their auctions on a regular basis. Skinner is the site where I ended up winning this huge lot of vintage linens. I had some before but all of the sudden I had a lot of them. All of the things in the gallery are from that one purchase.

II. Fusing My Take On Auctions With Chip's

Chip first went to an auction at Sotheby's in New York while he was designing costumes for Jacob's Pillow; he wanted to bid on a painting of the founders of the organization. He said he often bids online now, instead of going in person, because he doesn't want to get too carried away—which is "very easy to do." This sentiment is evocative of a section of Walter Benjamin's essay "Unpacking my Library," in which he writes about his love for, and complicated relationship with, the act of collecting, specifically of books. In this essay he describes various ways of acquiring collections, one of which is bidding at auction. Benjamin writes, *"A man who wishes to participate at an auction must pay equal attention to the book and to his competitors, in addition to keeping a cool enough head to avoid being carried away in the competition."* Auctions often denote an air of civility and bourgeois culture, it is funny to imagine them being competitive environments in which bidders develop a cutthroat attitude. Strategies must be developed in order to attain the item one is vying for while also remembering to keep calm and prevent oneself from spending too frivolously. Something so seemingly unserious is approached with so much seriousness.

III. In Closing

Auctions highlight another aspect of collecting in that instead of acting as an archaeologist, uncovering a rare or forgotten item, the collector, via the auction, is presented directly with the item. It is up to you if you want to take this opportunity to accept not only the object's material but also historical value. The act of collecting, especially at auction, is also reminiscent of Benjamin's feelings about the redeeming quality of history. The collector has the power to redeem the history of a lost or forgotten item, and to honor it as an artifact of importance. Being a collector is about refusing to let history sweep away everything in the churning of time, and to hold one fragment of an epoch in the palm of your hand. Collecting is to see the value in an item potentially outside of its historical context and to still believe in its significance.



Whisker Feather Focus Waltz

Grace Muller

Olivia Biro has two cats, Calliope and Bastet. She's also in a lot of Facebook groups for cat owners to talk about their cats, which is where she got the idea to look for their whiskers around her apartment. She started finding a few a week and keeping them in a sandwich bag. She learned upon some early research that it's normal for cats to shed a whisker or two a week, which means the rate at which she finds them reflects a healthy shed cycle—and that she's spotting almost every whisker they drop. Olivia had about 60 whiskers total at the time of our interview. The collection is ongoing, in fact she added a batch to the gallery display during the exhibition run.

For Olivia, the value of her whisker collection is twofold: first, they are grown and shed by two of her favorite beings on the planet. Olivia absolutely loves her cats and appreciates having mementos of each of them. Further, she recognizes something new happening with all the whiskers together, as her collection grows:

> They're kind of a physical reminder or manifestation of a point in time. Because the cats grew them, and then shed them, and they grow new ones that replace them, and they'll go through hundreds of cycles of that...having them all in a little pile is like having this time capsule of the literal cells that made up these beings at different points in their lives.

I feel the power of this congregation looking at her collection in the show. I am no witch, but I think I see why witches use whiskers for spells. Olivia also acknowledges that the gathering carries an undercurrent of morbid preparation for loss: part of each whisker's current value comes from the anticipation of an increase in sentimental value when Calliope and Bastet die.

The whiskers' second source of value for Olivia comes from the act of collecting them. There is such magic in keeping your eye out for something—and the whiskers are hard to see. Finding them requires a particular kind of looking. Olivia always has an eye out, especially when she is about to vacuum. She says "the act of being kind of aware...I would say it brings me joy...it's exciting to me to find one...it's like life is constantly a little treasure hunt."

Walter Benjamin writes in "The Collector" section of *Arcades Project*, *"The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space...The collector does just this, and so does the anecdote."* In the range of collecting impulses, Olivia's is a remarkably short-range mode of acquisition. Her subject, the whiskers, already sit in her space, inconspicuously, and the act of seeking them out and gathering them changes her relationship to her own apartment. This act is potentially contagious

—any cat owner who hears about Olivia's collection becomes vulnerable to a shift in the way they see their cats or their homes. There is potential even for non-cat-owners to tune into a whisker-scale view of the contents of their living spaces or take that mode of looking outside:

> I've talked to some people...who...didn't even know cats lost whiskers...[and] don't know how they would recognize them if they did. I feel like it is pretty central to my worldview to notice things like that, and I like that there are people who are maybe deriving some joy out of noticing them, too.

But for other people to notice them, the whiskers have to leave the apartment. Olivia's inclusion in the exhibition allowed her to share the collection through anecdotes about her active everyday life. "I don't think I really talked about it very much honestly until Anne started looking for stuff for the gallery...[and] now I've been telling lots of people about it. I guess that I've been sort of surprised by how many people are interested in it and think it's cool or cute...now I feel like it's a little less strange." The positive, receptive reactions of others have allowed Olivia to see her own impulse more clearly. She's also found a few fellow whisker collectors in the Bennington community.

I thought in the interest of fleshing out a lineage of cat-whisker collecting, I'd take a look at people selling whiskers online. I found whiskers marketed for casting spells, detail-painting miniatures, taxidermy, doll making, and costume. (I learned that both whiskers AND feathers can be used to make fly fishing lures.) Most sellers had a single lot of whiskers listed among other goods like a yardsale—collectors deaccessioning—but I found one Etsy seller in particular, WhiskerWhimsical, who is probably an active collector like Olivia. She sells batches of five or ten whiskers at a time, with an option to specify length (between 1 and 4.5 inches) and color preference (white, black, or white with black tips). They're all from her two cats. She must have a lot of whiskers if she can confidently offer ten of any size and color at any time.

In her mid 20s, Erin Ellen Kelly had a cat named Kitty. They left Brooklyn together to farm for a season in Upstate New York. Erin had just gone through a breakup. "[I wanted to] reorient myself, learn where my food came from...realizing I was so urban-ly located...how am I connected to this place, this planet...how can I feel more balanced." While she lived Upstate, Kitty started hunting mice and leaving them for Erin on the floor of her yurt in accordance with the phases of the moon. "That cat was so smart...[He came] from the alley in Brooklyn...and he started syncing to this moon rhythm...So coming back to the city, it had me thinking about

how nature is living and growing in urban spaces." That's how Erin started picking up pigeon feathers she saw on the street.

Erin doesn't know any of the birds her feathers come from. She's curious about them—"that bird, is that bird still here? But that bird comes from this very located place of New York. You know, did he fly away?"—but she's more interested in what they collectively represent. "This is just a really pointed symbol of where I am right now, of this time in Brooklyn, for me."

Erin is also interested in the pigeon feather as an example of honest, unidealized natural beauty. "[We have this clean, sterile] romantic notion of connecting to nature ...but also nature can be ruthless in its own right." The feathers in her collection are neither brightly colored nor particularly large; they house a range of holes and dirt stains. She describes grappling, in that early collecting period, with the twin impulses of attraction and repulsion she felt sometimes walking down the street, seeing something discarded and asking herself "should I touch that?" and realizing "that's exactly what I should be touching."

This gravitation toward objects that articulated an alternative sense of material beauty was further informed by Erin's part-time job with a florist:

> I would have to go and take out flower arrangements...all of these high-end salons and restaurants having this groomed nature...It had to be alive, it couldn't be dying, so you had to make sure you got there before it died to change out the water, pull the flowers that were drooping or whatever...this constant maintenance of presenting the beauty of this natural thing...that's been wrapped in plastic and flown halfway across the world.

Experiencing an idealized nature from behind the scenes—performing the labor it takes to keep flowers perpetually blooming—accelerated Erin's urgency for articulating her own aesthetic value system. She started collecting the petals, too.

Her reflection on these tensions between dirtiness and natural beauty bent introspective. "I was also at this time...exploring my sexual identity and power...[as someone socialized into femininity], contending with what is beauty and [exploring how to] disrupt this notion of what is beautiful."

Erins feathers belong to a period in her life that has passed. "I still do see the feathers on the ground, and I've also noticed that I'm less inclined to pick them up." But she brought her collection with her to Bennigton to carry that period into her MFA thesis work in dance "I came to Bennington to reflect on my process so [the

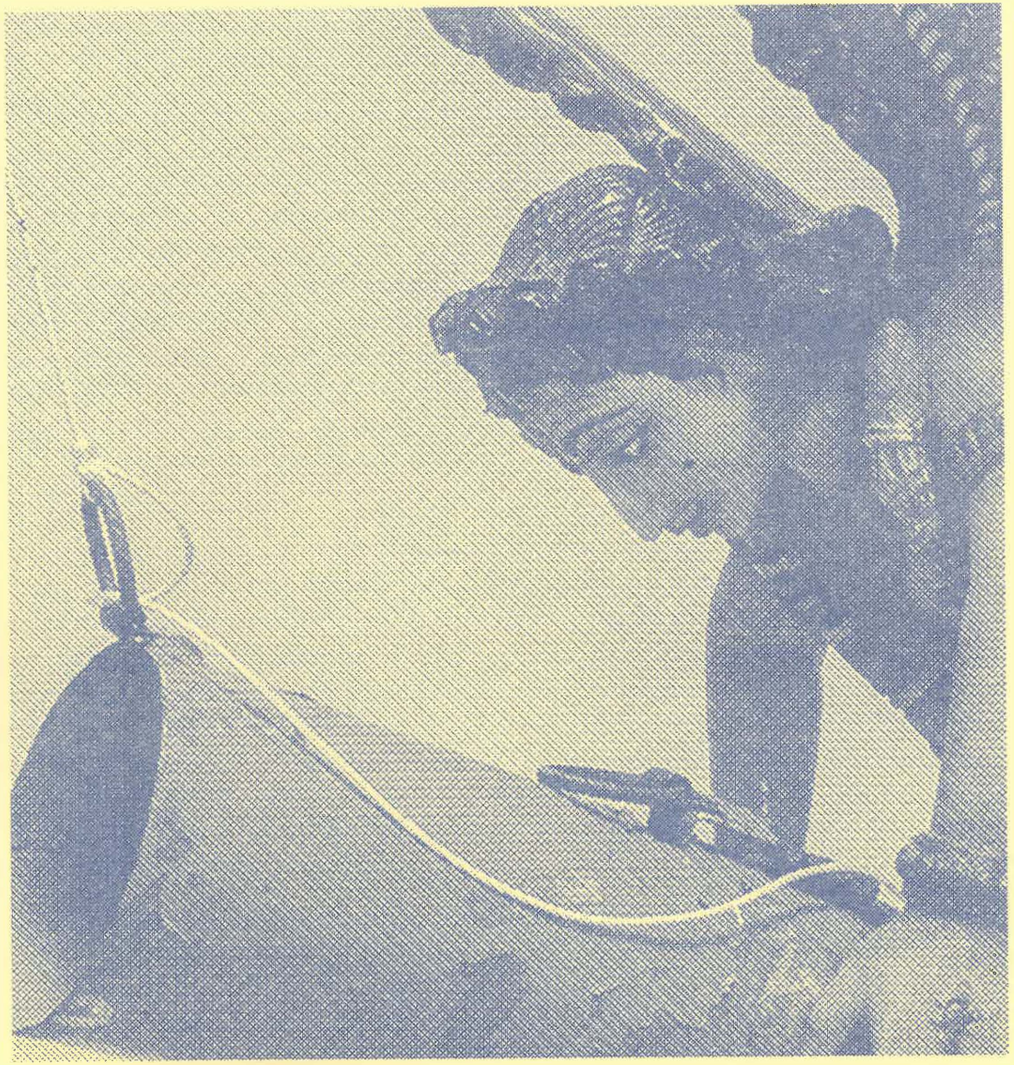
feathers] needed to be there in that self-reflection...[They] speak to me as an artist in a way I don't always have language for, so it's a way of sharing my sensibility."

Hearing from Olivia and Erin about their collections felt a little like being let in on a secret; each conversation imparted a sense that I was in the presence of something rare and important. In order to articulate the value of their collections that I felt so intuitively from hearing them talk, I became interested in the question "how do personal collections change the world?" for the tension inherent in reflecting on the impact of a private, solitary process at a planetary scale. Many collectors perform their collection in solitude, skeptical that it should matter at all to anyone else. This makes sense; the positive reverberations of their collecting may not bear much resemblance to the kinds of accomplishments we celebrate widely. For collections to receive media attention they generally have to be wildly expensive (art collections) or the most of one thing that someone has ever had (Guinness-World-Record collections).

There is great power in considering the very small changes in the world enacted by found object collectors like Olivia and Erin, who pay new attention to something which already surrounds them. To accumulate one thing this way is to operate on a wavelength of noticing and waltzing about your daily life. You waltz because close looking pulls life a little closer to dance; it loosens your physical relationship with your surroundings to allow for a greater range of motion. Fanciful material preoccupation may be in tension with Marxist ideals, but also it is deeply anti-capitalist to develop alternative systems of value and share them. As Hannah Arendt points out in her writing about Benjamin, his conception of collecting acknowledges its socially disruptive potential:

> *Inasmuch as collecting can...redeem the object as a thing since it now is no longer a means to an end but has its intrinsic worth, Benjamin could understand the collector's passion as an attitude akin to that of the revolutionary. (pg.42)*

There must be some great positive consequence of seeing and feeling seen in our quiet, intuitive desires. I felt it with each of my interviewees as we spoke; we were able to bond quickly over this shared way of seeing; by the end of each conversation, we were in step with each other. It strikes me that for people who collect, there is something joyful and rare about getting to talk about it with someone who is deeply curious. To show off a little, to reflect on why you do it, to share the niche expertise and perspective you've gathered from exercising that sight. Could a mutual recognition of our shared power of noticing push close lookers in a small way toward collective action?



A Conversation on "Junk": Collector to Collector

Stella Peacock-Berardini

"Suffice it to quote the answer which Anatole France gave to a philistine who admired his library and then finished with the standard question, 'And you have read all these books, Monsieur France?' 'Not one-tenth of them. I don't suppose you use your Sèvres china every day?'"

– Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking my Library"

Q: "Do you ever play with the objects?"

A: "I think I always love the fact that I could, but I don't actually."

– Conversation With Sue Rees

Sue Rees and I hover over the acrylic case containing her trinkets of movement, many waiting to be unstuck from their static state. Sue Rees, artist and visual arts professor teaching animation at Bennington, started her collection in the mid to late '90s and continues to accumulate objects today. She receives things as gifts or finds them while traveling, drawn to them because they relate to the function of her work in animation but also because they are cool, beautiful, and whimsical—Russian bears playing chess and small tops with faces, which seem to dancing when they spin, are just two of the many examples.

Sue's collection focuses on each object's story of physical transformation via methods including a spin of a finger, the shaking of hands, or, in the case of a suspended, swinging god that throws flowers on an altar, the momentum of gravity. Though these objects are not always used or "played" with, their value is nonetheless rooted in this potential—what they could be, what they have been. In this way, Sue's collection invokes Walter Benjamin's relation to collecting in the innocence of a child, the whimsical and physical nature of collecting in the hands of imagination, the object's stillness captured by potential action that lies under the surface, or under each twist that winds up the gears within, ready for motion.

"Possession and having are allied with the tactile, and stand in a certain opposition to the optical. Collectors are beings with tactile instincts."

– Walter Benjamin, "The Collector" section of The Arcades Project

" .. I made a shirt collar and then animated it with a motor and stretch. And I was thinking, this is all in my head, this is who I am. I like making things move."

– Sue Rees in conversation

While Sue's collection is about action, the potential of this action is not always in

reach for the exhibition viewer. For without touch, a snake, slyly slipping its slithery body through the slit of its constricting box, peeking out just so, stays still. Paper puppets are frozen in a dance around the top of the vaselike cup that holds them. The audience knows these objects can transform but only the collector knows how transformation occurs. Benjamin, in the essay "Unpacking My Library," writes of a collector's relationship to his objects, *"Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them."* Similarly, Sue has cultivated this collection over two decades, and the physical process of every slight transformation—every touch from her, the collector—lives inside the objects and their repetitive motions, making their transformation eternal.

> *"Naturally, his existence is tied to many other things as well .... to a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate."*
>
> – "Unpacking my Library," Walter Benjamin

"My interests are in animating inanimate objects and creating another world where they exist."

– Sue Rees in conversation

The curation of Sue's objects surrounded by other collections in Usdan Gallery connects to this concept of the theatrical, or the stage presence a collection can have, concerning its value, and its relationship to the collector. As we look at her collection in its case—the wind-up automobiles; the Polish bird clicking its ball; the monkey, waiting to climb its red rope—I ask Sue perhaps the hardest question for a collector: "Which is your favorite?" The answer is, of course, "I can't think of just one I love." A few are "beautiful," like the metal god with wings, but none can be a favorite. The collector gathers her objects out of love and, in doing so, often measures them less on their intended value and more on the way a mother loves her "children"—equally, for each represents levels of the collector's identity. For the object, its identity or value is aligned with the collector's motivation in obtaining it. In this case, Sue is motivated by the theatrical relationships of transformational steps, in which an object's original state changes and then changes back, and within those changes the subversion of assumptions. We, as the viewers of the collection, can make assumptions about their trajectory, but Sue understands their trajectory completely, watching and fascinated the whole way through.

Sue's objects come from around the globe—from India, Mexico, Nigeria, Poland, Russia, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States. She does not actively

seek them out but instead happens upon them in small shops and situations across the globe, enticed by seeing a vendor's demonstration or witnessing a religious practice. As Benjamin describes in his reflections on collecting, Sue navigates cities through the eyes of someone receptive to discovering new objects to acquire. Of how she obtained the swinging god, she recalls: "It was in India in 2001, and I saw the religious festival. I asked the people who were sort of pushing the carts and the rest of it, and that's how I got to bring it with me." How a collector reflects on her relationship with her objects is about the journey of the accumulation of the collection and also the fates the objects contain. The fate of these transforming objects in Sue's collection is the cycle it exists in, the variations of actions all moving back to an original state while transitionally revealing the layers of its beauty.

> *"Thus there is in this life of a collector a dialectical tension between the poles of disorder and order."*
>
> – Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library"

Q: "Would you consider yourself a collector?"

A: "I think I'm a collector of junk. I'm not a pack rat but I do often just think wow, that [object] is so cool."

– Sue Rees in conversation

Inside the Magical Circle: Brenda and Joseph Alpar on Inherited Collecting

Anne Pötzsch

Music glides through the air like fingers through sand, the texture of each note rubbing warmly against the others. In the far end of the large, white room filled with treasures and trinkets of any kind, a brown record player stands on an ornate coffee table. The needle scratches softly over the black vinyl. On the wall behind it, a mosaic grid of 100 record album covers stretches from floor to ceiling. Most designs feature smiling women wearing belly-dancing costumes or men in dark suits drumming on doumbeks or plucking on ouds.

Brenda Alpar—bellydancer, teacher and record collector—points at one of the covers. "This is Serena," she says, "the first in the country to teach belly-dancing in New York. She created her own school, and she was my teacher, too." This was in the 1960s, Brenda explains, when one could make a living as a Middle Eastern musician in the US. For Serena Wilson, belly dancing was more than just a passion. She had to support her family, her little son.

Brenda moves on to another album—Bellydance with Özel Türkbaş: How to Make Your Husband a Sultan— "And this is Özel, she left New York to perform in Vegas. Later she opened a restaurant, wrote books, invested in real estate in Manhattan. I bought some of her belly-dancing costumes."

"Look at the one up there!" Her son—Joseph Alpar, music faculty at Bennington—gestures at an album of Eddie "the Sheik" Kochach and Hakki Obadia. "They dedicated it to Alexandra." That's Brenda's stage name.

For nearly every album on the wall of Usdan Gallery, the Alpars have a story to tell.

Brenda started collecting belly-dancing records in the '60s, when she opened her New York studio and began teaching. She played the vinyls for her classes. Joseph grew up in this vivid world of song and dance. Brenda laughs, "he was listening to this as an infant 24/7." In college, Joe started buying records himself—today he and his mother combined have nearly 200 albums—and he continues to collect for his research as an ethnomusicologist. Whether he buys records on his travels to Turkey or locally, in Vermont, as soon as he enters the World Music section, he is sure to find new treasures, even buying albums he already owns. For him, these are more than just material goods.

"They are my childhood memories," Joseph explains, "my heritage and the foundation of my own musical practice."

"The most distinguished trait of a collection will always be its transmissibility," Walter Benjamin, cultural critic and avid collector, states in his essay "Unpacking my Library." This is certainly true for Brenda and Joseph. Their records are part of a

family history, a legacy they preserve and keep teaching. Their collection, while private, is constantly being used. In spring 2025, Joseph will teach a Middle Eastern ensemble course focusing on the music displayed on the Usdan Gallery wall.

Although he mostly creates Spotify playlists for teaching, the physical records play an important role in Joseph's research on the Middle Eastern music scene of the 1960s and '70s. "Who's on the cover? Which musicians, which dancers? It's small record companies in New York that produced this music," he explains. "The records are valuable for what they reveal. It's a bit like detective work, because we only have the written word left. Most of the people who made this music are gone now, so what I'm doing is also archival work."

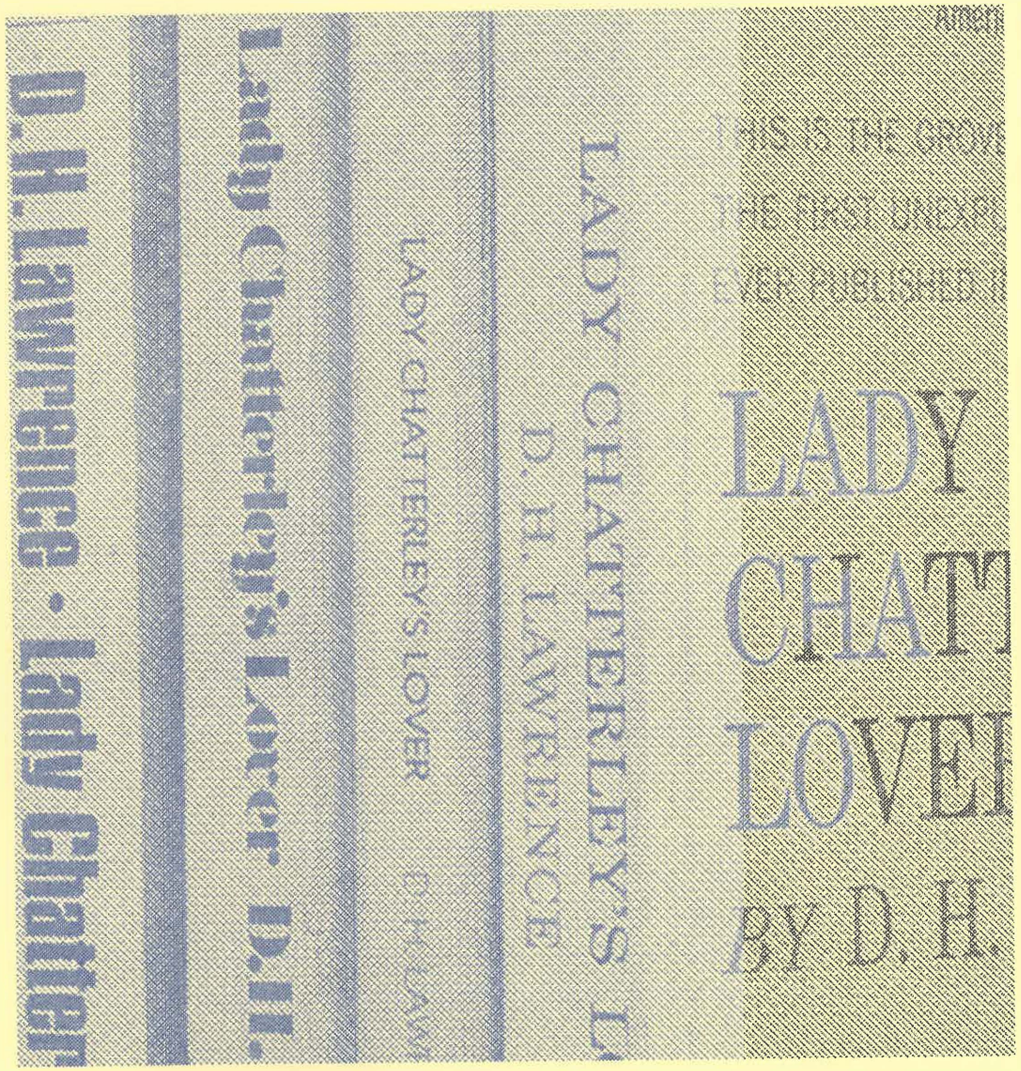
Both Brenda and Joseph are passionate about preserving this corner of the history of music. Most of these recordings of Middle Eastern music were produced in France, Boston or, of course, New York. This was the music of the first generation of immigrants coming to the US after World War II, made in conversation with records from Turkey, Egypt and Greece, while inspired by rock music and jazz. Armenians, Turks, Arabs and Greeks formed music groups together, presenting the audience with bits and pieces from each culture in the clubs and bars of New York, performing for other Middle Easterners as well as Americans. "It's sad that this diversity is gone—or mostly gone now," Brenda sighs. "But I was part of this era, and Joe was born into it, he inherited it while also establishing himself as a new musician."

The Alpars' need to collect has roots in their childhood. Brenda remembers that her parents barely bought anything not useful. Walter Benjamin notices *"a childlike element"* in the act of collecting, a wish to *"renew the old world."* For Brenda, starting a collection was a way to feed her inner child. She laughs, "I am a collector, and I passed on the disease to Joe. I always used to say, Joe's collections have collections." These range from sheet music and folk instruments to playing cards and juggling equipment.

"It's a way to appreciate the authentic beauty of things, this need to possess, to add something to my own world," Joseph explains.

In the section on "The Collector" in his unfinished *Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes: *"It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired), it turns to stone."* He depicts the collector as a nostalgic, whimsical creature, striving to grasp memory through the objects he obtains. Those objects are more to him than just property—the way he views the world through them, connecting

the collection's history with his own, distinguishes him from the *"profane owner."* Collecting, for Benjamin, is a form of *"practical memory,"* a way to bring the past into the present. Brenda and Joseph guard their bellydancing records with a similar vigilance. They are the keepers, the caretakers and archivists of an era long past, an era that still lives on within them and the music they bring to their students.



"O bliss of the collector, bliss of the man of leisure!"

Lily Sanders

Farhad Mirza, who teaches architecture and design, joined the visual arts faculty in 2022; he also is a Bennington alum, class of 2012. His collection—six editions of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and three earlier versions of the novel published in the 1970s—is displayed in the exhibition in a small, clear box hung on the wall near the Usdan Gallery entrance. The covers of the books are pointedly obstructed, for the most part, with the spines facing outward. Farhad consumes the novel in a way that is likely different from other readers, fascinated not by its scandalous narrative but with its presentations of class, industry, and architecture.

D.H. Lawrence's novel, once infamous for its sexually explicit nature and language, is about an upper-class woman who has an affair with a working-class man. It, expectedly, was challenged from the moment it was first published in Italy in 1928. At first, Lawrence could not find a publisher for the novel and instead opted to publish privately, distributing only 2,000 copies. From there, the text was largely pirated. It was not until 1960 that the unexpurgated version of the novel was published, by Penguin Books in the UK. An obscenity trial, and major moral panic, ensued. Historical context is especially important here; Penguin Books won the trial in 1960. Penguin's win marked the very beginning of a decade full of social changes—Beatlemania, civil rights, hippies and the sexual revolution. In the 1970s, once the social movements that began in the 1960s were fully fledged, several earlier iterations of the novel were published, including *John Thomas and Lady Jane*, as well as *The First Lady Chatterley*, which are both included in Farhad's collection.

Farhad first encountered *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in adolescence, in the form of his uncle's worn, pistachio-colored Penguin Classics edition. He didn't revisit the novel until after he'd discovered his passion for architecture and was attending grad school. In a history class on the picturesque, Mirza studied the "designed messiness" of the English garden and was reminded of the novel. In response, he wrote an essay not only about the picturesque in Lady Chatterley but also the novel's use of architecture and the characters' interaction with the landscape. After that, Farhad began collecting different editions, picking them up in thrift or antique stores and receiving them as gifts from "friends who know about [his] problem." He stressed, however, that none of the editions were sought out deliberately or bought online.

Walter Benjamin—who wrote extensively on the collecting practice—was also particular about the way he added to his collection. In "Unpacking My Library," he writes, *"The acquisition of books is by no means a matter of money or expert knowledge alone. Not even both factors together suffice for the establishment of a real library, which is always somewhat impenetrable and at the same time uniquely itself."* However, he adds, *"Anyone who buys from catalogs must have flair in addition to the*

qualities I have mentioned." Buying online, being the rough equivalent of Benjamin purchasing a book from a catalog, deprives the collector of the depth and breadth of feeling that collecting in person allows. A collection is best accrued organically, over time.

Benjamin, too, was interested in the way that people interacted with the landscapes of their surroundings. In his essay "Crooked Street," he writes of a place he frequented in childhood and of the figure of the flaneur. A "flaneur" is a person who strolls around urban settings, seemingly aimlessly really observing the city and its architecture, people, and society at large—with great attention to detail. Benjamin describes Krumme Strausse (German for Crooked Street), and his fascination for its many shops. He writes, *"I would scout around in front of the store windows and gather strength by gazing on the abundance of decrepit things in their keeping."*

Farhad, by Benjamin's definition, could be considered a flaneur of the novel he collects, wandering and admiring the architecture and society of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* from an architect's standpoint, rather than from the more typical literary reader's point of view. His fascination is not necessarily with the plot or its characters, but more so with his own personal connection to the novel and how it commemorates an interest that punctuated formative times of his life—childhood, young adulthood, and now, being included in the exhibition. And what Farhad describes as "designed messiness"when referring to the English garden is depicted by Benjamin as the innumerable intricacies and opportunities of the city and the *"abundance of decrepit things"* that bring him such joy.

Farhad's books are representative of how collections are often tied to the collector's memories. As Benjamin writes, in "Unpacking my Library," *"Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories."* The urgency of Farhad's collection is tied to the memories that fuel it —his experiences in graduate school, his numerous encounters with the novel in childhood and adolescence, and the idiosyncratic fascination around design that the novel stirred up.

Vanessa Lyon's Collection of Lesbian Pulp Fiction

Alexander Wiese

Among the many collections featured in *Collective Affinites,* the covers of Vanessa Lyon's lesbian pulp fiction paperbacks from the 1950s and '60s form a striking display. Lyon joined the Bennington faculty in 2016 as a professor of visual arts teaching art history and has directed the Visual Arts Lecture Series since 2017. She's published numerous academic articles in visual studies as well as writing the art historical book *Figuring Faith and Female Power in the Art of Rubens* in 2020. She started writing BIPOC lesbian romance novels in 2020. Vanessa joined me on a Friday afternoon in Usdan Gallery for a conversation about the personal and cultural significance of her collection.

As stated in the exhibition wall text, Vanessa "owned a few pulp-fiction paperbacks before becoming a novelist and afterward began growing her collection with titles found at auction." She specifically mentioned Swann Auction Galleries in New York City to me, which specializes in works on paper:

> They started doing LGBTQ+ auctions a few years ago and they tended to be pretty much all male-oriented erotica, etcetera. But one thing sort of pointed toward potential lesbian collectors has been these pulp collections, and they're small groups of books often, but what I like about that is it's like someone else's collection to collect... At my house I have a bookcase where I'm able to have them all facing out, so this is not quite all of them. So, it's fun to see them this way, but I'm used to seeing all these covers because I just love looking at all of them in relation to each other.

Indeed, the cover imagery of the books, opposed to their written content, is what Vanessa finds most compelling.

> I just think that the covers are hysterical. Visually, some of them are actually good art in a graphic art kind of way, but most of them are just trashy and provocative and exploitative sometimes, and none of that is great on the face of it, but it's one of those things for me where it's a fine line. A lot of them are not designed by women, they're not designed by lesbians, they're not designed by people who've even read the books. As an author, you don't get to design your own cover. But the point is, they don't relate to the stories, in many cases. But that's how you sell books. What's exciting to me is that they're supposed to be, in some cases, attractive to straight men. But so what? They're still attractive to people who are lesbians or people who are attracted to women because they use a lot of the standard fare. For me, I don't care if a cover was designed for a

straight man. If I find it sexy, I just think it's fun that I find it sexy.

Vanessa's intentions in collecting are reminiscent of Benjamin's thoughts in his essay "Unpacking my Library," in which he writes that the collector has *"a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate."* Vanessa has taken the novels out of their original "function" not only through her interest in their visuals but through their preservation, as pulp fiction's inexpensive paper allowed them to be mass produced and sold at a low price. Vanessa elaborates:

> One of the authors, Anne Bannon, said that they're so cheap that you could take them on the bus with you and leave it there and you'd be okay with that. It speaks to their disposability and also the fact that if you were caught with one you could do an "Oh that's not my book" kind of thing. But also if you were one of these 50s butches you could have it in your back pocket. Since they're so small, they fit on your body.

Beyond their physical elements, Vanessa's collection is also representative of larger issues regarding publishing and representation:

> The one thing about them that's really obvious here is what a lack of diversity they have in terms of the storylines and the people represented, and it's frustrating in that way to have this collection that is like an all-white collection, but also indicative of how it's still hard to get published as an author of color. Certainly, as a queer woman of color, it's still really hard to get published, and it was virtually impossible in this period.

Vanessa's collection holds weight in the past, present, and future of BIPOC representation in sapphic literature and media overall.

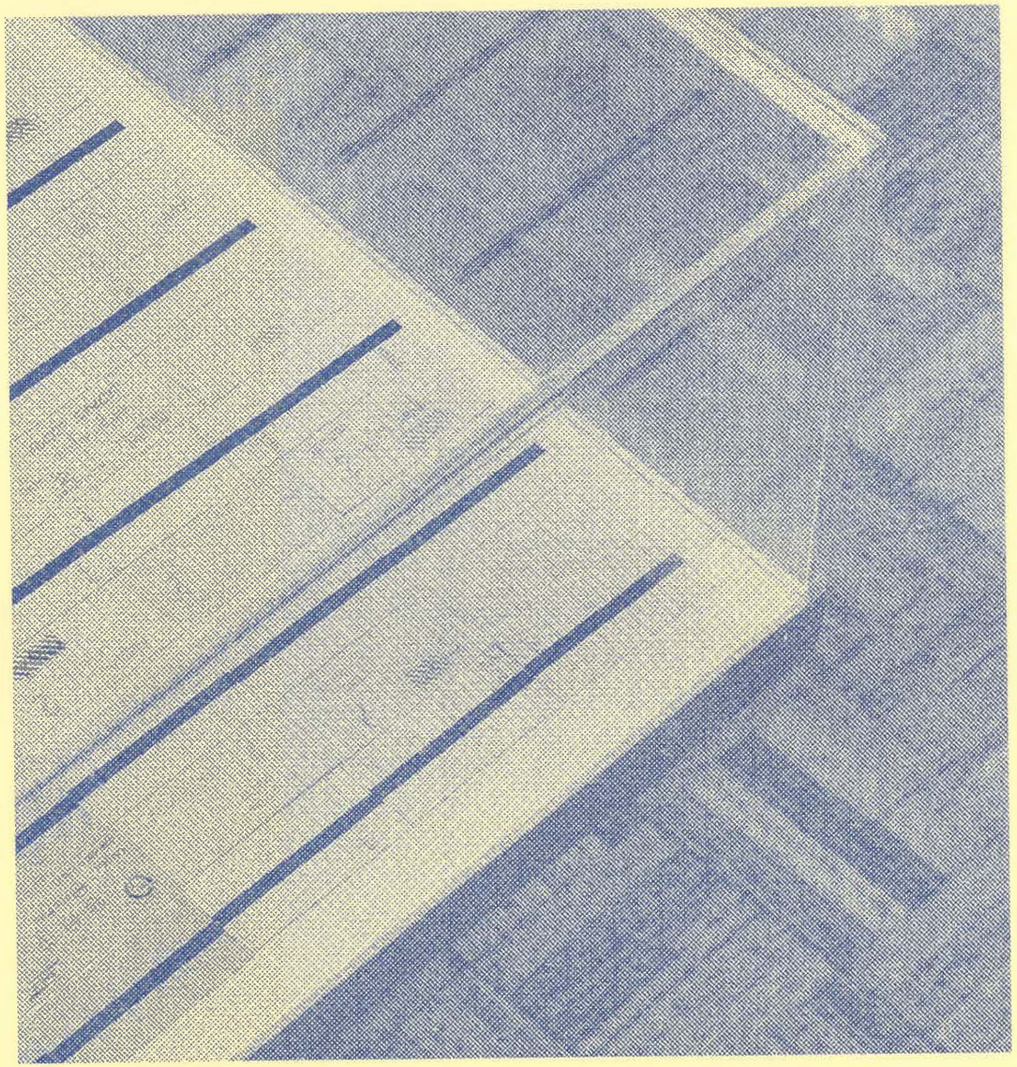
In "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin writes,

> *Writers are really people who write books not because they are poor, but because they are dissatisfied with the books which they would buy but do not like. You, ladies and gentlemen, may regard this as a whimsical definition of a writer. But everything said from the angle of a real collector is whimsical. Of the customary modes of acquisition, the one most appropriate to a collector would be the borrowing of a book with its attendant non-returning.*

Vanessa is certainly writing her own books. In 2020, she published her debut lesbian

romance novel, *Meet Me in Madrid*, under the pseudonym Verity Lowell. Then, in 2022, she published the audiobook *The Groves*. In August 2023, she published her first paperback novel under her real name, Lush Lives, through Roxane Gay Books. On Vanessa's website, she states, "As a lesbian of color who turned into an academic, writing fiction, and especially contemporary fiction where queer/BIPOC live happily ever after, is a way to create a world that doesn't (always) exist."

Through her collecting and writing, Vanessa is preserving the past and cultivating the future.



Ésitériophile

Finn Wilkinson

The act of collecting ephemera lies somewhere on the spectrum between active and passive. It is an accumulation, imbuing quotidien and fleeting objects with the honor of being kept. The collector does not seek out new objects; there is no "hunting." But objects of ephemera are not passively happened upon. Rather they are sought out for their manufactured purpose, consumed, and only then collected. And thus a disposable thing becomes something displayed.

Mary Lum's collection of Metro tickets spans her travels in Paris over the past forty years. These paper tickets with a magnetic strip along the back were introduced in 1973 as a replacement for tickets punched manually by staff. Each of the four colors represents a different period of time: Mary's collection begins in 1983 with the yellow tickets, which were replaced by the green tickets in 1992, which included a new RATP logo. These circulate until 2003, when the "violine" tickets– the dark pinkish-purple—were introduced. After 2007, the tickets were white. The Collective Affinities show displays about 80 percent of Mary's 1,240 tickets while maintaining the proportion of each color in her collection. In this way, the installation is a visual representation of the frequencies of Mary's Metro travels during each time period. Her collection of the tickets was not a conscious decision — "rather,"she writes in an email, "I found myself holding onto the tickets."This was partly due to the nature of the Paris Metro: there was always a chance that a Metro controller could ask for your ticket while on your journey, and while on the regional trains, the tickets are needed to exit the turnstile at the destination. Despite a reluctance to call herself a collector, Mary has a penchant for collecting: trading cards, job titles from obituary cards, names found on the bottom of paper bags, dates on lottery tickets, and expiration dates on food packages are among the things she's saved. Whenever she lived in Paris, she separated her tickets into two stacks: used and unused. This was the beginning of the collection.

The Paris Metro has already begun to phase out paper tickets in favor of the reusable plastic Navigo Easy card. Singular tickets can still be purchased—at a higher price than the fare of the smartcard—but carnets, a set of ten paper tickets, are no longer sold, and by 2025, the paper ticket will be gone entirely. Mary's collection ended when she purchased the new smartcard. What is displayed in the gallery is an encapsulated image of two overlapping time frames: that of Mary's travels in Paris, and the lifespan of the paper tickets. Mary does not know if or how the value of the discontinued tickets will change in the eyes of ésitériophiles, or those who collect transport tickets. For her the value of her collection will remain the same. The tickets do not hold significant monetary value, nor is her ownership of them where their value comes from. This is a collection of personal value. Mary writes, "They remind me of being in Paris. I like the way they look and feel...I do love the

color of the turquoise tickets." While this particular collection does not have a role in her work, her attitudes toward the material and ephemeral object place value in this collection. One aspect of Mary's work is collage: she collects paper while in cities to collage together and later expands her collages into paintings. She calls this paper "just like paint and glue. It's there as raw material. I couldn't make my work without first collecting."

Perhaps this is why Mary resists calling herself a collector, despite her numerous collections. When the act of collecting becomes the beginning of an artwork, when collection becomes supply, what title do we assign to the artist-as-collector? Is collector a temporary role that the artist might fill? The collection of ephemera is the collection of objects that have fulfilled their manufactured use; many of Mary's collections fit this description: tabs from takeout coffee cups, plastic milk rings, used drip coffee filters with the grounds brushed out of them. In his 1931 essay "Unpacking My Library," Walter Benjamin writes that *"the most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed."* But many of Mary's collections do not stay frozen in their collected state. They become their material component, their color, their shape. Though she usually stores the cards in a plastic container in her library desk drawer, Mary previously used some of the green cards to make installation artwork in an exhibition. And she writes that she may find inspiration for a painting in their display at Usdan Gallery. The art making feels inescapable.

Mary avoids sentimentality in the personal value she finds in the collection. This is not a diaristic collection. Each ticket is not a glimpse towards a specific journey on the Metro; groups of them do not recount specific trips. As a whole, the collection instead holds a type of physical memory, Mary writes, "of being in Metro stations, buying tickets from a machine vs. buying tickets from a station attendant, remembering that you have to take the ticket after it has passed through the turnstile machine, otherwise you can't move the turnstile to get in, etc." Each individual ticket is a fragment of this larger sentiment. As a group, they become the collection: "not a document of [my] travels in Paris", Mary writes. "Maybe more like evidence."

On Mortuary Cards: Interview with Chris Rose

Bailey Yarbrough

Music Fellow Chris Rose began teaching at Bennington College in 2019. Hailing from Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, Rose has played trumpet in international orchestras and across the US, performed on ocean liners, and taught students in grade school and beyond. Rose's involvement in *Collective Affinities* is not through his own items but rather his grandmother Kathryn Stefanski Rose's collection of mortuary cards accumulated over her lifetime. With 72 cards in all, from the 1930s to 2017, Rose acts as caretaker to his grandmother's cherished cards and also her memory, emphasizing the importance of maintaining the thread that connects our present to the shared past of our loved ones.

Though Chris and the *Collective Affinities* exhibition audience can't ever fully understand the scope of this intimate collection to its original owner, we can use it as a tether to grasp the significance our personal histories have on our present selves. Walter Benjamin quotes Hegel in "Unpacking My Library," *"... only when it's dark does the owl of Minerva begin its flight. Only in its extinction is the collector comprehended."* Kathryn Stefanski Rose's memories are kept aflame through her grandson's caretaking of her collection, which through being exhibited is placed in the hands of viewers. The viewers in turn extend these cards outside their physical confines, be that the envelope Kathryn kept them in or the clear vestibule that holds them in Usdan Gallery, into a collective memory..

Interview Transcript

Q: Before they came into your possession, did you know about the cards?

Chris Rose: I basically rescued them from the trash pile. My grandmother was my father's mother. She had six kids, her oldest died in 1975 and his card is included in the collection. Along with the mortuary cards there's a handwritten prayer book, and she kept both of those things in a standard business envelope next to her all the time. Nobody felt like it was theirs to touch, so I knew that it was there but I never thought to flip through them. Going through this box of junk, one of my dad's sisters said, "I'm gonna pitch all this, but go through it and see if you want anything." There were a few photos and things, but nobody even noticed the envelope. I was just so struck that this was a quite well-maintained collection. In addition to her son, there's her brother, her parents, some of her aunts and uncles [represented by the cards]. Some of these people were born before 1900. She wasn't just saving them, they're with her. She probably went to hundreds of funerals in her life.

Q: So this isn't all of them?

CR: These are just the important people. Which is an interesting way to think about it, who made the cut? Other funerals she went to, for better or worse, she didn't

save those cards. Some of her best friends are in there, since she made it to 93 she was kind of one of the "last ones." How to wrestle with that for her went hand in hand with her relationship to Catholicism. It's clear in her prayer book she prayed really earnestly about the issues that she thought were important. It didn't quite have a practical, A + B = C thinking to it, it was just how she was coping with the transition into a different stage of life.

Q: Did she go to the same church her whole life?

CR: Yes. She probably, except for going to Disney World one time, never made it more than a couple of hours from Wilkes-Barre.

Q: What does taking care of this collection look like when it's not being displayed?

CR: It goes right back in the envelope. It's still striking in some way; it's of its time. God forbid you or I lost somebody we cared about, I don't know if it would occur to us to leave the funeral home with a card and then keep it for your whole life.

Q: Are these cards still a part of Catholic funerals?

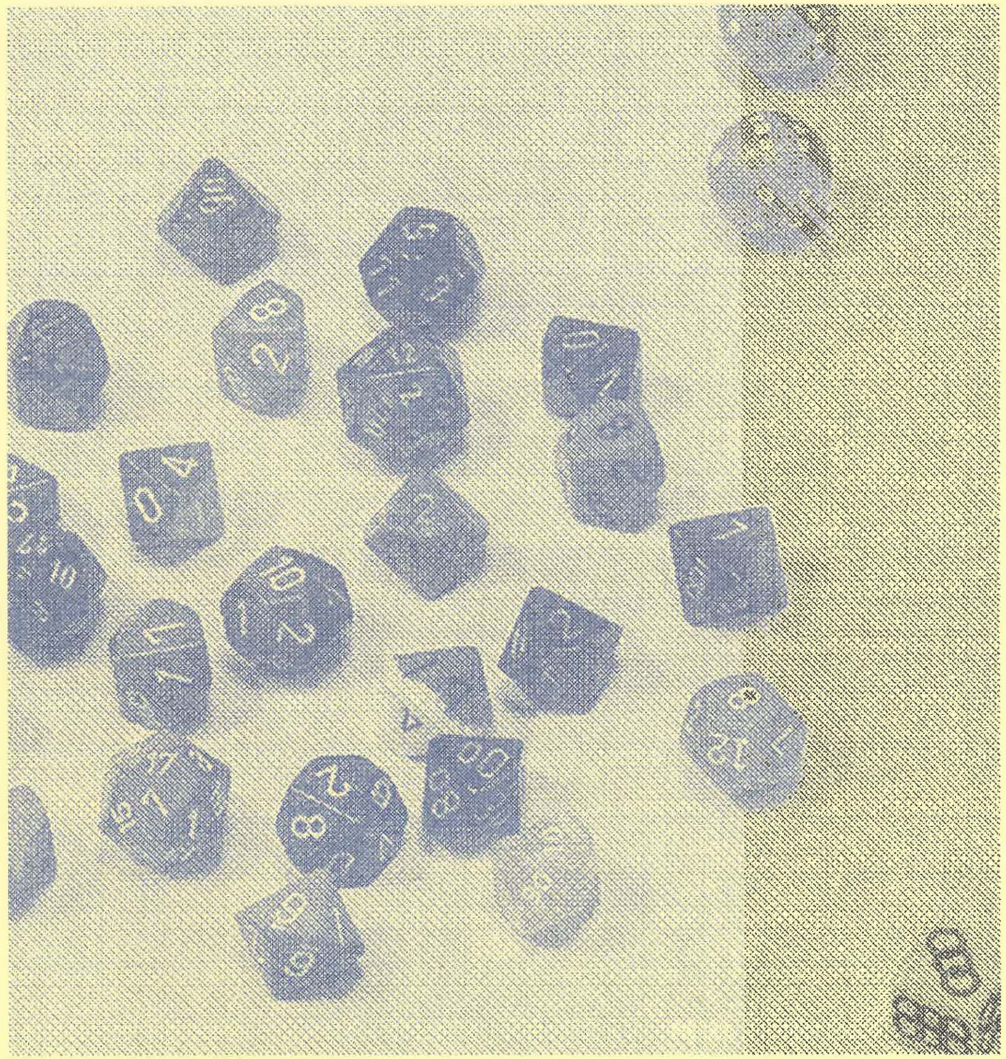
CR: Definitely, it's a service that funeral homes provide. Usually they have a prayer on the back, the date, the birth and death dates of the person, and their name. The imagery is one of the most interesting things, it remains the same across decades. Only the printing technology changes. It gives you the feeling that her world and our world aren't really that different. It's still a world with wars, and people hating other people, and people loving other people, those two forces clashing. I was really heartened to see as much as things can feel different because of technology, it's the same daily life that we're living. Who were your grandparents' parents? You'll never meet them, there's not really any reason to talk about them, but if nobody asks you have to bring it up. The cards strike me in that way too: "I was too young, I didn't think to ask."

Q: Are there any cards you're especially fond of?

CR: The ones that are people that I knew. My grandfather predeceased her by 11 or 12 years; they were married for 47 years before he passed away. She had him right there in the stack with her parents and her sister and her deceased son. He's part of that, and that says something to me about the relationship they built. I have my own copy of his card, but I haven't intentionally kept my own collection. I was asked if I would ever add to hers, but the answer is no because I don't really think of it as my collection. I'll hang onto it for as long as it makes sense.

Q: Has your relationship with your grandma changed since taking care of her collection?

CR: I don't know how to ask her, even if she were alive, "How much do you really miss these people? Does that go away? Are these people really with you, or do you cling to the cards because the people have been gone for so long their memory is slipping away?" There's nobody else alive on the earth that you can ask "Remember so-and-so?" because they're all gone and you're the only one. It's just wild. It makes me wonder if the collection played a role in preserving a sort of self-identity, because I don't think any of us can quite relate to that feeling of "I knew all these people, and now they're gone and now it's just me."



I Feel Lucky

Q&A with Exhibition Curator Anne Thompson

Q: When did you start collecting dice?

AT: In 2006, we moved from New York City to Columbia, Missouri, and I started going to estate sales. And there usually would be at least a few dice for sale. Sometimes different dice, from old games or whatever, would be sold as a batch. I found the dice interesting as objects, disconnected from their purpose. So I started buying them.

Q: At what point did you consider this a collection?

AT: After I had about a dozen pairs, I started looking deliberately in our town and when I traveled. And then my husband got into finding unusual dice for me, like 3D-printed ones by mathematicians or nineteenth-century "cheater" dice made from animal bone.

Q: What does this collection look like when it's not on display?

AT: It's mostly in a glass bowl that belonged to my grandmother. When people come over, the bowl is an invitation to touch the dice and look at them. But now I have too many, so some are in envelopes or bags. I need a bigger bowl.

Q: What's your favorite dice game?

AT: Yahtzee.

Q: Which is the most recent addition to the collection?

AT: The show was already installed when one of the Usdan Gallery desk attendants, Lorena Fernandez Camba, gave me a pair of green dice she got from the gumball prize machine in Crossett Library. I added them to the display.

Q: Why do you collect dice?

AT: They're so beautiful and a little bit magical, with their geometry and information—numbers, words, alphabets, colored shapes, symbols, images of nature, animals or human body parts, really anything required for game play or instructions. Dice represent chance, risk, luck, and next steps. What will happen? What should we do? What signs and messages shape our decisions? These ideas are fascinating to me.

Q: Do you ever use any of the dice?

AT: Not from the collection. A while back I used dice for a painting project; numbers were associated with colors and dice throws determined formal moves. But the dice collection is its own thing.

Q: Does your connection to dice or dice games have personal significance?

AT: We played lots of games in my family when I was growing up—cards, board games, ping pong, pool and also sports. It was a way have fun but sometimes it could be intense. It's occurred to me that collecting all these dice for their own sake, just because they're beautiful and cool, might be doing something to defuse or reposition that competitive energy.

Q: Which is your favorite pair?

AT: All the transparent dice. And this cream-colored pair, with bull's-eye dots, from someplace called the West Side Club.

Q: Will anyone inherit your collection?

AT: My daughter.

Q: Do you think about previous owners of the dice?

AT: Not about owners but maybe about previous use. I have a lot of casino dice, from Vegas and places along the Missouri River. And some have holes drilled in them, which is how a casino marks used dice to sell as souvenirs. They void them so the used dice can't go back on the floor. So you know someone at some point gambled with or handled the dice, which is interesting. The previous use is necessary for the dice to leave the casino and become collectable.

Q: What determined how the dice are displayed?

AT: I scattered them to look "thrown" and also clustered some in categories, like green dice are together, alphabet dice are together, et cetera. And then (sculpture faculty and deputy gallery director) John Umphlett, who I collaborate with on exhibition design, thought people should have an intimate experience of the dice without actually touching them. So he figured out this elegant solution of a low, hovering, acrylic cover, so viewers can see the dice up close.

Q: Why choose to include yourself in an exhibition you curated?

AT: This project hews close to a lot of my personal interests and I was excited to participate in that context. It felt like a natural thing to do—a little like the gesture of an artist curating an exhibition of their peers and including their own work. Plus, it's a show about the Bennington community, of which I'm a part.

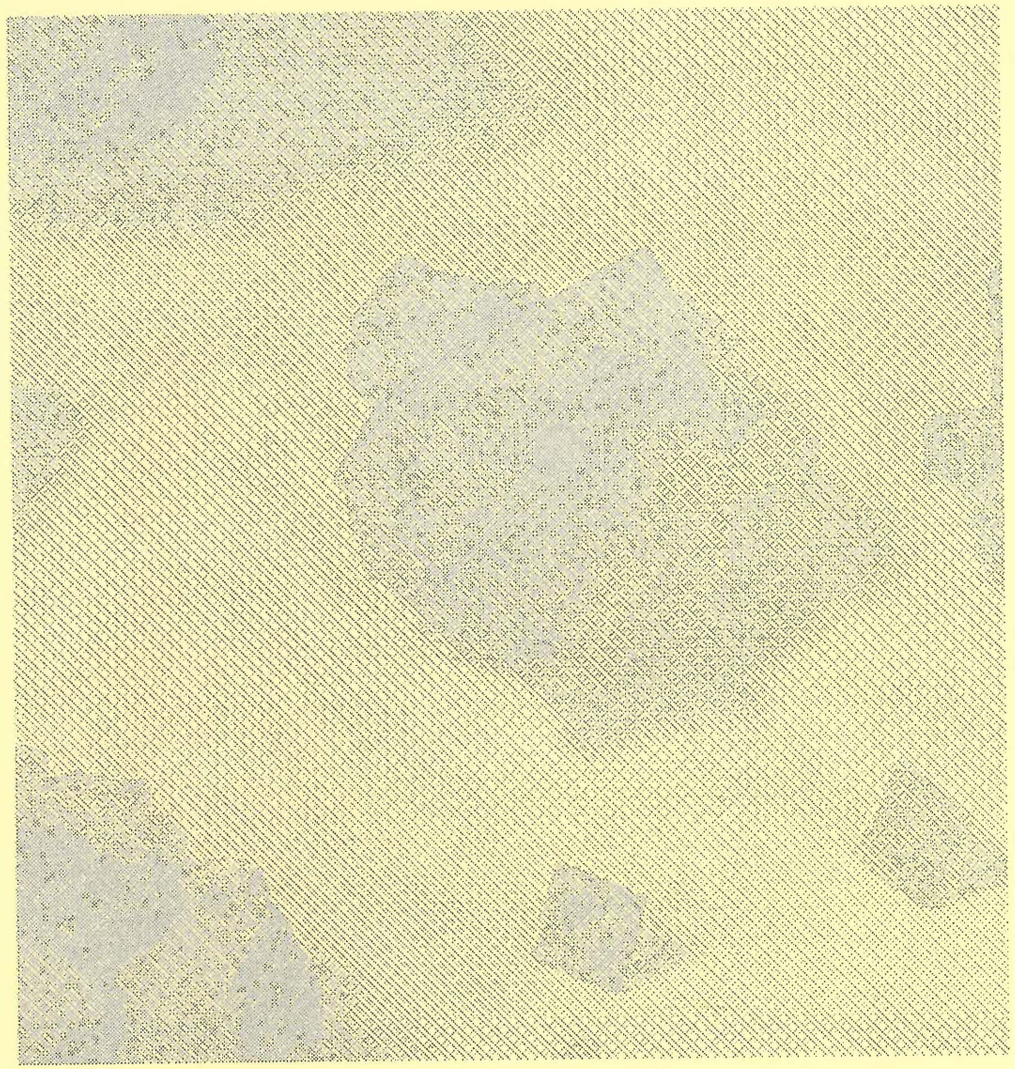
Q: What quote from Walter Benjamin do you relate to as a collector?

AT: The one from "Unpacking My Library" about collecting and travel. "I have made my most memorable purchases on trips, as a transient. Property and possession belong to the tactical sphere. Collectors are people with a tactical instinct; their

experience teaches them that when they capture a strange city, the smallest antique shop can be a fortress, the most remote stationery store a key position. How many cities have revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in the pursuit of books!"

Q: Do you ever give the dice away?

AT: No. But I like idea of making dice as an artist's multiple or a piece of exhibition ephemera. So giving away dice could be on the horizon.



Thank you for your generous donation: Collectors and Institutions

In 2021, the estate of Karen Leslie Burke '84, bequeathed her collection of minerals to Bennington's science and mathematics discipline area. Burke (1945-2018) studied literature and French at the College and spent most of her adult life in France. Though it is unclear why these minerals were part of her estate, they now serve a pedagogical function at her alma mater. Easily accessible in Dickenson, stored in white plastic drawer-like containers, they are part of a large assortment of rocks used by geologist Tim Schroeder in his teaching.

Burke's gift is an example of how people frequently turn to colleges, universities, museums and other institutions as sites for donating collections. Whether a donation is accepted depends on its value to the institution. Burke's minerals were gladly received as beautiful examples of fluorite, quartz, and copper that could be useful to students. Within the Collective Affinities exhibition, they represent the common practice of institutions assuming custodial roles in the perpetuation of collections of all kinds.

Collective Affinities:
Personal Collections from the Bennington College Community

Published by Usdan Gallery, Bennington College

Essays by Dalia Bermack, Hollis Churchill, Carrie Colley, Lorelei Kurowski, Cianna Lee, Lil Gael Montevecchi, Grace Muller, Stella Peacock-Berardini, Anne Pötzsch, Lily Sanders, Alexander Wiese, Finn Wilkinson, and Bailey Yarbrough.

Catalog designers: Abby Daniels, Gael Delgado, Kaley Fantasia, Julia Fornari, Emma Lily Gaffney, Chris Golovina, Ether Homer, Dylan Hoyes-Gbewonyo, Shadan Karimi, Prasana Katwal,* Sam Mar, Robin McDonald, Isaac Morton, Liam O'Connor, Ryan Parsons, Joao Santos.*

*Project Managers

Print Supervisor: Gus Ramirez
Catalog Coordinator: Farhad Mirza

Collective Affinities features collections from Brenda Corman Alpar '62, and Joseph Alpar, music faculty; Karen Leslie Burke '84 and the math and science discipline area; Olivia Biro, music library and program coordinator; Maurice Hall, Provost; Brent Harrington, husband of Karen Prime, budget manager, Office of the Provost; Erin Ellen Kelly, dance MFA '24; Mary Lum, visual arts faculty emerita; Vanessa Lyon, visual arts faculty, art history; Farhad Mirza '12, visual arts faculty; Sue Rees, visual arts faculty; Chris Rose, music teaching fellow; Olivia Saporito '20, visual arts technical instructor; Charles Schoonmaker, drama faculty, retired; Donald Sherefkin, visual arts faculty emeritus; and John Umphlett, visual arts faculty.

Collective Affinities is curated by Usdan Gallery Director Anne Thompson, who also is a contributor to the exhibition.

Special thanks to Gus Ramirez and Liza Charbonneau

Printed on a Risograph / SF5450EIIU at Bennington College
Type: Weird Serif (designer, Alex Slobzhenino) and Charter (designer, Matthew Carter)
Printed on 60 lb Church Paper Opaque White and 65 lb JAM Paper White

Edition of 100
ISBN: 978-1-7323605-5-6

Bennington College
Bennington, Vermont
2024