Collectors, Collecting and Non-collectibles

Between Everyday Aesthetics and Aestheticism

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Collecting goes beyond art collecting and seems to meet a more general need. Although it originally aided survival and has predecessors in the animal world, the gesture of collecting has complex motivations. After exploring the collector's psychology and the behavioural differences between collectors and spectators, this paper analyses the logic of collecting and its principles: order, variation, attractive and meaningful display, the control of contingency, processuality and growth, seriality, and limitation. Finally, the paradoxical attempt to collect non-collectibles, such as gods, clouds or human relations will be shown to illustrate a para-aesthetics of collecting which ranges from the poetics of everyday life to aestheticism. Keywords: *Collecting, Everyday Aesthetics, Aestheticism, Kierkegaard*

For a long time, aesthetic theory has referred only to artists and spectators; later on, it integrated the interpreters and performers. More recently, museums have started to portray art collectors, while museums and art collections are considered typical for modernity (Groys, 1997). However, the gesture of collecting surpasses the art market and pertains to the aesthetics of everyday life. Private collections are not only preliminary stages of galleries and museums, but also appear to meet a more general need: people of all ages and in all times collect all sorts of things depending on their interests, aesthetic taste and financial means. This paper first sketches a portrait of the collector, looking into her motivations and considering her behaviour toward the collection, with emphasis on the differences between users, spectators and collectors. The second part analyses the logic of collecting, identifying the principles that guide the birth, evolution and documentation of a collection, some of which have aesthetic relevance. Finally, the question of the limits of collecting in terms of time, space, and categories of objects will be raised. Regarding the latter aspect, some paradoxical attempts of collecting non-collectibles bring poetry into everyday life, while others epitomise

aestheticism. Retrospectively, the diversity of collections, collectibles and collectors' motivations supports the idea of a continuity between aesthetic and non-aesthetic values, as well as between everyday aesthetics and the theory of art.

1. Homo collector[1]

One person collects watches, another stamps, a third perhaps postcards, perfume flacons, comics, old cinema posters, teddy bears, or paintings. Early in life, the small boy starts up a collection of car toys; as an adult he may afford to collect vintage cars. What do all these people have in common, what triggers their passion, and what does it mean to collect? To start with the last question, a distinction should be made between the natural processes of accumulation or accretion – which produce, for example, the patina of objects, a musty atmosphere in a junk shop, or a cloud – and the human act of collecting. The protagonist of this paper is neither a dust collector, nor a waste collector or a sun collector, but an intentional subject. Moreover, her motivations differ from those of a tax collector, since they involve a free activity which is deployed as a self-rewarding hobby. Professional collectors may well transform their passion into a source of profit, yet their primary motivation is the enjoyment caused by the things collected.

As a matter of fact, collecting has deeper roots than everyday aesthetics and can be considered "as old as humanity" itself (Hadamowsky, 1965, p. 9). Collecting originally enabled biological survival; in the oldest Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cultures it began to serve political or religious purposes of representation, as grave goods demonstrate. Collecting is likely to have become 'aesthetic' for the first time in Ancient Greece, when the urban elite started to purchase works of art and the art trade flourished. In early modernity, the gesture of collecting remained confined to aristocrats, merchants, and wealthy scholars; the chambers of art and curiosities and the cabinets of rarities emerged from a mixture of (pseudo)scientific interests and the love of art. Up to the middle of the 18th century the collections remained a prerogative of the sovereigns and nobility and held mainly works of art and handicrafts, manuscripts, and printed books. The spreading of collections is undoubtedly the result of democratisation and economic affluence. Nevertheless, like haute couture advances only the top end of a common profession, the 'high' collections, too, represent only the elite segment of a more general activity. Before acquiring an aesthetic meaning, the gesture of collecting is anthropologically relevant.

The etymology of the verb 'to collect' leads us back to the early 15th century, when it meant 'to gather into one place or group' (Online Etymology Dictionary). The English verb is derived from the Old French 'collecter', which originated in turn from the Latin participle of 'colligere' ('gather together'). Initially the verb was used in English with a transitive sense; the intransitive meaning of 'gather together' or 'accumulate' is first recorded in use as late as

[1] On the collector's psychological profile, with focus on the collector of antiques, see also Diaconu (2012).

1794. The fact that the primary meaning was transitive may support the hypothesis that collecting is principally an intentional and possibly typical human activity. This also allows for a phenomenological approach to this gesture.

According to Manfred Sommer, the essence of collecting is twofold, consisting both of gathering and looking at something (Sommer, 1999). On one hand, the collector brings together what was previously scattered; in this respect, collecting is the reverse of dispersion and creates spatial unity. On the other hand, this activity reaches its peak when it is performed for the sake of perception – which brings into play its aesthetic-aisthetic dimension. This dual essence also enables the comparison of two sorts of collecting: as accumulation and as differentiation within the same category – in other words, the economic type (gathering) and the aesthetic type (collecting *sensu stricto*). The concept of economic 'collecting' is characterised by a sheer amassing of the same sort of thing and should be considered a primitive form of collecting, which is guided by the principle: "the more, the better". By contrast, aesthetic collecting is interested in differences and variations, and obeys the rule: "the more diversified, the better". While gathering produces amorphous piles or heaps, the spatial and taxonomical arrangement of the items is typical for a collection; this higher form of collecting evidently reaches its most elaborate form in specialised museums.

The developmental psychology confirms that collecting stands for an "aesthetics of preservation" (Sommer, 1999, p. 11). Even the child feels a natural urge to collect 'treasures'. In this stage, the objects of passion often have a natural origin and obtain attention through their (again) 'natural' properties, mostly shape or colour. This attests to collecting as a genuine aesthetic gesture, since it is deployed for the sake of beauty and not, as is often the case with adult collectors, as an appropriation of prestige objects. It may be precisely this relation between collecting and social representation which explains why collectors were ignored by aestheticians. Collectors, they would say, violate the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness (by enjoying the possession of objects) and break the rule of "noli me tangere" (since they enjoy not only contemplating, but also handling them). These two qualities were reason enough to suspect the collector of an 'impure' or 'incorrect' aesthetic experience. If the coupled joy of possessing and touching works of art undeservedly banish the collector from the aesthetics of art, at the same time they convey to him/her a special value when it comes to discussing the importance of tactility for the aesthetic experience. The pleasure of touching practically depends on the *right* to touch; only the owners (or those authorised by them) may touch the collection at any time, sit on it or use as many senses as possible in order to enjoy it. Ernst Battenberg noted:

> An antique that one has inherited or acquired can be touched, placed in the bright light of the morning or in the dim glimmer of the lamp in the evening. Its owner can caress it, smell it and look at it, it belongs to him. (Ehret, 1981, p. 7)

Jean-Charles Moreux, too, who was not only an architect and set designer, but

also the owner of a cabinet of curiosities, attached great importance to the "indisputable tactile value" of the collected objects and characterised it as "the most fundamental and at the same time the most superficial feature" of the aesthetic experience (cited in Mauriès, 2002, p. 223). As is well known, Kantian and post-Kantian aesthetics condemned such sensual pleasure, which can be regarded as an episode in the longer process of forbidding touch in the public space as an expression of civilisation (Elias, 1997). In the Middle Ages it was common to touch the 'works' in the cathedrals, and until the early modern age, private collectors allowed their guests to lay their hands on their exhibits. The fact, however, that this began to be considered a temporary privilege that was granted only under the owner's supervision and as the result of her courtesy, attests to the gradual privatisation of tactile pleasure.

The right to multisensory enjoyment is derived from possession and the result of purchase. Before acquiring the object, the collector is engaged in a more or less assiduous search, which sometimes combines serendipity with a persistent 'hunt'. The passionate collector must not only manifest tenacity in building up the collection, but must also develop the qualities of a private detective. Translated into anthropological concepts, the *homo collector* is an aesthetic avatar of the prehistoric gatherer and hunter. She is happy about the 'trouvailles' she comes across at flea markets or in antique shops, but she can follow an object over years with admirable dedication, perseverance and obstinacy. Dashiell Hammett's famous *Maltese falcon* (1932) is an exemplary illustration of the risks a passionate collector is willing to take in order to come into possession of an intensively desired object. Items of collection are not neutral objects, but investments of libido, and collecting itself combines satisfaction with the pride of possessing and the pleasure of hunting. Like hunting, the collecting process alternates "phases of building up excitement and tension-relieving satisfaction" (Stagl, 1992, p. 42). In their quest for a rarity, the collectors systematically explore the market, gain and extend their knowledge about a specific type of objects, and build up a network of useful relations to producers, experts and other collectors. Collecting is a typical individual activity, but its passion founds (aesthetic) communities of peers. Ownership cannot be shared, but passion can, as collector's clubs demonstrate.

Persistence and detective skills characterise, however, only one kind of collector, who obsessively chases the unique. Other collectors let themselves be guided solely by their subjective taste and appreciate the elementary, almost childlike joy of rummaging about at flea markets as much as they enjoy purchasing an object (Jackson and Day, 1999, p. 10). The pastime of fossicking around mediates between the intentional search and luck, given that with a little patience surprises turn up (Reichl, 1995, p. 198). The mixture of valuable objects with junk that is typical for the flea markets (not to mention some internet platforms), conveys an additional charm to the rummaging around; the collector is attracted precisely by the (never guaranteed) *possibility* of finding a good item among "horror homeware stuff and hideous kitsch" (Hadamowsky, 1965, p. 13). The collector's opportunity is

the opportunity of the object as well: by picking it up, separating it from the bare trash and giving it a new home, the object is born again, though for an artificial life.

Exploring, chasing, picking up and bringing home comprise the sequences of the quest and combine playfulness with the scholar's meticulous, systematic research and with the social skills of the experienced *homme du monde* (not least during price negotiation). This psychological alloy corresponds to the collector's characterisation as a *senex puerilis* (Mauriès, 2002, p. 134). The collector's almost childlike "pleasure for the unusual and strange", which was at the heart of the cabinets of curiosities and the art and wonder chambers (Philippovich, 1966, p. 1), is deeply anchored in senectitude. Collecting can mean a defensive reaction against one's own aging and physical decay through the accumulation of objects, or an attempt to protect oneself from death by an ever-thickening wall of objects. 'Saved' objects become a life saver for the collector. By gathering things into one place, the collection protects the subject against dissolution; being is compensated by having. The agency that pulls out the objects from the flow of time and keeps them in cupboards as if in a place outside of history promises the collector the control over her own facticity and temporality. Collecting is a two-step process of extraction and abstraction.

This implicit meaning distinguishes human collecting from animal collecting. What may appear as specifically human turns out to sublimate a proto-aesthetic animal activity. For example, Richard O. Prum's book *The Evolution of Beauty* includes a picture showing a male Vogelkop Bowerbird in New Guinea that "curates a collection of strange objects and materials on a planted garden of moss in front of its hut bower."[2] Other bird species collect items of the same colour and display them in beautiful arrangements, in order to attract a future mate. This temporary tasteful 'collection' serves as a stage for an equally impressive dance of the male in front of the female. On this basis, Prum claimed that many nonhuman animals can be assigned aesthetic agency and that the time has come to outline a post-human approach to art that would include the biotic artworlds, to use Danto's concept. My present focus is different. The bird's 'collection' is an instrument of the sexual selection and serves the perpetuation and multiplication of life. As for human collectors, some of them are indeed driven by economic reasons and conceive of their precious collection as an investment for the future; others yet invest a precious amount of time, energy, and money in their collection for its own sake. More importantly, the univocally positive and indirectly life-fostering character of collecting seems to lack in the human gesture of collecting, which is rather tinged with the ambivalent pleasure of nostalgia. The collector is a kind of Proust of material culture who fights against the irreversibility of time, decay and oblivion. Collecting is a defence strategy that secures, archives, and organises a fragment of the world with the final aim to freeze time. In Justin Stagl's words, collections are "materialized memories", just as "memory is

[2] This is composed of: "globular red fruits; flakes of rotten wood infiltrated with green fungus; charcoal, black fungus, and rotten red fruits turned black; red flowers from *Freycinetia* vines; shiny black beetle elytra; blue berries; and gelatinous amber tree exudate" (Prum, 2017, no page).

a materialized collection" (Stagl, 1998, p. 41). Collecting helps recollecting both the collective and the individual past. The age of the object is an essential criterion for collectors, since so-called antiques revive past cultures, but the age of an item *within* the collection is precious as well: the founding piece of collection has a sentimental value for the collector irrespective of its price on the market. In short, collecting nourishes nostalgic feelings and makes it possible to travel into the past (Battenberg in Ehret, 1981, p. 7).[3]

The collector's melancholia is sometimes documented biographically (for example, in the case of Rudolf II), but the "symptoms of an obsession or a depression as well as a mechanism of isolation and protection" (Mauriès, 2002, p. 182) can also apply to the common collector. Further, Patrick Mauriès ascribes to the collector a "passionately inquiring mind, inclination to mystery, propensity to brooding, passion for appropriation, enthusiasm for changing forms and hybrids, and a ceaseless questioning of the boundary between life and death, the purpose of existence and its transience" (Mauriès, 2002, p. 183). This quasi-philosophical dimension is accompanied by the extension of life with the aid of objects. Like the reader of narratives who makes the characters' lives her own, the collector appropriates the stories told by the objects and enlarges her personal biography. Along with the objects, she collects and archives their stories, and collecting becomes a self-reflective practice. If museums are "places where cultural-historical trash is processed into cultural identities" (Groys, 1997, p. 48), then private collections process the cultural-historical trash into personal identities. Collecting sets forth the formation of personality.

Each item has its own biography; the more dramatic this is, involving human fates or prominent former owners, the more it increases in value. Old jewels, works of art and masterfully crafted objects have special stories and have written history. But common objects can enter a collection at the end of memorable adventures, when their purchase involved a strenuous effort, risky expeditions, or thorough research. In this way, the object's "biography" is interlaced with the collector's life.

Another possible motivation for collecting is vanity. Given its intricate connection to social appearances, vanity can itself be assigned to everyday aesthetics. Recently, Barbara Carnevali made the attempt to rehabilitate vanity against its traditional disdain in Western metaphysics and morality, where it was condemned as a symptom of frivolity and relegated to the illusory sphere of appearances, as opposed to reality (Carnevali 2020, p. 57 ff.). Understood as the obsessive concern about one's image due to a strong need for recognition, vanity can indeed be suspected as the subjective motivation lying behind some collections of objects of prestige. Moreover, the passion for collecting can become a principle of alienation and trigger social competition among collectors (which moralists again associate with vanity). Like other passions, collecting can reach a self-destructive intensity and take over the

[3] On historicity as an atmospheric value in interior design see Baudrillard (1968). Old objects exhale authenticity and enable a narcissistic regression in time. As symbolic objects, they have a minimal functionality, but reach a maximum of meaning.

collector's life. Nevertheless, if the passion for collecting is authentic, it is certainly driven (also) by a sense of beauty and intellectual curiosity: only aesthetically appealing or interesting objects unleash the desire to own them. Once more, the primary motivation for collectors ought to be the concern about objects and not about their egos.

For all these reasons, a phenomenological interpretation should consider collecting in its entire complexity. To dismiss collecting in general as an "amusing pastime" (Philp, 1975, p. 6) falls short of the mark; to suspect non-aesthetic interests behind every collection would be equally unfair toward enthusiastic collectors; finally, to reduce this phenomenon to a cultural expression of the accumulating logic of capital[4] sounds hyper-intellectualistic. Such approaches ignore the notion that collecting is a factor of construing identities. Collecting objects is inextricably linked to collecting oneself both in the aesthetic meaning of a focused contemplation of the displayed and in a psychological sense, as recollection or the (re)assembling of the self, grace to memory. All of this is possible owing to the logic or *ratio* of collecting.

2. The Logos of Collecting

In his reading of Heraclitus, Heidegger pointed out that the Greek *logos* was related to *legein*, which meant not only 'to speak', but also 'to lay down and present', or 'to submit and deposit' (*nieder- und vorlegen*) (Heidegger, 1994, p. 200). The Latin word *legere* signified in addition: 'to read', 'to catch up' and 'to bring together'. The gesture behind the *logos* thus had the meaning of laying down and displaying (or collecting) himself and other things.[5] Most importantly, it implied for Heidegger that what is collected comes "to lie down in the (re)collection of rest."[6] The collection itself is a resting camp (*Ruhelager*) or a "reserve where something is deposited and created."[7] Further on, Heidegger recalls the double etymology in German and Old Greek of *legein*/*lesen* as 'reading' and 'picking something up' or 'harvesting'. In sum, the activity called *legein* appears as a succession of picking up (*Auflesen*), removing (*Abnehmen*) and collecting (*Zusammentragen*) (Heidegger, 1994, p. 201).

To my knowledge, this Heideggerian reading of the *logos* has not yet been fructified for an interpretation of collecting, although its terminological repertoire presents astonishing analogies with our topic[8]: What was "picked up" or harvested is brought together and deposited in containers and reservoirs with the aim of storage and safekeeping (Heidegger, 1994, p. 202). These are the "safe" places where what was picked up can recover itself, claims Heidegger, who plays in this context with the polysemy of *Bergen*. The collecting process ends by collecting people in a dual, social and psychological, respect: collecting/harvesting brings people together in an assembly (*Versammlung*); moreover,

4 The art historian Adalgisa Lugli disqualifies collecting as a parodistic-critical reflection of the overproduction and oversaturation in Western society (cf. Mauriès, 2002, p. 231).

5 "das sich und anderes sammelnde Nieder- und Vorlegen" (*Ibid.*).

6 "sich niederlegen in die Sammlung der Ruhe" (*Ibid.*).

7 "der Hinterhalt, wo etwas hinterlegt und angelegt ist" (*Ibid.*).

8 It is true that Heidegger obviously prefers the agricultural connotations.

they collect themselves and concentrate their work on the action of saving and enabling recovery (*Bergen*).[9]

This dense interpretation of the *logos* can inspire a phenomenological reading of collecting in general. Collecting, too, begins with a selection (picking up), which is equally gratifying as harvesting, although useless from a practical point of view. The carefully chosen objects are removed from their context, if they had not already been decontextualised as is the case with the flea markets. The reaped objects are brought into the same place and stored in showcases. Professional collectors build special rooms or houses for this purpose and do not merely store things, but also take care of their conservation and restoration. In so doing, they 'rescue' objects from deterioration and keep them in 'safe' places or in safe-deposit boxes. The analogies do not end here. Collectors enjoy contemplating their 'crop', which is a good opportunity to collect themselves, and like to present them to friends. As a result, collections bring people together in various ways, by gathering them around the exhibits or in collector's clubs, the members of which have common interests.

However, apart from this reinterpretation of the *logos* of collecting following Heidegger it is worth reconstructing its logic also with respect to its principles. Let us start with the *order*. A collector treasures the same type of objects. Therefore, collecting is preceded by the organisation of the material world according to categories. Any collection arranges first the world and then sets forth the taxonomical principle within the collection itself. Sometimes this ordering of the world – which is essential for being human – is materialised in catalogues and inventories, which accurately document the origin and characteristics of the pieces. Collections have strong similarities with the taxonomical-descriptive approach in the modern sciences; in the 18th and 19th century it was a common practice in biology, geography, and cultural anthropology to pick up, remove from their natural environments and bring to Europe samples of plants, insects, minerals, or artifacts. Especially methodical subjects satisfy their wish to get an overview of a certain field by collecting things. They systematically set up a second world and manage it; experts' recommendations help them to maintain and improve its order. One of these specialists is Franz Hadamowsky, who remarked: "At the beginning of every collection there is order; the salutary necessity not only to plan it, but also to implement it consistently, is one of the most positive side effects of any collecting activity" (Hadamowsky, 1965, p. 11). A pedagogical undertone is unmistakable: "'In the beginning was the order' – this is how a Bible for collectors should begin" (*Ibid.*).

Nevertheless, the order is not only an epistemological, but also an aesthetic principle. The arranged microcosm of the collection produces both intellectual satisfaction and perceptual enjoyment. Collecting creates a *unitas multiplex* or

[9] „Zu jedem Sammeln gehört zugleich, daß die Lesenden sich sammeln, ihr Tun auf das Bergen versammeln und von da her gesammelt, erst sammeln. Die Lese verlangt aus sich und für sich diese Sammlung. Im gesammelten Sammeln waltet ursprünglich Versammlung" (Heidegger, 1994, p. 202).

unity in diversity, which was one of the first definitions of beauty.[10] The collected items appear like sensible variations of the same Platonic prototype. However, unlike the philosopher, the collector does not seek the unity that underlies plurality as much as she enjoys diversity in itself. Therefore making *comparison* possible can be considered another principle of collecting. A collector is less interested in gathering samples that look alike than in acquiring something slightly different; collecting trains the sense of observation and takes pleasure in the richness of the world.

A third aesthetic aspect concerns the *display* of the collection, which can indeed reach the level of art. However, the common collector is already a proto-designer, having to stage neat and meaningful arrangements of her pieces. Options about the illumination and position of the objects, the container, and its position in a private environment are unavoidable and express judgments of taste. The collector has to decide what pieces deserve to be highlighted and what can be rather hidden. Even the distances between the objects contribute to form materialised sentences, in which some objects are given the prominent status of nouns or verbs and others modestly fill the space, like prepositions. The spatial distribution of objects between foreground and background creates an internal hierarchy which may reflect the object's value on the market, its rarity, difficulty of acquisition, or age, or can simply betray subjective preferences.

Apart from its intellectual meaning (as classification) and aesthetic dimension (as arrangement), order has a third major sense, which is related to the process of collecting. A collection often starts with a 'trouvaille', a curious or beautiful object one accidentally encounters, a gift, or more rarely an inherited object. In general, contingency plays an important role at the beginning of collecting. Once set up, the further growth of the collection, however, integrates the initial accident into a fairly coherent system of relations. In this respect, collecting is the human gesture of *controlling contingency*, conveying order to a chaotic experience and seeing similarities and differences in an amorphous world. Collecting is a sign of the subject's power over the material world: one collects what one does not need, just for its own sake, and controls the accumulation of things. This principle of command and control needs a serious revision in practice, given that the collector seems to constantly switch between agency and passivity: on the one hand, she is actively searching, takes decisions about what to acquire, and owns the pieces; on the other hand, a passionate collector can succumb to the addiction of collecting. Maniacal collectors become possessed by their possessions.

Nevertheless, even in such a case collecting is not perverted into hoarding – the mental health disorder characterised by the accumulation of (usually worthless) things which the hoarder finds difficult to let go. It is precisely the order associated with control that draws a sharp line between a collector and a hoarder. The hoarder does not appreciate variation within the same category

[10] "[…] Beautiful wholes are formed of similar as well as opposite elements" (Tatarkiewicz 2015, p. 333).

of objects, but absurdly amasses copies of the same thing. Hoarders neither proudly showcase their objects to other people, nor display them in neat arrangements; they cannot even manipulate them with ease after a point. The order of the collection degenerates into chaos, and collecting is converted from a delightful hobby into a habit that interferes with normal life. Instead of giving objects a second life, hoarders risk becoming buried alive by objects. Moreover, such people can end up in social isolation – which is the very opposite of Heidegger's assembly. The aesthetic dimension is hard to find in the hoarder's world.[11]

On the contrary, a collector builds up her own world – and this takes time. Therefore, collecting is inconceivable without *duration*, *continuity* and *growth*; collections are dynamically, steadily or intermittently expanding works. Pieces of a collection can be sold or exchanged for other objects, but on the whole collecting follows the logic of accumulation. In this respect, despite historically preliminary forms and anthropological invariants, aesthetic or scientific collections are typical in modernity. As long as it 'lives"' a collection is a work in progress and the result of a long-term process. As such, it does not only express the collector's personality and social status, but is also her lifework.

The starting point of collecting can be clearly identified, though sometimes only retrospectively; it usually takes some time between acquiring or receiving the first piece and the decision to gather the objects of the same kind. This *capo d'opera* does not have to be a masterpiece, but it should be attractive enough in order to awaken the desire for similar things. The *opera* itself is the collection as a series. Once again, a principle of collecting – in this case, *seriality* – has a particular relevance for our age, being widespread in modern and contemporary art, from Monet's cathedrals to Warhol, from photography to cartoons. The aesthetics of seriality has been analysed so far mainly in examples from literature and film (Pohn-Lauggas et al., 2018; Bronfen, 2016); more seldom it included serial imagery in art (Sykora, 1983), and integrated the mass production of industrial series, scientific and epistemic series in general, as well as art and TV series in a cross-disciplinary approach. (Rothöhler, 2020) Seriality opens a field of relations between the series as a result and its building through succession, between repetition and variation, identity and difference, continuity and transformation or interruption, redundancy and innovation (Rothöhler, 2020, p. 12). Regarding everyday collections, these are favoured not only by technological and economic factors, but also by marketing strategies (in particular for children's products) that awaken the passion for collecting from an early age.

Once it begins, the collection can stop after a long process of agony, during which the collector loses her interest in it, or it can end with the collector's death – unless she is forced to 'freeze' their collecting for various reasons. For the passionate collectors, both the beginning and the end of this process leave the impression of heteronomy: the debutant collector assumes a passion she is seized by; the old collector is forced to leave this world *and* her

[11] The border between collectors and so-called pickers is less sharp.

collection behind. Valuable collections can be donated or left to heirs. Nevertheless, the almost organic unity of the collection remains essential until the end, the items being *pieces* of a whole; no collector would break it unless she is forced to.

Usually collections are the work of *individuals* or couples, such as the *Essl Collection* for contemporary art, which was built by Agnes and Karlheinz Essl for over 50 years. Rather exceptionally, some collections are continued over generations within the same family. Collected items are heritable, the passion for collecting (the same kind of objects) is not. This truth holds even more strongly for common collections; they hardly survive the collector's death if they are devoid of objective value on the market and are instead put down to some collector's idiosyncrasy.

The collector's existential finitude represents only an aspect of the principle of *limitation* that concludes the presentation of the *logos* of collecting. A second limitation is spatial but derived from the collector's passing away. If collecting entails the gathering of objects into one place, then the collection simply disappears with the dispersion of its pieces. A collection is *per definitionem* a collective of objects and in the owner's eyes almost an organic being; indeed, it can survive 'amputations' better than living beings, yet, aesthetically speaking, it is affected as a whole. The ideal of a collection is completeness; as any other ideal, this is impossible to reach, however, fragmentation can be fatal to collections. Third, the limitation applies to the kind of collected objects and to collectibles in general. No collector can collect everything, and instead usually selects specific objects from a certain epoch and a certain culture. In addition to this, not everything is collectible in principle. This brings us to the last question: What is collectible and how can the paradoxical collecting of non-collectibles be relevant to aesthetics?

3. Collecting Non-collectibles

Experts are confronted with almost insurmountable difficulties when it comes to classifying the possible objects of collection. Peter Philp (1975) and Dennis Young (1979) prefer to order them alphabetically, according to categories of products, their materials, and functions. Sometimes the material becomes the unique criterion of classification, as when the focus lies on cleaning, repairing and restoring antiques (Jackson and Day, 1998), and special investigations can be confined to a single type of object (Lutze 1977). These studies have the same outline for each chapter or lexicon entry: they begin with a concise art history of the kind of object (e.g. furniture, China, etc.), before integrating issues of style, as well as explanations of materials and manufacturing techniques. These books provide excellent technical descriptions and practical advice for collectors but are useless for any reconstruction of the collector's psychology or the logic of collecting, as expounded above. Besides, they never raise the question about the *fundamental* limitations of collecting. If we stick to the definition of the collector as the Proust of material culture, then obviously only material objects are collectible. Nevertheless, this trivial statement can lead us to interesting situations if we ask further what kind of non-collectibles still

tempt people to collect them. Let me mention in the following only three such cases. In so doing, the intended phenomenological analysis is completed through what Husserl called the eidetic variation, by testing what falls outside the realm of collecting.

First, from the perspective of monotheism God is uncollectible and gods ought not to be collected. For believers from strong monotheist and aniconic religions this interdiction even applies to images of gods (in their view, idols). In their eyes, a private sanctuary with statues of gods or saints or a wall covered with painted icons are alarming signs of idolatry. For the scholars of religious studies, who adhere to a methodological agnosticism, these are no more than collections of devotional objects, while art historians see in them aesthetically valuable arrangements of skilfully crafted cult objects. From the believer's perspective, however, these are *not* collections – this difference in perception makes clear the implicit aesthetic dimension of any collection in general. No matter how passionate the collector can be, seen from outside, her collection falls under the categories of aesthetic, hobby, leisure, and superficial enjoyment.

Secondly, collecting implies a sense of property; the collector owns the object and is its 'master', being in principle entitled to do whatever she wishes with it, including destroying it. Conversely, whatever belongs to the public domain is per se uncollectible. The same goes for the so-called commons, indivisible natural resources that are shared by communities, such as air, light, and water. The modern territorialisation of the atmosphere (think of national airspaces) would require a special discussion. Others contest the object-character of the atmosphere and prefer to call it a hyper-object (Morton, 2013). If the physical atmosphere is uncollectible, how can then Marie-Luce Nadal present herself as a "collector of clouds" (Nadal, 2021)? The author of this statement is a contemporary French artist who produces artificial vapours and clouds (one of her installations is titled *Fabrique du Vaporeux*) and in this sense she can indeed 'collect' self-made cloud-works. More generally, each of us can collect physical and mental *images* of clouds. While the statement about collecting clouds is intuitively absurd, its metaphorical dimension activates a poetical thinking. The idea of collecting clouds opens the way for letting poetics enter everyday life outside of an artistic context.

The religious collector and the poetical (artistic) collector (not to be confused with the art collector) represent only two types of para-collecting behaviour. One can certainly add to them the globe trotter, who 'collects' memories of places, and the obsessively photographing tourist, who collects images of places. More interesting than these, however, is what may be called existential collecting. As already mentioned, collectibles have to be material; for example, we cannot collect human relations – or can we? We do not 'collect' friends or interesting acquaintances, let alone parents, partners or children – and if one does so, one is criticised for her irresponsibility, superficiality and objectification of others. In the same vein, it is impossible to collect love, friendship, and respect, but it is possible to 'collect' love affairs, memberships, diplomas, and honorific titles. Vain people collect signs of recognition, whereas

Don Juan and Casanova were 'collecting' female beauty and erotic experiences. For Søren Kierkegaard, Don Juan and the character of the seducer in general embody the aesthetic stage of life (Kierkegaard, 2013).

Roughly speaking, every seducer is a collector of the non-collectible, though Kierkegaard does not use this expression. Instead, he pays closer attention to the fine differences between the Greek and the modern seducer on the example of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (Kierkegaard, 2013, p. 93 ff.). The Greek love was affecting the psychical; the Greek seducer, be it Zeus or Hercules with his mythical fifty love affairs, fell in love with a girl and did everything that was possible to get her; after a while, he got bored and started to look for new love – and the cycle began again. However, for Kierkegaard he was not a real seducer, given that he was still praising the individuality of each 'conquest' and was merely reacting to accidental encounters. Conversely, Don Juan seeks the abstract idea of femininity or the principle of the sensuous, which can be found only in individuals, but can never be fully realised by a single woman. For him, "every girl is an ordinary girl, every love affair a story of everyday life" (Kierkegaard, 2013, p. 97). The Greek hero's biography has a richness of content and obeys the logic of accretion (Kierkegaard claims for Hercules that he eventually reigned over an extended family); in contrast, Don Juan's love is *in principle* unfaithful and the series of his erotic adventures build a mere sequence of moments and pure repetition.

No matter how A (the author of the aesthetic part of *Either/Or*) endeavours to distinguish between similar behaviours, both the Greek seducer's and Don Juan's ways of life are unacceptable from the perspective of the moral stage given that they do not take life seriously and reject longer commitments, in this case (Christian) conjugal fidelity. However, since moralising is not the aim of this paper, we should better attempt to detect common characteristics of the seducer and the real collector on the basis of Kierkegaard's analysis. The seducer's never-ending quest for new objects of desire could indeed be compared to the collector's 'unfaithfulness' to single objects. At first glance, the collector's psychology recalls the Greek 'polygamy' rather than Don Giovanni's almost abstract repetition, since the Greek seducer never fully abandons the old loves. At the same time, however, the collector indirectly evokes Don Juan's idealism: s/he is adulterous, so to speak, to each object taken separately; the collector remains faithful to the *category* of objects she collects – in Kierkegaard's words, to the idea of that object – and to her own identity as a collector.

Another feature of the aesthetic stage opens the possibility of a different kind of comparison. The motto of the *Diapsalmata*[12] which opens the 'aesthetic' part of *Either/Or* is a French poem expressing the classical motif of the *vanitas vanitatum* (Kierkegaard, 2013, p. 18). This holds that prestige, intellectual knowledge, and honours, no less than friendship and sensual pleasure, are ultimately worthless and do not deserve to be pursued. This melancholy –

[12] *Diapsalmata* is a collection of aphorisms. The literary genres that 'collect' ideas and short notes over a period of time, from anthologies and diaries to Lichtenberg's famous *Sudelbücher*, who also developed a special method of ordering the entries, would deserve special analysis.

which, in Kierkegaard's case, is nothing but the *mal de siècle* of Romanticism – has already been commented on in relation to collecting. However, the collector's nostalgic *Grundstimmung* is counterbalanced by an active reaction: instead of complying with passive nihilism, the collector fights to save objects from consumption and decay; instead of denying the common human values, he affirms life and manifests solidarity with what is transient. The collector's implicit moral philosophy is ultimately positive and constructive.

The aesthetic stage of Romanticism enjoys a comeback in postmodernity. Zygmunt Bauman's interpretation of the "liquid love" of our times includes Kierkegaard's Don Giovanni among its predecessors, but adds to it the dimension of consumption (Bauman, 2003). Bauman bemoans that relationships have been converted into ephemeral and superficial *Erlebnisse*, into "profitable investments" and "top-pocket relationships" that can be kept in one's pocket to be brought out whenever one needs them (Bauman, 2003, pp. 15, 20). This world, in which real social bonds are lacking and commitments are considered meaningless, could also be reclaimed for an existential form of collecting that simply 'accumulates' human relations. Compared to the common collectors' attachment to their objects – which (so to speak) can 'trust' their owner – the collecting of relationships precisely gives away the subject's deliberate detachment and fear of emotional involvement.

The contrast with the 'real' collector is striking. The latter appreciates the privilege of intimate contact with her objects, which leads to ambivalent tactile behaviour. On one hand, the collector enjoys touching the pieces, weighing them in her hand and turning them on all sides, opening and closing recipients, and wearing the objects (think of jewels, watches or other historic accessories). On the other hand, the conservation of objects requires protecting them from any contact, which brings into play an entire aesthetics of veiling. Touch can be integrated into a ceremony of possession, and possession be in turn aestheticised through ritual: valuable pieces are touched only with gloves, hung behind curtains, placed in skilfully manufactured cases or in special cabinets. The collector touches and lets herself be touched by the objects; she is aware of the exposure of the material world and assumes it – and with it, her own vulnerability. On the contrary, the collector of human relationships avoids being (emotionally) touched, and her aestheticisation does not reach the stage of elaborating rituals – she lacks the time to develop them. While the material collector is profoundly 'conservative' and reacts to modern speed by slowing down the rhythm in which objects are used, worn out and discarded, the existential collector sets forth the logic of acceleration and consumption.

Consumption at bottom appears to be the very opposite of collecting and preserving. Nevertheless, the existential collector, like the collector of places and their images, is engaged both in collecting and consuming. The result is a typically modern eclectic subjectivity, which reminded Boris Groys of museums. Modern museums collect heterogeneous objects in a homogeneous space and are devoid of the coherence that was proper to churches and palaces. "This absence of inner organic unity and this irreducible inner heterogeneity

characterize not only the modern museum, but also modern subjectivity as such" (Groys, 1997, p. 50).

In contrast, collections obey or at least should obey the previously described logic of gathering and ordering items according to the principle of unity in diversity. The collector's life, too, achieves a certain coherence through the collection. Although her home, cabinet or private gallery remains a temporary shelter for homeless artifacts and a transitory space for the remnants of historical worlds, a collection is still an island of order amidst contingency and an example for how things can embellish daily life.

To conclude, the gesture of collecting shares common features with other aesthetic phenomena; these regard the collector's psychology and behaviour, as well as the collection as such. Collecting is a passion for a certain kind of object that seizes the subject and develops in time; it praises the fragile beauty of the material world and is tinged by nostalgia. The collector's experience alternates between activity and passivity, control and enjoyment, possession and fascination, manipulation of objects versus their contemplation. It would be simplistic to reduce the collector's motivations to economic interests or vanity; genuine collecting is disinterested in the Kantian sense, for it gathers objects for their own sake and takes pleasure in the variation of perceptual qualities and styles. Yet collecting not only sharpens observational, aisthetic skills; insofar it brings order into the world, it also nourishes curiosity and teaches perseverance, thus having both epistemic and educational value: far from merely being an amusing pastime, collecting can serve to build character. From the viewpoint of aesthetic theory, there is no sharp line between the activity of everyday collecting and art collecting; both follow the same principles, such as the aforementioned production of order and of a unity in diversity, along with seriality and the ideal of completeness. In relation to the collector's life, on one hand, collecting conveys continuity and coherence, as it adheres to the principle of a controlled growth, and on the other hand, the special and delightful moments spent with the collected items form enclaves that fall outside the flow of the everyday life, similar to the experience of art. Moreover, pieces with an interesting history have 'quasi-biographies' and evoke the status of quasi subjects that Mikel Dufrenne (1973, p. 190) assigned to works of art. Finally, the display of the collection – for the owner's personal satisfaction or for showcasing it to peers – has to be appealing and meaningful, which requires proto-curatorial skills from the collector.

As the last part of the paper has shown, the continuity between everyday aesthetics and the aesthetics of art under the concepts of beauty, order and diversification represents only one side of the coin; the broad field of para-aesthetical practices related to collecting would be of equal interest for further exploration. Not only is it difficult to make a complete list of collected categories of objects, but it is also impossible to provide an overview of the indefinite field of non-collectibles that may be tempted to collect them. Our exemplifications have demonstrated that some of these practices border on aestheticism by improperly extending the aesthetic stance to human relations, while others refresh everyday life in a poetical manner.

Finally, collecting has relevance beyond everyday aesthetics due to its anthropological and existential implications. Since collecting can be encountered in the animal kingdom, it raises the question of whether it is legitimate to attribute aesthetic agency to some non-human animal species from the perspective of evolutionary aesthetics. Moreover, while the standard collecting affirms life and attempts to rescue ephemeral things, it degenerates into its opposite, sheer consumption, when it is applied to human relationships; the aesthetics of existence, in the sense of self-cultivation and self-design by means of objects, then turns into the reification of other people and ends up in self-alienation.

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