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MASKE UND KOTHURN

INTERNATIONALE BEITRÄGE ZUR THEATER-, FILM- UND MEDIENWISSENSCHAFT

Lorenzo da Ponte

Ed. by

Michael Hüttler

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Notes on the History of Collecting (2002)

KLAUS HEINRICH

1

How do collecting and history go together? The question seems to point in three seemingly unrelated directions that nevertheless seem interwoven, contingent, and dependent on one another: to the archaic act of collecting or gathering something, an activity that provided the designation for an early phase in human history; to the inner process of “collecting myself”, which expresses a split while at the same time being intended to save me from it; and to the venerable institution of the semi-public and semi-private collection, the origins of which can be traced back as far as the graves of our ancestors, and which we now term the “museum”, and visit in order to confirm our existence, an exercise that is both partly regressive and partly utopian, as any such attempt would be.

2

The archaic activity of collecting objects (“hunter-gatherers” was the term taken by ethno-archaeology seeking to classify our ancestors in this early phase of history) continues to occupy us to this day, keeping us busy right into the artfully arranged wilderness of consumption. We are no longer driven by pangs of physical hunger, even if we are acutely reminded of this instinct in times of dire need. However, what we gather, accumulate, and precisely do not devour appears to satisfy our hunger and quench a thirst that seem no less compelling and soon we discern here those familiar traits of addiction. While we pine for the non-consumable we are in truth in search of that which consumes us. The activity of collecting has seized hold of us; the things we collect clutter up our flats, storage spaces, and minds, and the only thing that seems to help is their regular emptying. Fullness may be problematic, but completeness seems desirable as it at least apparently gives the addiction an objective. However incompatible with bulimia it may be, it is essentially a rationalizing expression for constipation, and it is completeness that highlights the actual reach of such a self-destructive metabolic disorder. Described thus, the history of collecting has taken the place of history itself; in particular collections that seek mnemonically to process history easily divest themselves of the act of reflecting on history.

3

When the subject and object of collecting converge, as they do when we “collect ourselves”, collecting is construed as an inner process that may range from occasional bouts of concentration to meditative contemplation. Of course, this process likewise has its own history: we can discern it in religion, for example, in the fixed definition and instrumentalization of mystic experience with a view to stabilizing the role of the human being in cults, or the stages by which peoples practice art. An empty gaze is not yet a collected view; a statue without the shift between standing leg and free leg lacks tension and balance, which both call for collection and render it visible. However, were the concept of collecting itself not to undergo metamorphosis, a history of collection only as an inner act would remain a history of moments devoid of history (the same moments without which the archaic act of collecting will remain an expression of aimless acts of gathering something which does not consider the deep sense of satisfaction brought about by discovery here or by mystic contemplation there). This transformation marks a caesura beyond which we can talk of the history of collecting in the conventional sense today, yet at the same time it also questions that very convention.

4

The wish that the act of inner collecting take objective form – i.e., that the objects of that act of collecting become parts of a “collection” – firmly defines in time those moments devoid of history, if in so doing it becomes an instrumentalizing staging of them, places them in a narrative relation to one another (known as “tradition”), and opens them and similar objects to a history that can itself be remembered and re-described precisely by dint of their intervention. However, in the process, the collected items are themselves forced to undergo an unexpected change, one that calls into question whether the collected things are objects and transform the tradition, hardly do we feel we have grasped it, into a utopia. I would like to resort here to a term that is the absolute antipode of that notion of the antiquated that denounces words such as collecting, collection, and the history of collecting when a new era dawns on the horizon or an old era undergoes upheaval, and in so doing robs the collected of any protection. The question is, however, whether the acts of the iconoclasts were not aimed more at the real power of images than at their purported lack of power, and a glance at the histories of iconoclasm and aniconism shows that beneath its surface the battle of the genders rages, and within it the tension between the genders was to be brought to an end by machismo. The antipode that I would like to present seems to be unaffected by this. It is one that the archaic acts of collecting already knew and imbued with the form of myth that founded cult; mystical contemplation endeavoured to bring it about by force, and without it the

venerable institution of semi-private, semi-public collections would not be alive. I am speaking of the epiphanic quality of the collection that stems from the epiphanic intention behind collecting.

5

Just as the early gatherers found masks under leaves that started to sing to them in familiar if unknown voices (the voices of their ancestors), telling them of the past and future of their tribe¹, so archeological finds, those altar wings, images and environments, talk to us, quite independently of any issues of ascription, dating and interpretation (they follow on from the tale, translating it). It is the epiphanic character of the collected items in the major collections (albeit also of the very small and completely private ones) that makes them so fascinating. The items cause reality to appear anew before our very eyes. To make a finer point of it, it is not the objects, but the epiphanies that are collected. This is a process with which every collector is familiar, and it reveals two things: the collector's need for epiphany (but where does it come from?) and the epiphanic satisfaction that the collected items grant the collector and the visitors to his collection. (We can well assume that constipation and evacuation, those feared side effects of collecting – and they were not unknown to primitive peoples as the custom of archaic potlatch shows – secretly pursued an epiphanic goal that only secondarily entailed self-purgation.)

6

Epiphanic – the word also relates to how artists have seen themselves since the Renaissance, and to a special form of succession to Christ: the artist as someone who causes reality to appear, vying here with God the Creator, and, vying with the sacrament, enabling the communication of that reality without the need for sacrifice and in an hitherto unknown way. Potentially, this art becomes a *sacrament for everyone*, one that no longer requires successive generations of officiating priests (not until the nineteenth-century “religion of art” does the new officiate of this sacrament, namely the artist, who possesses the power of epiphany, again become the proxy victim – and this position of old authority by dint of being epiphanic persists through to the Action Art of the twentieth century). However, for all their autonomous pathos, artists since the Renaissance have only continued what, ever since the first drawings scratched by human hand, has charged our finds with epiphanic

1 I mention the singing ancestral masks that early collectors found beneath the leaves in memory of Joachim Moebus (1928–2001) who described them in his early work on masks *Ursprungsmythos und die zeremoniale Verfertigung von Masken*, Berlin: Doctoral thesis 1959.

power (and which the collector of whatever bric-à-brac today, acting as it were as his own object artist and gallery owner, must achieve all on his own). Even the oldest items in a collection do not cause the past to appear, but rather the visions of yore. In their light, the present changes, the eye that alights on them and the hand that touches them participate in a process of transubstantiation that the collector of beer mats, the collector of antiquities, not to mention the patron of a picture gallery all believe their activity will offer. What kind of process is this and can we understand it without resorting to the theological meaning of the term?

7

The collector's need for epiphany leads back into his own early years as it does into those of the human species, and perhaps even further back, into our prehistory as animals. The philosopher who used the concept of "aura"² to describe the epiphany, in particular that of the artwork, described it as something intangible – as the closeness of something distant, which, as we know, is always also the distance of closeness. However, this does not provide an exhaustive account of the collector's need and the power of the artwork. The *aura*, that intimation of something, is reminiscent of an early breath, just as the mirrored image intimates the older mirror, that of the mother's gaze, which absorbs the distraught gaze of the child, the child's still speechless horror, and then transforms it and returns it to the child as a tolerable, expressible, comprehensible gaze that calls on the child to join the mother in processing it. Psychoanalytical experience, which has long dipped deep behind the oedipal rivalry of the sexes³, offers us a key for what is sought for here, and for the rest of the child's life, and is found again, in ever new translations of such a mirror with the power of transformation, and which not only allows us to understand the collector's need for epiphany, but also the epiphanic power of images to banish the horror and enable us to process it. Indeed, an observation of children before they have the capacity of speech draws our attention to the fact that this search is not mere regression, but contains within itself the promise of new intellectual horizons. It is for the sake of this promise that we seek out the species caves of the museums, and it is one of the most powerful, and politically effective motifs behind the great

2 In his famous definition, Walter Benjamin terms "aura" the "unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be," and bemoans its decay (Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, in *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn, Glasgow: Jonathan Cape 1970, pages 224 and 245).

3 On the psychoanalysis that has gone further back behind the battle of the sexes: Taking up Melanie Klein's concept of projective identification, Winnicott emphasizes the function of the mother's face as mirror, Bion stresses the role of the mother as a container that overcomes and transforms fear (see Robert D. Hinshelwood, *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, London: Free Association Books 1989).

collections being established – and yet it is also something that we must acknowledge inheres in some form in the smallest, most eccentric ones, as well. In each individual case, focusing on that promise of the new can preserve the history of collecting, which actually follows its objects to the grave, from the temptations of regression.

8

All major collections originally arose as projects of power and prestige, for the sake of personal salvation, for the purposes of enjoyment and education, to the greater glory of a family, a state, or a city.⁴ And such politically motivated collecting by no means reduces the epiphanic impact of the collection, as is shown by a project housed here, that explores the so-called “Habsburg exchange of paintings”, whereby the first-born, Viennese branch of the House of Habsburg in Vienna and the second-born, Florentine branch exchanged paintings, as well as all the attendant circumstances and consequences.⁵ The pictorial epiphanies of the major collections that wandered back and forth between these two cities form a subterranean imaginative context which also shapes the way the large cities are perceived, or, as I put it on one occasion: Florence would be a different city without Bellini’s “allegoria sacra”, the dream vision it has absorbed, while Vienna would be different without the return of the apocalyptic vision of Titian’s “Shepherd and Nymph”, which was rejected in Florence. However pointed such claims may sound, we cannot get by without them if the history of collecting is to be accorded its due place, and not just be regarded as a form of archiving.

9

It is obvious that the history of collecting is of topical import. Given the overwhelming power of a fundamentalist concept of revelation, one that both the faithful and the non-believers of the various prophetic religions tend to associate with terror rather than with a humane outlook, it is instructive to focus on the revelatory aspects of the human world itself. One key to this is the history of collecting. Given the world-wide event cult, which purportedly relieves us of the effort of processing experience and which in part covertly and in part overtly kindles a fascination with disaster from whence it originates, the epiphanic in art not only kindles our collecting instinct, but also our interest in knowledge. The intention is for reality and all its

4 Recommended reading: Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectors and Curiosities*, London: Polity, 1990.

5 I described the House of Habsburg’s exchange of paintings as an exchange of epiphanies in May 1997 on the occasion of an attempt to explore it, at a small meeting at Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum.

horrors to become visible, and any engagement with the real would be doomed to failure without the confrontation with the imagined horror that fuels it. Confronted by the fascination with disasters, the history of collecting has a task of enlightenment to perform vis-à-vis the contemporary event cult and its chiliastic predecessors and successors. Given the economic submissiveness with which even the major collections lock into the event business (their epiphanies no longer wander from city to city, but are chased round the globe pars pro toto, yet nevertheless lose the race to gain the edge as events to a virtual-omnipresent presentation of events without time or place), a focus on epiphanies that are bound by time and place has the character of resistance. For it embodies the human species' objection to its self-destructive atomization dressed up in business sense. The history of collecting that along with the epiphanies also guards the utopias, would be an obvious ally.

10

The history of collecting as a history of epiphany – this claim that I try to make here, because in my opinion it not only belongs to the matter at hand but also the latter would not exist without the former, is as old as the act of collecting itself. This is already demonstrated by the temple treasuries, those earliest predecessors of our art museums. The claim is likewise made by the collections of relics, by those aristocratic cabinets containing curios and items of natural history, each with its own respective epiphanic legitimacy, accompanied in the nobles' picture galleries by the constant evocation of heroic female and divine male ancestors. It is also raised by the major bourgeois collections displayed in the hope of educating and edifying man. If today this claim refuses the confines of a museum and thus of a collection, it can nevertheless not forego records and documentation, and confidently endeavours to epiphanically recruit new forms of inner collection. It is a claim that cannot be satisfied at one fell swoop. Rendering it visible requires infinite painstaking historical work. But it offers compensation, for with it light that would otherwise have been extinguished is shed from the human past onto our future.

NB:

The text was written on the occasion of the foundation of the Da Ponte Institute, Vienna, which alongside librettology and research on Don Juan, focuses on the history of collecting (2002).

(trans. Jeremy Gaines)