

**LOSS, MEANING AND ABSENCE IN PERSONAL COLLECTIONS**

By

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**ILAHLEKO , INTSINGISELO NOKUNGABIKHO KOKUTHILE KWIINGQOKELELA**

**ZABANTU**

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u-Agasti 2018

## DECLARATION

I declare that LOSS, MEANING AND ABSENCE IN PERSONAL COLLECTIONS is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



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Adelle van Zyl

22 August 2018

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Date

## **TITLE**

LOSS, MEANING AND ABSENCE IN PERSONAL COLLECTIONS

## **SUMMARY**

This study explores how a narrative view of collecting can be expanded and applied to Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's installations, as well as to my own artworks. It focuses on personal and intimate collections of everyday objects that serve to edify their owner's sense of being. The project is undertaken in order to arrive at new interpretations of the themes of loss, meaning and absence through Mieke Bal's (2006) narrative theory, Susan Pearce (1994) and Mikhail Epstein's (1995) methods of collecting and Jean Baudrillard's (1996) notions of the collector.

These theories are applied to selected installations from the Kabakovs' series *Ten Characters*. My own exhibition, *S(h)elves*, is an exploration of collections, underpinned by conceptually relevant theories. Conclusions are reached by means of literary analysis and comparison of selected theorists and artworks. A reflexive approach to art-making means that theories inform art-making processes while practical developments facilitate re-evaluated perceptions which lead to new insights.

## **LIST OF KEY TERMS**

Collecting; Furniture; Hoarding; Ilya and Emilia Kabakov; Installation; Jean Baudrillard; Mieke Bal; Mikhail Epstein; Object; Thing

## **TITEL**

VERLIES, BETEKENIS EN AFWESIGHEID IN PERSOONLIKE VERSAMELINGS

## **OPSOMMING**

Hierdie studie ondersoek die maniere waarop 'n narratiewe beskouing uitgebrei kan word en toegepas kan word op Ilya en Emilia Kabakov se kuns, sowel as op my eie kunswerke. Die fokus is op persoonlike en intieme versamelings van alledaagse voorwerpe wat as verheffing van hul eienaar se sin van bestaan dien. Die projek word onderneem met die oog op nuwe interpretasies van die temas van verlies, betekenis en afwesigheid deur Mieke Bal se narratiewe teorie, Susan Pearce en Mikhail Epstein se versamelmetodes en Jean Baudrillard se idees van die versamelaar. Hierdie teorieë word toegepas op uitgesoekte weke uit die Kabakovs se reeks genaamd *Ten Characters*. My eie uitstalling, *S(h)elves*, is 'n verkenning van versamelings, onderlê deur konseptueel relevante teorieë. Gevolgtrekkings word gemaak deur middel van diskoersanalise en eksperimentele navorsing, insluitende outobiografie, outo-etnografie en outo-topografie in teorie en ook in die praktyk. 'n Refleksiewe benadering tot kunsskepping beteken dat teorieë kunsskeppingsprosesse inspireer, terwyl praktiese ontwikkelings persepsies wat geherevalueer is fasiliteer – en dit lei tot nuwe insigte.

## **LYS VAN SLEUTELTERME**

versameling; meubels; opgarings; Ilya en Emilia Kabakov; kunswerke; Jean Baudrillard; Mieke Bal; Mikhail Epstein; narratief; voorwerp; ding

## **ISIHLOKO**

ILAHLEKO , INTSINGISELO NOKUNGABIKHO KOKUTHILE KWIINGQOKELELA  
ZABANTU

## **ISISHWANKATHELO**

Esi sifundo siphengulula iindlela ekunokwandiswa ngazo imbono ebalisayo yokuqokelela, kusetyenzwe ngazo kubugcisa obakhiweyo bukallya noEmilia Kabakov's kanti nakweyam imisebenzi yobugcisa bokuzoba. Esi sifundo siqwalasela iingqokelela ezisondele emphefumlweni womntu ngezinto nje zemihla ngemihla, zinto ezo zikhulisa ukuziva komntu ngendlela ayiyo. Le projekthi/eli qweba yenziwe ngenjongo yokufumana enye indlela yokutolika imixholo yelahleko, intsingiselo nokungabikho kwezinto ezithile, kusetyenziswa ingcingane yokubalisa kaMieke Bal, neendlela zokuqokelela zooSusan Pearce noMikhail Epstein neembono zika Jean Baudrillard ngomqokeleli. Ezi ngcingane zisetyenziswa kubugcisa obakhiweyo obukhethwe kwiqela lemiboniso kaKabakovs eyaziwa ngokuba yi*Ten Characters*. Owam umboniso ekuthiwa yi*S(h)elves*, uphengulula iingqokelela ezisekelwe kwiingcingane ezifanelekileyo. Kufikelelwe kwizigqibo ngokuhlalutya iincoko nokuqhuba uphando olulinganisayo (*experimental research*), kwakunye nembali yobomi bomntu ebhalwe nguye, nophando lomgangatho apho umphandi ecamngca nzulu ngokuthile, nokuthi aphande ngeentsingiselo zezinto zobugcisa ezigciniweyo nezixatyisiweyo ngumninizo. Indlela yokuxilonga iingcinga zomntu ngokwenza ubugcisa ithetha ukuba iingcingane zikhokela iinkqubo zokwenza ubugcisa lo gama uphuhliso olwenzekayo luqhubela phambili iingcinga neembono eziphononongwe ngokutsha, nto leyo ikhokelela kwiimbono ezintsha.

## **ULUHLU LWAMAGAMA ABALULEKILEYO**

Ukuqokelela; ifenitshala; ukugcina inqwaba yezinto; ullya noEmilia Kabakov;  
Ubugcisa obakhiweyo; uJean Baudrillard; uMieke Bal; uMikhail Epstein;  
ebalisayo; into ebambekayo; into

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The staff members of the Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology of the University of South Africa, especially the Unisa Art Gallery, are acknowledged for their assistance and contribution. I also wish to thank Unisa for its generous bursary, without which this project would not have been possible.

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## PREFACE

The research for this thesis builds on several aspects of my own interests and previous studies.<sup>1</sup> These focused on museum practice, especially the natural history museum, and on concepts of collecting and cataloguing. An overlap was found with my personal hobby of birding, which resulted in an undergraduate body of work focused on the cataloguing, keeping and display of bird specimens.

This thesis should be considered from the point of view of the artist; in that the main focus of the research is leading up to a practical body of work. The study was approached from a practice-led position, whereby practice and theory inform each other interchangeably. In this instance, the study's ultimately aim is towards a practical conclusion.

This study is relevant to a specific part of western society which attributes a sense of importance to the individual being. Many cultures differ from mine in the sense that there is not such an emphasis on the individualistic self and its accompanying aim of self-fulfilment, but rather on a collective sensibility. It would be erroneous to say that such cultures do not collect at all. At the very least, they might place a greater value on collecting non-material "things", such as oral traditions and ancestral customs. The restriction of this study to a very particular section of society (that collects material culture for the edification of the personal self) needs to be kept in mind.

Because the artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov work as a collaborative team, they will be referred to as "the Kabakovs" for the sake of readability unless only one of them was involved in a particular project or discussion. In the title of this dissertation I refer to "Kabakov" for the sake of simplicity and for recognisability,

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<sup>1</sup> Bachelor of Visual Art at the University of South Africa (2005) and Postgraduate Diploma in Museum Studies at the University of Pretoria (2009).

since the artists have, up to this point in time, usually only been referred to as Kabakov.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

Unisa                      University of South Africa

USSR                      Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background**

Collecting is a vast field, and this study is a focus on a personal and intimate account of the collector's world and mind. I am reflecting on a type of collection that falls between the systematic and the sentimental. The extremes of the collecting spectrum are excluded: on the one hand, professional collecting and, on the other, the purely pathological domain of hoarding. The collections I examine are those that sit between the rationalised and the fetishist, between those that are perfectly organised, labelled and displayed, versus the ones that are really just assembled heaps of stuff. It is this liminal space, where peculiar and intimate collections of everyday objects are formed, that is of interest to this study. I am also concerned with the human reaction to material physicality. According to Julian Maynard Smith (in Ede 2005:97), "[a]rt is about human beings, which includes their response to nature. For an artist, our response to the notions of randomness, uncertainty, chaos, and catastrophe are more interesting than the phenomena themselves". The focus of this study is thus on objects and our reaction to these material things.

### **1.2 Aims and objectives**

This study aims to apply the themes of loss, meaning and absence to the notion of collecting within a visual art context. The theme of loss, in this instance, is limited to an individual's loss of part of themselves, family members, friends, or objects that were dear to them. Meaning will be discussed in this study in terms of that which gives an individual person's life more substance and depth. Absence refers to the incomplete series and the place a collector takes within their collection. These themes and their relationship with collecting are first discussed through reference to specifically applicable theorists, most notably Bal

(2006), Epstein (1995) and Baudrillard (1996). The particular scope of Bal's (2006) narrative theories is focused on literary studies and the aim is to apply her theories to visual art. In order to do this, I am considering the artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's early installations that encompass collections of everyday objects and employing the insight gained to reflect on my own art practice as culminated in the exhibition "S(h)elves" (2017).

The intention of this research is to compare and develop the conceptually relevant art-making processes of these installations to form new understandings into existing theories and my own art-making.

### **1.3 Research problem**

I aim to problematise three topics through this study. The first research concern is how a literary concept, namely Bal's (2006) view of the narrativity of collecting, can be expanded to bring new insights to the themes of loss, meaning and absence. Pearce's (1994) modes of collecting are considered in this regard, as they afford us the ability to distinguish between different types of stories in the collecting narrative. The second inquiry reviews how these themes can be applied to the visual art context of the Kabakovs' early installations in order to arrive at a new understanding of their work. The third area of investigation considers ways in which the identified themes are applicable to my own art-making approaches and processes.

### **1.4 Research question**

These problems can be summed up in a primary question which forms the crux of this thesis:

- How can Bal's (2006) literary narrative view of collecting be expanded and applied to specific visual art contexts of collecting?

New insights are found by means of a development of Bal's (2006) work and the subsequent application thereof to both an international artist's work and my own practical work. The research question thus concerns itself with the original conclusions that can be drawn from Bal's (2006) formulation of narratives and the interpretation of the Kabakovs' work alongside my own practice. The result of such an application is a visually and conceptually synergetic relationship between an international and a local artist, underpinned by a critical overview of overlapping themes.

### **1.5 Methodology**

This study makes use of two qualitative methods of research. The first is a literature study of the general relevant themes within the collecting framework as well as a critical consideration of the Kabakovs' works. The second research methodology of this study is a practical consideration and experimental application of the relevant themes to form a creative body of work that, in turn, inspires a rethinking and altered understanding of the themes of loss, meaning and absence within the field of art. Theory and practice inform, develop and influence each other in a mutually constructive manner in this research project. This study is thus the application of theory (literature analysis) to an analysis of the visual (my own work as well as that of the Kabakovs. In addition to these two research methods I employ biography (my father and husband) autobiography (my childhood experiences as well as my relationships with my father and husband), auto-ethnography (a critical, self-reflexive analysis of my own practice and art-making process) and autotopgraphy, explained by Bal (2002) as a "spatial, local, and situational 'writing' of the self's life in visual art" as tools with which I unpack the personal nature of this study.

## **1.6 Ethics**

Ethical clearance was received on 8 January 2014 from the Departmental Ethics Review Committee of the Department of Art History, Visual Arts and Musicology at the University of South Africa.<sup>2</sup> The research for this project was done in accordance with Unisa's ethical values as stipulated in the Research and Innovation policy of 2016.<sup>3</sup> According to these policies, the research undertaken here is truthful, beneficial, non-maleficent and just. My research, therefore, strives to represent both literary and artistic voices with respect and truthfulness, while retaining a critical perspective so that the work will be beneficial and of value to the research community. Non-maleficent research indicates that no harm was intended or done. All requirements concerning the ethical handling of this type of research have been met.

Two of my installations are based on the personal lives and living spaces of my husband, Daniël Rudolf van Zyl (hereafter referred to as Danie), and my father, Jan-Carel Herselman. Even though they were not directly involved in my research or the construction of these installations, private aspects of their lives are exposed to public view, for which I received their full consent.

## **1.7 Literature review**

The following section is an overview of both literary and practical influences. Literary voices include Samuel Alberti (2005), Bal (2006), Baudrillard (1996), Epstein (1995), Werner Muensterberger (1994), Timothy W Luke (1992), William Furlong (2010), Boris Groys (2006 & 2010), and Pearce (1994), while the practical influence is that of the Kabakovs.

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<sup>2</sup> Reference number: 2014\_AVME\_STUDENT\_0001.

<sup>3</sup> Based on the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research 1978). See also Unisa (2016 and 2018).

Alberti (2005) is concerned with the significance attached to a collected object and the changes in meaning that happen over a period of time. He considers different factors that contribute to these changes, of which the most notable are: the initial owner's use of the object; the history of the object as it moved around in collections; other items associated with the object, as well as meanings transferred upon it by its audience. Alberti's (2005) view of the changing essence of the collected object is applicable to my discussion of the middle of the collection.

In the essay *Telling Objects*, Bal (2006) finds a correlation between collecting and narrative. She considers the object as a medium for storytelling and poses the question of whether the object is able to act as narrator. She discusses the most basic elements of storytelling, namely the 'beginning', 'middle' and 'end', and applies them to the progression of a collection. Bal (2006:274) considers the beginning of a collection in terms of the motivation to collect and the relationship between owner and object. She emphasises the object and the emotional relationship that exists between collector and object. When discussing the middle of a collection, Bal (2006:282) focuses on the changing nature of objects: "Objects are inserted into the narrative perspective when their status is turned from object-ive [sic] to semiotic, from thing to sign." Her concern here lies with the transformation an object undergoes as it becomes part of a collection. The end of a collection is considered by Bal (2006) in terms of the metaphorical death of the collector. I will compare both concepts of progression and completion with Baudrillard's (1996) opinion on the same topics.

Baudrillard (1996:85) describes objects in terms of the French *objet* as that thing which is abstracted from its original utilitarian function to become something which is owned and which gives meaning to its owner. He devotes a large part of the chapter *A Marginal System: Collecting* to the transformation an object undergoes when it changes from being a utilitarian "tool" to becoming an owned object. These objects are then part of their owners' world and, according to him (1996:85) they "become mental precincts over which I hold sway, they become

the things of which I am the meaning". Baudrillard (1996:87) considers collecting from a psychological point of view and uses terms like "accumulation, orderliness, and aggressive retention". His view of collecting as a regressive act is discussed and juxtaposed with Bal's (2006) concept of the sense of narrative progression inherent in the act of collecting. An important aspect Baudrillard (1996) touches on, and one that forms a vital part of this study, is the position the collector takes within their collection. He (1996:91) states that people collect themselves and that the collector often becomes the final piece within a collection. Baudrillard (1996:92) also discusses the completion or finality of the collection, which corresponds with Bal's (2006:284) discussion of the death of the collector. These concepts form an important part of my practical work.

Epstein (1995:253) proposes a museum consisting of ordinary objects or "things", as he calls them, which are devoid of any commercial, historical or aesthetic value. His belief that all of human life is preserved in its objects is linked to the Kabakovs' installations. Where many psychoanalysts see the collector of individual objects as a narcissistic being, Epstein's (1995:265) collector ponders the single object from an empathetic viewpoint and creates meaning from it. I further discuss this concept in the chapter on the Kabakovs' work. I also apply Epstein's (1995:253) concept of the "profound significance" of everyday things in my own practical work.

Muensterberger (1994) builds on the work of Donald Winnicott (1953) and other psychoanalysts<sup>4</sup> that formed part of the British branch of object-relations theory.<sup>5</sup> He seeks to find the origin of the collector's urge to amass objects. Muensterberger (1994) focuses on the early phases of infant development, and he places the beginning of the urge to collect at the pre-genital years of

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<sup>4</sup> Melanie Klein, Erich Fromm, Anna Freud and Sigmund Freud, amongst others.

<sup>5</sup> Object-relations theory, according to Pearce (in Bal 2006:274), attempts to explain the origins of our psychological lives by means of the "link between our understanding of our own bodies and the imaginative construction of the material world".

personality development. The reliance on objects for comfort, and the notion that the object becomes a countermeasure against the re-experience of loss will be relevant in my discussion on the Kabakovs' characters, as well as in my own practical work.

Pearce (1994) is concerned with the reasons why people collect and focuses on the relation between subject and object. She distinguishes between three modes of collecting, namely souvenir, fetish and systematic collecting. I also agree with Pearce (1994), who states that any collection can show signs of more than one mode of collecting. In chapter four I apply these modes of collecting to my three installations respectively and show how they overlap.

Luke's (1992) description of the Kabakovs' work under the burden of Communist Russia and its ideologies inform my own view of the artist's work.

Furlong, a British conceptual artist who has collected and published a library of recorded interviews with other conceptual artists from the early 1970s, plays an important role in my understanding of the Kabakovs' work. His (2010) conversation with Ilya Kabakov centers on the communal apartment acting as a metaphor for the human condition. In this interview, Ilya Kabakov discusses the term Pathos, which forms a key element in my interpretation of their work.

For more on the Kabakov's work, see Svetlana Boym (1998), Jamey Gambrell (1995), Kabakov, Margarita and Victor Tupitsyn (1999) and Matthew J Jackson (2010).

Groys (2006) discusses the Kabakovs' work *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1988) (fig 3.3) in terms of the Soviet Union's attempt at utopia. Groys (2006) focuses on the cosmonaut, who is epitomised as the symbolic hero of this ideal. His argument forms the basis for my discussion of the Kabakovs' work in terms of the middle of the collection, where objects' meanings are formed and transformed.

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov are Russian-born, American based artists whose conceptual works and installations often involve elaborate fictional narratives. The main work that is considered in this study is *Ten Characters* (1988)<sup>6</sup> – an exhibition that can be interpreted as a large-scale installation which consists of smaller installations. These take the form of ten apartments belonging to ten fictional characters. Two of these are highlighted in my discussions. These rooms are filled with everyday objects and furniture pieces that reflect their owners' mundane yet peculiar interests and lives. The Kabakovs' work deals, in a specific way, with the living circumstances in Communist Russia and, on a universal scale, comments on or laments the postmodern human condition. It is this state of being that I identify in my own work and which makes the correlation between my work and that of the Kabakovs viable.

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov's upbringing in the poverty-stricken Union of Soviet Socialist Republics had a lasting impact on their work. The effect of Leonid Brezhnev's<sup>7</sup> Era of Stagnation<sup>8</sup> is implied in the selection of found objects they use in their installations: worn-out furniture, threadbare linen and overall sparse living material. In an installation titled *The Toilet* (1992)<sup>9</sup>, for instance, the artists critique these poor living conditions in a literal manner when they present the viewer with a dilapidated public restroom in which a family has carefully set up home. In chapter three I argue that the loss of personal wealth that was part of communist living is what propelled the Kabakovs' inhabitants, especially *The*

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<sup>6</sup> Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *Ten Characters*. (1988). Mixed media installation, dimensions unknown. Collection Unknown.

<sup>7</sup> Leonid Brezhnev was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1964 until 1982. (The Farlex Financial Dictionary 2012. Sv "Brezhnev Stagnation")

<sup>8</sup> According to The Farlex Financial Dictionary (2012. Sv "Brezhnev Stagnation"), this was a period in the 1970's when Russia, through an inability to match supply and demand, experienced a severe shortage of many goods.

<sup>9</sup> Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Toilet* (1992). Found objects, dimensions unknown. Collection unknown.

*Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1) to gather to themselves small treasures of personal belongings.

The Kabakovs' work is considered in terms of the meaning objects have for their collectors, as well as the shifting and transformation of such meaning within the collection. The installation titled *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1988) (fig 3.3) forms the basis of my discussion on the formation and transformation of objects' meaning.

The concept of absence is prominent in the Kabakovs' work. Bal's (2006:273) and Baudrillard's (1996:90) dualities of progression and regression are mirrored in the counterbalance between presence and absence. The Kabakovs' installations are permeated with empty beds and chairs, which act as signifiers for the absent inhabitants. This is considered in my practical work.

The body of work that I developed alongside this study is influenced by the concepts and theories posited in this proposal and by the works of the Kabakovs. Since this study is concerned with objects and collections, my work includes masses of found objects. In terms of objects, I consider the very ordinary, lived-in objects that people surround themselves with. The real object holds a fascination that sometimes seemingly gets lost in a depiction thereof. Muensterberger (1994:61) talks about the power and "magic" of an object and of a perceived life-force in objects. Pearce (1994:195) considers the real object to "possess the survival power of materiality" and the capacity to build up "a myth of contact and presence." By utilizing only found objects, my practical work attests to the importance of the real "thing" and its presence.

Another focus area of this research is the aspect of the psychology or (often) idiosyncratic personality of the hoarder-collector. Since this was a major factor in selecting the main artist of this discussion, my body of work reflects this notion of peculiar characters. I found a similar type of personality in the Kabakovs' imagined characters, and my installations focus on such personalities. I do not wish to show this explicitly in any way, but rather aim to create a sense of this

psychologically laden personality through the installations. In my work, I am considering Maynard Smith's (in Ede 2005:97) notion of human response to our surroundings by indicating how my "characters'" physical environments affect their sense of being.

The first installation, *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2), is based on my husband and the objects he chooses to surround himself with every day. Danie is a stutterer, and I use this as a departure point from which I consider his immersion into his computers. He does not find it easy to express himself verbally. I compare what might be perceived as a partial loss of this communication channel to the concept of loss as described by Bal (2006:276), who considers the trauma of deprivation as a starting point for the act of collecting. Through this installation, I attempt to highlight Danie's loss of a part of himself as the catalyst to his surrounding himself into his computers. His desk is usually a tangled mess of cables and computer parts. In this work, I exaggerate his assemblage of "stuff" and apply it as media and as metaphor for broken communication. We share a home office, and part of this area is dedicated to the study of birds. The hobby of birding is one of the few points of contact between my husband and myself, and it plays an integral role in our relationship. *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2) becomes an analogy of Danie's withdrawal into his own verbally non-communicative world and, through the shared activity of birding, my entering into that world and an attempt at alternative avenues of communication.

Epstein's (1995:253) idea of the immense significance of everyday objects forms the starting point for the second installation, titled *The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3). The work consists of an extremely personal and meaningful collection of yellow items, stacked and layered in a column stretching from floor to ceiling. Within this work, I explore the idea that meaning is created through our "things" – the basis of my own search for a meaningful existence. The significance of the colour yellow will be discussed in terms of my childhood, while the verticality of the work is discussed in terms of Bal's (2006:273) as well as Freud's (in Forrester 1994:226 ) concept of the prehistory of the personal self.

The installation titled *The Stamp Collector* (2017) (fig 4.4), which is based on my father, is directly informed by the Kabakovs' work *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1). The artist's imaginary inhabitant is implied by the empty chair and bed, even while he is shown as completely immersed in his own world. Yet where the Kabakovs invented their characters and their worlds, I found a similarly idiosyncratic real-life character in my father. Like *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1), who surrounded himself with his valuable possessions, my father has literally immersed himself in his stamp collection by combining his bedroom and study into a single space where he spends most of his day.

*The Stamp Collector* (2017) (fig 4.4) is a replica of my father's study. Through the sourcing of appropriate pieces of furniture and personal items, I consider the idea of the sign, whereby a thing can at once be a metaphor *and* the real thing. I also consider the concept of the one-to-one scale map. Bal (2006:274) and Baudrillard's (1996:90) dualities of progressions and regression, as well as that of absence versus presence, are deliberated through this installation. The completion of the collection becomes an important factor in this work, as my father is in the process of concluding his collection, in order to bequeath it to his grandchildren.

### **1.8 Overview of chapters**

In chapter two I consider the nature of objects and the collections that they form. Pearce's (1994) three modes of collecting, namely systematic, souvenir and fetish are considered and extended to include the idea of the collection of single objects. I apply the themes of loss, meaning and absence to the concept of collection by expanding on Bal's (2006) observation of the collection as a narrative. Her application of the three parts of storytelling (beginning, middle and end) to collections is used to show a correlation with the themes of loss, meaning and absence, as reflected in the title of this thesis. In addition to this, I consider the phenomena of hoarding and its correlations with collecting. This

chapter serves to address the first research concern, namely the understanding and expanding of Bal's (2006) notion of the collection narrative.

In chapter three I consider how the themes of loss, meaning and transformation are applied to the Kabakovs' work. This discussion takes place with reference to two of the apartments in the Kabakovs' *Ten Characters* (1988) namely *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1) and *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1988) (fig 3.3). In this chapter I address the second research concern, which questions how Bal's (2006) narrative view of collecting can be applied to a visual art context.

In chapter four, which deals with my practical work, I use Bal's (2006) tripartite division of narrativity to inform and structure three installations. These installations are also discussed in terms of overlaps and disparities with the Kabakovs' work. The chapter aims to demonstrate how the third area of concern, which involves the application of Bal's (2006) theories to my own practical work, is addressed.

Chapter five concludes this discussion through an overview of the core discussions of this study. I review the main concepts of loss, meaning and absence, and how these come to the fore in the theoretical as well as the practical applications of the Kabakovs' and my installations. In this chapter, I reflect on the successes and limitations of this study, highlight new insights that emerged, and identify ways in which the research could be further developed in the future.

## CHAPTER TWO: COLLECTING OBJECTS

In this section, using Baudrillard's (1996) notion of the *objet*, I give an overview of the object and its importance in the context of collecting. After this, I consider Pearce's (1994) three modes of collecting, namely systematic, souvenir and fetishist, and add to this list *the collection of one*. Bal's (2006) concept of the narrative aspect of collecting is unpacked through a consideration of the beginning, middle and end of the collection. Finally, I consider the collector as hoarder. The aim of this section is to address the research concern of how the narrative aspect of collections can be expanded theoretically.

### 2.1 Objects

Since my concern lies with specific themes within the narrative aspect of collecting, it is necessary to first contextualise collections and the objects that make up collections. Are the things that we collect different to other objects around us? If not, why would a person make a distinction between his collection of objects and the rest of the material world? My research investigates the question of what it is that constitutes a thing or an object. I also consider why some things, which are not necessarily useful, are more important to us than other, useful items. It can be said that a thing becomes an *object* when it transcends the purpose it was initially intended for, when it transforms from being a utilitarian tool to an object that has meaning. In this chapter, I consider how such changes take place and how this informs the notion of collecting.

Baudrillard (1996:85) has written extensively on the topic. He uses the word *objet* to describe a thing which is a source of passion or love. For him, objects become the site of our emotions. They acquire the capacity to enter into a relationship with their new owner because they possess the ability to permeate their owner's sense of being.

When an object has completely abandoned its original function, it exists purely for the purpose of being owned. According to Baudrillard (1996:86), it becomes “abstracted from its function”, as it “takes on a strictly subjective status”. Bal (2006:283) discusses the same concept and states that “objects are inserted into the narrative perspective when their status is turned from object-ive [sic] to semiotic, from thing to sign”. An object that is collected takes on the role of belonging or being owned.

Russell Belk (1988:139) considers the object’s function as being an extension of our sense of self. Of our basic states of existence, namely *being*, *having* and *doing*, he places most emphasis on the state of having. Baudrillard (1996:101) believes that *having* is directly linked to *being*. Belk (1988:146) contrasts this prominence of *having* with the Marxist view of *doing*. For Marx, *doing* leads to an edification of the self, while *having* leads to a capitalist state of over-indulgence. In my discussion on the Kabakovs' work in chapter three, I consider the impact of this socialist<sup>10</sup> view on his work.

## **2.2 Modes of collecting**

Both Pearce (1994) and Epstein (1995) distinguish between three types or modes of collecting. According to Pearce (1994:194), these are distinguishable based on the motivation of the collector. These categories are not mutually exclusive, as one collection can have attributes of all three distinctions. These overlaps become particularly obvious in my practical work, which I discuss further in chapter four.

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<sup>10</sup> Ilya and Emilia Kabakov lived and worked in the USSR from the 1950s until the late 1980s, at the height of Socialism.

### **2.2.1 Systematic collecting**

The first type of collecting is what Pearce (1994) calls systematic, and what Epstein (1995) refers to as the catalogue-museum. This type of collection consists of specimens. For Epstein (1995:253), “things possessing the significance of typicality are chosen for their ability to present an entire class or category of similar things”. Pearce (1994:201) also uses the word “example” to explain the selection of one individual item to represent others that are alike: “Systematic collecting, therefore, works ... by the selection of examples, intended to stand for all the others of their kind and to complete a set.” Both Pearce (1994) and Epstein (1995), therefore, consider a type of collection that is based on order, seriality and a focus on representation through specimens.

Systematic collections rely on principles of organisation (Pearce 1994:202). This reflects the notion of structure and logical progression that we (as post-Victorian scientists) superimposed on an outer reality. According to Pearce (1994:202), such collections “are formed by the imposition of ideas of classification and seriality on the external world”. The systematic collection is thus recognised by its methodical nature. In section 4.1 I apply this to my practical work and argue that both birding as a hobby and ornithology as a branch of science can be seen as a systematic type of collecting.

### **2.2.2 Souvenir collecting**

The second type of seriality Pearce (1994) refers to is the collecting of souvenirs or objects which have significance because of their link to a certain person or place. This is possibly the most common type of collecting, as almost every person (in the western society I belong to) owns an assortment of mementoes. According to Susan Sontag (in Pearce 1994:196), the function of the memento is to make public events private. The nature of such a collection is usually overtly sentimental and awkward to share with others. In my practical work, I present the keepsake in magnitudes to the public in an attempt to re-enter it into the public realm and to readdress the notion of its privacy and sentimentality.

### 2.2.3 Fetishist collecting

The last type of collecting is what Pearce (1994:199) calls fetishist<sup>11</sup>, and what Epstein (1995:253) calls the rarity. Pearce (Ibid) describes a fetish object as carrying something “magically active”. Muensterberger (1994:9) calls this animism, and he suggests that “affection becomes attached to things, which in the eye of the beholder can become animatized like amulets.” Fetishist collections often center on odd selections of items, like matchboxes or cigarette cards. There seem to be no rational reason for the collection to exist, other than the collector’s (peculiar) fascination with this specific type of object. The objects that make up this collection are “detached from any context” (Pearce 1994:200) and the fetishist collection exists purely to create a private universe for the collector.

### 2.3 A collection of one

Closely related to the concept of fetishist collections are those that consist of singular items. When individual items are inserted into a collection, they can gain or lose some meaning. Baudrillard’s (1996:92) singular item gains enormous importance when it is the last missing piece in a series. Conversely, Alberti’s (2005:565) “rare specimen” has a pronounced importance of its own, which is reduced when placed in a series of similarly significant or meaningful objects. Therefore, an object either gains in meaning if it is missing from the collection or loses its individual power when inserted into a series. In addition to these two views of the singular object, I propose a type of collection that consists of disparate yet significant objects, where their individual meanings remain, even when they become part of a series. The only common denominator amongst these objects would be their differences. In this type of collection, each object

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<sup>11</sup> The word fetish stems from the Portuguese *feitico*, which means amulet or charm (Pearce 1994:199).

that is included gains in meaning because it increases the *gestalt*<sup>12</sup> of the collection. Extending from this, and further discussed in my practical work, I propose that a collection can even be made up of a singular item.

#### **2.4 Collecting as narrative**

The next section of this chapter is a consideration of Bal's (2006) narrative view of collecting and a further application thereof, with support from Epstein (1995), Pearce (1994), and Russell Belk (1988). I agree with Bal (2006: 273) that any collection can be seen as a story with a sense of movement, progression, and transformation. This sense of narrative flows from her interpretations of objects as having the ability to tell stories:

[O]ne must ask the question: How far can you go? What if the medium consists of real, hard material objects? Things, called objects for a reason, appear to be the most "pure" form of objectivity. So examining the question of the inherent fictionality of all narratives can as well begin here. In other words, can things be, or tell stories? (Bal 2006:271)

The stories that objects tell follow the same progression of any tale, with a beginning, a middle and an end. Each of these phases of an object's (or collection's) life is distinguished by different features. In the next three sections, I explain how the notions of loss, meaning and absence are related to these phases.

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<sup>12</sup> Gestalt theory implies that the whole is perceived as being greater than the sum of its parts. (Encyclopædia Britannica 2017. Sv "gestalt psychology")

### 2.4.1 The beginning

According to Bal (2006:273), it is only possible to pinpoint the beginning of a collection in retrospect. The first object is rarely consciously chosen to be the start of a collection. At that stage, it was merely chosen because it holds some special meaning for its new owner. Bal (2006:273) states that it might even have been possessed unintentionally, or acquired haphazardly. The second and third object may be chosen for the same reason or because it resembles the first piece, but it is only after many items have been collected that the objects show themselves to be *a collection*. Only then is it possible to look back and say: *that* was the first item. According to Bal (2006:273), it is when we look back and reconsider the narrative development of the collection that we may discover the first, accidental, object and thereby the beginning of the collection. Bal (2006:273) likens this to the narrative element *in media res*,<sup>13</sup> which means we are thrown into the middle of a story and must look back to find its beginning.

In discussing the beginning of a collection, motivation plays an important role. Bal (2006:275) considers motivation as “another part of the narrative aspect of collecting and its intrinsically ungraspable beginning.” Pearce (1994:194) questions the motivation for collecting behaviour and asks what it is that drives a person to grant such significance to objects. One answer lies with Object-relations theory, a branch of psychology which emphasizes the role objects play in a child's development.

In an attempt to understand the relationship a collector has with his objects, I consider the child's first object. Donald Winnicott (1953), along with other psychoanalysts like Freud and Klein, is of the opinion that the mother (in particular the mother's breast) is the child's first object. At first, the mother and the breast are internal to the infant and seemingly a part of himself because the

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<sup>13</sup> *In media res* is Latin for “in the midst of things” (Encyclopædia Britannica 2017. Sv “in media res”).

very young infant does not distinguish between himself and his mother (Winnicott 1953:94). Usually, the mother would offer her breast whenever the child cries from hunger. According to Winnicott (1953:93), however, the infant does not know that it is the mother who presents the breast, but instead believes that it is their own need that creates it. The child thus possesses the ability to make the breast appear whenever needed, and so has mastery over it. There are, of course, times when the breast does not appear, and the infant begins to realise that the mother and her breast are external or separate from him. Belk (1988:146) is of the opinion that it is the mother's inability to nourish the child at all times that causes the infant to realise that she is a separate object that is apart from him: "The lack of responsiveness to the infant's desire makes it likely that she is the first object that the infant regards as not self." The child soon begins to distinguish between self and environment. This newly formed realisation that the mother is separate from the infant is a major source of anxiety.

Yet the infant usually discovers that this tension can be relieved through some other source of stimulation. Winnicott (1953:91) states that "there may emerge some thing or some phenomenon ... which becomes vitally important to the infant for use at the time of going to sleep, and is a defence against anxiety, especially anxiety of depressive type." The infant is able to defy the unavailable mother and her withheld breast by finding solace in another object. This phenomenon usually takes the form of a teddy bear or blanket, and it is a normal, almost expected aspect of infant development in certain cultures. Winnicott (1953:89) noted its acceptability in Western cultures: "[M]ost mothers allow their infants some special object and expect them to become, as it were, addicted to such objects." The child thus learns to invest his need for comfort in objects that are not the mother.

This object was coined "the transitional object" by Winnicott in 1953 (Litt 1986:383). The transitional object stands for many things: it acts as an extension of the self, as a substitute for the mother, and ultimately as coping mechanism

against fear and loss. Transitional objects often endure through infancy and childhood into adulthood. Such an object does not lose its meaning when the infant grows up, nor is it cast aside at some point. Rather, its meaning becomes diffused over a range of other objects. Bal (2006:276) demonstrates how this resurfaces as collecting behaviour in pre-adolescents: "Small children do this, collecting gravel, sticks, the odd pieces that grown-ups call junk, but which, for the child, has no quality other than constituting an extension of the self, called for to remedy the sense of being cut off." The transitional object, therefore, exists in different formats throughout the child's formative years.

At a later stage in life, when the (now grown up) individual re-experiences trauma or anxiety, they might return to transitional objects. Baudrillard (1996:88) describes the retained object as fulfilling "the demand for a definitive or fully realized being" and further states that "whatever it is that man lacks is invested in the object." The adult, therefore, returns to physical objects for their ability to pacify. In popular reality television shows like *Hoarders*<sup>14</sup> and *Clean House*<sup>15</sup>, the loss of a loved one is often mentioned as a catalyst for adult collecting or hoarding behaviour. The adult's object not only continues to calm in times of tension but also is applied pro-actively to counter anxiety. The object thus acts as the adult's safeguard against the potential trauma of another loss.

An additional type of loss that is relevant here is the loss of objects. Belk (1988:142) speaks of the loss of possessions and the trauma of the loss of self that follows. It can be argued that if our objects are seen as part of ourselves, then the loss of these objects must be felt as deeply as the loss of a part of ourselves. Studies have shown that when people are deprived of certain things their hoarding tendencies increase. According to Belk (1988:142), victims of object loss experience the same stages of grief as someone who lost a loved one,

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<sup>14</sup> Aired on *The Arts and Entertainment Network (A&E)* from 2009 to 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Aired on *Style Network* from 2003 to 2013.

“moving from denial to anger, to depression, and finally, to acceptance (often after many months).” Even though object loss might not be felt on the scale of the loss of a person, it is still significant, since objects share the same spatial and temporal dimensions that our bodies (and those of our loved ones) do. Belk (1988:143) also discusses the institutionalised loss of objects, for example, at prisons and boarding schools. This is relevant in the Kabakovs' work, where the socialist loss of personal wealth is what drives their characters to surround themselves with their odd assortments of personal belongings. The beginning of any collection is thus tied to the type of loss that reminds an individual (although probably subconsciously) of the disparity between the self and its others.

#### **2.4.2 The middle**

When considering the middle of the collection, the focus falls on the transformation of objects from their utilitarian functions to being owned. As stated earlier, any object is created with a task in mind, but its original purpose is sometimes abandoned. Its new function is now simply to belong.<sup>16</sup> According to Baudrillard (1996:86), these two functions stand in inverse ratio to each other. At one extreme, we find the strictly practical object, and at the opposite extreme, the pure object, devoid of any function and abstracted from its use. As it becomes part of a collection it takes on a completely subjective status.

It is in the middle of a collection where the meaning of an object becomes important. As Pearce (1994:1) states, a collected object is something that comes to us from the past, and it comes with meaning attached to it. Objects are permeated with meaning and often act as metaphors. Epstein (1995:257) compares the object to a poetic trope, "whose literal meaning coincides with its

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<sup>16</sup> This is, of course, not entirely true of the gift-shop type of souvenirs that were made specifically for such a purpose. These objects, however, move from being an impersonally mass-manufactured “thing” to being an object that is connected to a specific time and place, along with its associated memories.

material existence and everyday function, but whose figurative meaning embraces the entirety of experiences expressed in it." This notion of the accumulation of significance is supported by Alberti (2005:562), who is of the opinion that an object will, throughout its career, amass a history of changes in associations and contexts. The collected object thus brings with it a conglomeration of meanings, as it carries the knowledge of its origin, function, history and past and present associations.

When placed in the context of the collection, the object receives an extra set of meanings, depending on its place in the collection and the things that surround it. Epstein (1995:260) talks about the middle of the narrative and the change in meaning as an object moves around in a collection. He (1995:260) describes the "mobile, changeable, wandering essence of any thing". Alberti (2005:568) states that "the meanings of an object were impacted upon not only by its arrangement and place in the overall classification, but also by its immediate display environment". An object's meaning is thus as much transformed through its inclusion in a collection as by the objects that come before and after it. In turn, the collector is transformed, as they are now the owner of an object that has acquired an expanded set of meanings. I am thus of the opinion that a collection can be viewed as a liminal space or a threshold where objects transition between different meanings.

### **2.4.3 The end**

According to Baudrillard (1996:91), we inevitably collect ourselves, and he goes as far as saying that the collector himself is the final piece in the collection when he writes, "any collection comprises a succession of items, but the last in the set is the person of the collector." For both Bal (2006:284) and Baudrillard (1996:92), the end of a collection is linked to the concept of death. I agree with both authors' view of the completion of the collection as reaching perceived perfection. This negates the need for the collector to continue, and so brings about their symbolic death. It is the only way to properly, or perfectly, complete

a collection. In keeping with the narrative theme, Bal (2006:285) states that “(c)ompletion may be a simple way of putting an end to a collecting narrative – defining it, so to speak, as a short story – in order to begin a new one.” It can be argued that all other conclusions are merely the result of abrupt endings that force the collector to sell his items, to move them to the back of his mind, or to abandon them in favour of something else.

To truly complete a collection – to bring about its perfection – is to die alongside it, while to actively collect is to keep the series alive. For the collector, continuing to amass objects is a way to postpone its completion and to defer death. Like Bal (2006), Baudrillard (1996:92) states that the absence of the final object “would be what enables him merely to rehearse his death (and so exorcise it) by having an object represent it.” He is of the opinion that the completion of the collection can be put on hold, and he questions if collections are ever meant to be completed. I agree with this opinion and ask if collections are not perhaps most alive when they are missing a few last pieces?

## **2.5 The dark side of collecting**

Collecting is not always seen as a positive act which edifies the self. For Baudrillard (1996:106) there is a more sinister side to collectors. He sees them as persons who “invariably have something impoverished and inhumane about them.” He (1996:105) sees collecting as a regressive, solitary act, and he asks: “Can man ever use objects to set up a language that is more than a discourse addressed to himself?” When collecting is left unchecked, it often takes over the life of the collector. While my installations attempt to overcome this critique of the collector as solitary creature by engaging three collectors (myself, my husband and my father) with one another, as well as with the public, a sense of the regression and lonely separation remains. This notion of isolation and deterioration is evident in the Kabakov’s characters, who insulate themselves in their secluded universes.

Collecting, it seems, becomes hoarding when the collector is unable to let anything go. Both collectors and hoarders are often called anal-retentive. Where the habit of collecting stems from the oral phase of infant development (to take a thing and to make it part of oneself), hoarding stems from the anal phase. According to Baudrillard (1996:87), the process of collecting “constitutes a regression to the anal stage, which is characterised by accumulation, orderliness, aggressive retention, and so on.” By holding back everything, one has ultimate mastery over all of one’s objects. Yet, as a person takes ultimate control over what leaves his body (or his house), he forgoes the ability to select and discard. The hoarder, through an attempt to play master over all his objects, is unable to let go of anything, thus lacking the capacity for selection, a critical component of collecting.

One of the most notable characteristics of the hoarder is the inability to bring order to their objects, or clutter, and to distinguish between important and unimportant items. This inability to process information is one of four deficits that cause hoarding, according to Frost and Hartl (2003:167, 171):

A great deal of the clutter found in the homes of hoarders appears to be associated with difficulties in organizing possessions. This is associated with the general indecisiveness demonstrated by compulsive hoarders. [They] may have trouble making decisions because of a tendency to review every piece of relevant information, however unimportant, before making a decision.

It thus seems that people who hoard have more complex concepts, meaning that they define individual category boundaries more narrowly. At the same time, hoarders tend to entertain a wide range of categories, which results in a mass of groupings, each of which contains only a small number of objects. Hoarding is thus, partly, the result of such collectors’ inability to distance themselves from the objects in order to synthesize categories. Baudrillard (1996:87) sees organising as a problem to which there is never a final answer and describes it as “an ever-disappointed effort to achieve a total integration.” My argument is that any constructed category is spatiotemporal, meaning it is only true at one point

in time and place. This view of the superficiality of categories might offer a glimpse into the mind of hoarders, who cannot decide *when* and *where* should be taken as a starting point for the act of categorizing. Hoarders move from one extreme to another: they shun oversimplification and lean towards a complexity that is so overwhelming that they are paralysed.

Apart from not being able to create functional categories for piles of stuff, it seems that hoarders also suffer from an overabundance of emotional anxieties and fear. According to Frost and Hartl (2003:174), “people who hoard appear to overestimate threat.” This sense of fear stems from the sense of loss that I discussed earlier. According to Greenberg et al (1990 in Frost & Hartl 2003:171), “some authors have suggested that the early experience of loss may be tied to the disorder.” Erich Fromm (1947 in Frost & Hartl 2003:163) states that “hoarders depend on acquiring and saving things for their sense of security, and they use acquisition and saving as a mechanism to escape fear.” As mentioned before, behavioural avoidance of the experience of loss can thus be seen as another cause of hoarding.

In conclusion, this chapter contextualised seriality by considering the object which is owned, as opposed to the rest of the material world around us. This is done in reference to Bal’s (2006:283) notion of the semiotic role of the object and Baudrillard’s (1996:85) consideration of the *objet*. I considered Pearce’s (1994) and Epstein’s (1995) distinctions between three modes of collecting, namely systematic, souvenir and fetishist, and proposed another type of collection consisting of singular objects. An exploration of Bal’s (2006) idea of the three narrative elements (beginning, middle and end) followed with support from Winnicott (1953), Belk (1988), Pearce (1994), Epstein (1995), Alberti (2005) and Baudrillard (1996). After this, I reviewed collecting as it moves into the realm of hoarding. These considerations all function to address the question of the different types of stories that are being told through our objects and collections. The section also serves to inform the first part of this study’s research question,

namely how Bal's (2006) narrative view of collecting can be understood and expanded.

## CHAPTER THREE: ILYA & EMILIA KABAKOV: *TEN CHARACTERS*

In this chapter, the Kabakovs' installations are discussed in the context of collections of objects. The themes identified in Bal's (2006) narrative view of collecting, namely loss, meaning and absence, form the basis of discussions of the Kabakovs' installations. This chapter involves itself with the research concern of how Bal's (2006) literary theory is applicable to a visual art context. This is achieved through the identification of themes in the artworks that correlate with specific literary theories, while additional authors and theories are employed to support the developing discourse.

### 3.1 Loss and poverty

In this section, I consider how the Kabakovs' installations are permeated with a sense of poverty, which stems from a loss of personal wealth. This serves as an illustration of Bal's (2006) sense of loss as a catalytic agent for a person's drive to surround her- or himself with objects that both reflect, and become a part of, themselves.

As stated previously, the Kabakovs' *Ten Characters* (1988) is a large-scale installation consisting of ten small apartments with shared communal spaces. The idea of these communal apartments originated from the communist regime's confiscation of luxury Moscow apartments in the 1970s (Luke 1992:138). By placing several families into each of these homes, strange living arrangements were created. According to Luke (1992:138), random people were thrown together, stripped of their privacy, and forced to share bathrooms and kitchens with strangers.

Some of the Kabakovs' apartments were openly accessible to visitors, while others were boarded up, offering only a glimpse of the interior. The two-toned walls remind viewers of government institutions like hospitals, prisons and boarding schools. This reflects in Belk's (1988:142) consideration of the loss of

objects, specifically by means of an institutional decree (cf. section 2.4.1). Luke (1992:138-139) describes the aura of the exhibit in terms of its sense of scantiness:

[It] reproduces the almost third world quality of everyday Soviet life by bracketing one's awareness of cramped, gloomy rooms, exposed and broken light fixtures, and lack of personal privacy... . Like the collective spaces of the Soviet Union itself, the individual rooms of the apartment are rough-hewn, unstable, and strangely decorated with a mixture of scientific socialist bric-a-brac and the detritus of well-worn material poverty.

Through this installation, the Kabakovs create an image of Communist living at its most intense. The artists worked in Russia during the 1970s, when the Era of Stagnation reached its pinnacle (Farlex Financial Dictionary 2012. Sv "Brezhnev Stagnation.") This 'Era of Stagnation', reflected in the Kabakovs' installation, recalls George Orwell's (1961) dystopian novel *1984*, in which three super-states are perpetually engrossed in a constructed war. The function of this fictional war and its ensuing military overspending is to keep the proletariat suppressed and uneducated. In Orwell's (1961:191) words:

The essential act of war is destruction, not necessarily of human lives, but of the products of human labour. War is a way of ... sinking in the depths of the sea, materials which may otherwise be used to make the masses too comfortable, and hence, in the long run, too intelligent.

The Kabakovs' characters, like Orwell's, experienced an immense loss – the loss of personal freedom and of their personal wealth. Furlong (2010:100, 103) describes the resultant sense of hardship as follows:

So in a way the apartment is merely being used metaphorically as a way of exploring the human condition. The installations here seem to be inhabited by, on the one hand, comic characters, and, on the other, very tragic characters. There is [...] a sense of the private, of withdrawing into a private space. There is a sense of private, personal survival being investigated here.

Each of the characters is thus trying to make sense of this madness in a personal way. The Kabakovs feel a type of kind pity towards their inhabitants, which reflect a sense of pathos prevalent in all of their works. Luke (1992:150) considers these characters' escape into their own worlds as a natural effect of the strange situation they are forced to live in: "Given this institutionalized disorder, the various personal worlds that these characters build for themselves within their rooms are actually very sane mechanisms for coping with this almost insane social situation." Ilya Kabakov (in Furlong 2010:100) describes their inhabitants as fleeing into their own safe spaces, away from the reigning madness, as each person "protects the self from surrounding others." This correlates with psychoanalyst Muensterberger's (1994:9) opinion that the personal object, or collection of objects, takes over the function of the teddy bear or blanket, which is to comfort and soothe during periods of trauma.

At the centre of my discussion on the Kabakovs' work is the installation titled *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1). The work consists of a room filled with numerous scraps of paper and rubbish, neatly labelled and organised in display cabinets and cupboards. Amongst the masses of "things" stand a sorting table, a chair and a bed. At the entrance to the room is an explanation of the scene, including a short essay written by the tenant (Merewether 2006:32). In this essay, titled *Garbage*,<sup>17</sup> the inhabitant describes the importance of these scraps, as they are, to him, the only real evidence of a life lived.

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<sup>17</sup> Addendum A



Figure 3.1, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* 1988.



Figure 3.2, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (detail) 1988.

Upon entering the apartment of *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1), the viewer is presented with a narrow, corridor-like room. As with the rest of the installation, the room is sparsely furnished and decorated and contains only the most essential of furniture. To one side stands a narrow trestle which reminds viewers of those belonging to state institutions. The bedding consists of a single, threadbare blanket. The rest of the room is filled with shelves, cupboards and display cabinets. These storage spaces are filled with hundreds of fragments of rubbish, neatly ordered and each presented with its own short inscription. The inscription under a scrap of fabric reads “put under the iron, but it later fell off”; under a splinter of wood: “old stick which held up the flower by the window”; and below a piece of white plastic: “Nikolai squashed a plug during repairs” (fig 3.2). The viewer is presented with a room that belongs to a very peculiar person, one who ascribes a sense of importance to the items that any other normal person would discard without any thought.

*The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1998) (fig 3.1) uses loss as motivation to gather to himself things in which he finds meaning. The order and care with which he treats these fragments of rubbish testify to a sense of veneration. His actions affirm Epstein's (1995) significance of everyday things. Luke (1992:139) notes that this sense of reverence permeates the whole installation by stating that "there is also an undeniably rich spiritual or intellectual aura in every room that few average consumers in the West ever come to know."

The Kabakovs' idea of pathos is relevant in this work, where we are invited into the life of a person who is faced with a crisis, who cannot distinguish between rubbish and valuable things, and who inevitably deems every bit of scrap crucial to his being. This observation is further substantiated by the artist:

Grouped together, bound in folders, these papers comprise the single uninterrupted fabric of an entire life, the way it was in the past and the way it is now. And though inside these folders there appears to be an orderless heap of pulp, for me there is an awful lot in this garbage, almost everything. Moreover, strange as it seems, I feel that it is precisely the garbage, the very dirt where important papers and simple scraps are mixed and unsorted, that comprises the genuine and only real fabric of my life, no matter how ridiculous and absurd it seems from the outside (Ilya Kabakov 1988).

In opposition to the view of the hoarder as being anal-retentive, I propose the hoarder to be a person who experiences the empathy of things and who recognises significance and meaning in objects. Even though hoarders surround themselves with things that, to the rest of the world, may appear to be junk, those fragments of material reality have meaning for them, otherwise they would not find it so difficult to let go of them.

The poverty and loss experienced by the Kabakovs' inhabitants thus serve as a catalyst for them to surround themselves with whatever objects that seem meaningful to them, and which will, in turn, reinforce their own sense of being. This confirms Bal's (2006) notion of loss at the beginning of the collection.

### 3.2 Meaning and transformation

In this section, I consider how objects acquire new meanings when they are entered into a collection, how this meaning can change and how this shift in meaning ultimately leads to a transformation in the collector. Alberti (2005:559-560) calls this shift in the meaning of objects “the mechanics of the movement of things” as he considers changes and new events to be part of each object’s “biography”, or its “metaphorical ‘life’ or ‘career’”. Baudrillard (1996:85) states that objects “become things of which I am the meaning”, so it would follow that there is an exchange of meaning between object and owner. If the object’s meaning changes as its biography is expanded, it would imply a change in the owner, who is now the master of an altered or enriched object.

In *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1), it can be seen how the transformation of objects takes place by analysing the artist’s incorporation of discarded pieces of junk into a series of meaningful items. Rejected objects, having fulfilled their tasks and headed for the rubbish dump, were seized and given a new set of meanings as evidence and markers of their owner's being. Throughout the Kabakovs' installations, it is evident how objects form an intrinsic part of their owners' world, and enter into a relationship with them.

*The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment* (1988) (fig 3.3) is another of the Kabakovs' spaces where a shift in the relationship between objects and owner is evident. The apartment walls are covered in propagandist posters from floor to ceiling. Against the furthest wall stands an unsteady bed – again, only with the most basic of linen. The most prominent feature in this room is a massive catapult and, directly above it, a gaping hole in the ceiling. The whole room is covered in its dust and debris. The only other objects in the room are a pair of shoes, some drinking cups, a small scale model of a projectile shooting from a house into the atmosphere (fig 3.4) and a few drawings related to this model. This chaotic room, barricaded from viewers by means of a couple of

wooden planks, reads like a crime scene, where the viewer is left to make sense of residual fragments.



Figure 3.3, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* 1988.



Figure 3.4, Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment* (detail) 1988.

Bal's (2006:271) question of whether things can tell (or be) stories is answered here, as we are able to piece together the inhabitant's life story by sifting through the rubble and considering the items of his everyday life.

Ilya Kabakov, in an interview with Furlong (2010:101), speaks of their apartments as prison cells, a notion which will be contrasted with my own work in chapter four. Where their other characters succeeded in escaping their daily prisons metaphorically, through their own peculiar habits, this tenant managed to escape his literally. Ilya Kabakov (in Furlong 2010:101) describes the work in terms of the madness of the utopian ideal and the tragic hopefulness of its pursuer:

It is about an attempt to get into the other world by your own means, and although this character has tried to get into the other world by this crazy invention, it has a kind of pathos because it is obviously not adequate. It seems to us that it is silly and comic and idiotic. On the other hand, when he flew away, nobody found him on earth afterwards, so it may have been a successful experiment. We have no proof of the contrary.

Bal (2006:283) speaks of the violent act of moving an object around in a collection, as established connotations are severed. She is also of the opinion that it is with violence that an object is taken from its original setting. There is a poetic sense of violence done to these posters as they are torn from their initial function of uniting a nation and moved to their new function of inspiring a person to build a catapult which would enable him to escape his surroundings. The sense that this person used the posters as motivation is enforced by Groys (2006:5), who states that “he didn’t get there through his own strength alone but by virtue of the energy of these collective dreams”. The objects in this person’s collection have been altered and, in turn, facilitated the transformation of their owner.

In the afterword to Orwell’s *1984*, Fromm (1961:318) asks the question: “Can human nature be changed in such a way that man will forget his longing for freedom?” I am of the opinion that the Kabakovs' character, who lived in a similarly restricted world, gives us his answer: Not only will we continue to long for freedom, we will use the spirit which suppressed us as catalyst and catapult towards it. Groys (2006:6) describes the inhabitant’s flight to freedom in terms of an almost pathetic, criminal application: “For this is where the dream of a global, cosmic, communist future has been purloined under the cover of darkness, privatised and misused for one person’s private, lonely ecstasy.” *The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment* (1988) (fig 3.3) was thus able to gather enough objects that, in their masses, became a tangible source of motivation for him.

When considering Groys' (2006) interpretation of *The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment* (1988) (fig 3.3), a sense of negativity and bitterness becomes evident in the work. This will be contrasted in my own work, which searches for meaning and communion between things and people. This section serves as a substantiation of how objects' meanings or biographies change when they are collected, and how that leads to the transformation of the collector.

### **3.3 Absence and presence**

In this section, I consider how the concept of absence, which forms a part of my research question, is evident in the Kabakovs' work. A key element in these installations is the sense of movement between advancement and recession. This can be linked to Bal's (2006) sense of a progression of the collecting narrative, as opposed to Baudrillard's (1996) sense of regression of the collector. As the collection moves towards being completed, the collector regresses "into the ultimate abstraction of a delusional state" (Baudrillard 1996:106). In collecting, there is thus an inverse relation between going forward and backward, which is reflected in the Kabakovs' work. According to Furlong (2010:102), the dualities of progression versus regression manifest as a sense of the unfinished in the artists' work. Groys (2010:120) refers to this as a process of "evolving out of waste and dissolving back into waste". Ilya Kabakov, as quoted by Furlong (2010:102), states that "rubbish is very much a symbol of this uncertainty of movement ... it is a symbol of construction and destruction". In an essay titled *The Dump*,<sup>18</sup> one of the Kabakovs' (in Merewether 2006) characters describes rubbish as taking over our lives and as being evidence of the continuous cycle of growth and decay.

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<sup>18</sup> Addendum B

The building across the street has been under construction for 18 years already, and it is impossible to tell it apart from the ruins of the other buildings which were demolished in order to build this one. This new one, which has been a ruin now for a long time where some men occasionally swarm about, may at some point be finished, although they say that the blueprints are very outdated and have been redone many times and it even seems that they have been lost, and the first floor is covered with water... Looking at it, it is difficult to understand whether it is being built or torn down, and it may be both at the same time (Ilya Kabakov 1988).

The Kabakovs' USSR is filled with chaos. In physical science, the Second Law of Thermodynamics states that the amount of entropy (or disorder) always increases in a closed system.<sup>19</sup> If there is no external input (from human interference, for instance) things will become more and more chaotic. The Kabakovs' chaotic world thus speaks of the absence of human order and intervention, or at the very least of the lack of sufficient human presence and interference to bring about a significant improvement to the reigning chaos. In this instance, absence and regression are interwoven.

It can, therefore, be argued that the dualities of progression versus regression are echoed in the dichotomies of absence versus presence. When discussing the end of a collection the concept of absence comes to mind and can be identified in the works of the Kabakovs. Our attention is drawn to the empty chairs and beds in these works. In a visual art context, the empty chair is a metaphorically loaded object which alludes to an absent person. Jacques Derrida (1973:156) speaks of the trace of something as that to which presence is implied by its absence: "The trace is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself." By pointing out the absence of something, its presence is called into being. In the Kabakovs' work, we are

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<sup>19</sup> According to Malley, et al (2016).

constantly reminded of the apartments' inhabitants by means of traces: empty chairs and beds, items of clothing and empty coffee mugs.

In this section, I have demonstrated how the loss that Bal (2006) speaks of is evident in the Kabakovs' work, which has its roots in Communist Russia and the subsequent sense of poverty. It was also made clear how an object's meaning changes as it enters into a collection, and how this change in meaning brings about a transformation of the collector. Finally, a link was established between the dichotomies of chaos and order with that of presence and absence, in order to create a link with Derrida's trace and Bal's (2006) and Baudrillard's (1996) concept of the death of the collector. The part of my research question that concerns itself with the application of theories to a visual art context was addressed in this section by means of identification of the relevant themes and support from additional authors and concepts.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ADELLE VAN ZYL: *S(H)ELVES*

This chapter addresses the third research concern, namely the application of Bal's (2006) narrative view of collecting to my own practical work. The three installations that form this body of practical work were presented under the title *S(h)elves* (2017) (fig 4.1). The word *shelves* refer to the accumulation and stacking of objects that are present in all three works, while the word *selves* refer to the biographical and autobiographical nature of the installations. The Kabakovs' installations are almost always autobiographical, as their characters are extensions of Ilya's own personality. One of my installations is autobiographical, while two are inspired by people who are very close to me (my husband and my father) and, in a way, even an extension of myself. By combining the words *shelves* and *selves*, I am suggesting that this accumulation of objects is central to a person's identity and sense of being. The crux of the exhibition can be summarised in Baudrillard's (1996:91) words: "For what you really collect is always yourself."

I approach art-making as a visual form of research that reflects upon, is informed by, and influences theoretical aspects. Throughout the process of making, I continuously engage with relevant theorists and artists by means of a consideration of their approaches. This influences my thinking and leads to new theoretical insights and conclusions. Theory and practice are reciprocal developments that inform one another. The process of making of the three installations was underpinned by a reflexive approach to my research concerns. The most notable aspect is how Bal's (2006) theories of the narrativity of collections influence my work and, in turn, how my production methods lead to a re-interpretation of these theories.

The first installation, *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2), is based on my husband's home office and deals with the theme of loss, while the second installation, *The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3), is autobiographical and centers on the aspect of meaning created through objects. The final installation, *The Stamp*

*Collector* (2017) (fig 4.4), resembles my father's study and focuses on the theme of absence.



Figure 4.1, Adelle van Zyl, *S(h)elves*, 2017.

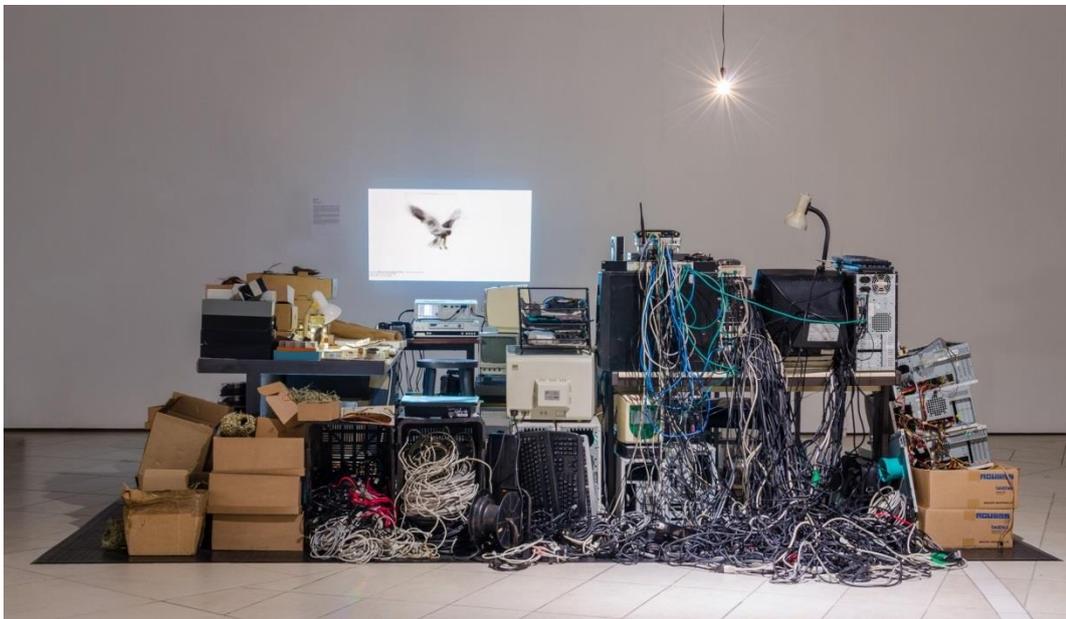


Figure 4.2, Adelle van Zyl, *The Quiet Man* 2017.



Figure 4.3, Adelle van Zyl, *The Pockets of my Jeans* 2017.



Figure 4.4, Adelle van Zyl, *The Stamp Collector* 2017.

#### 4.1 Loss in *The Quiet Man*

In this section, a description of the artwork is followed by a consideration of the themes which are evident in the installation. I contextualise this work in terms of Pearce's (1994) modes of collecting, as well as Bal's (2006) narrativity and the notion of loss as a catalyst for the act of collecting.

*The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2) is an exaggerated representation of my husband's study. The space is delineated by black rubber carpeting, but this demarcation is not entirely respected, as computer cables spill over onto the gallery floor in the front, and a projection extends onto a gallery wall. Upon entering the installation the viewer is confronted with a small desk and a chair that is engulfed by computers and processor parts in varying degrees of disrepair. Two laptops are placed on the desk: one is continuously running a database search for a specific bird (but never finding a match) while the second laptop is showing two- and three-dimensional visualisations of bird calls emanating from a small cd player (fig 4.5). Behind all the computer parts, a tangled mass of cables forms a visual link between the computer desk and stacks of boxes filled with birds' nests (fig 4.6).

Next to these boxes stands a second desk, devoted to the studying of birds. The desk is packed with bird specimens preserved in formalin-filled glass jars, a tin can filled with tiny fragile skulls, and various other items relating to the study of birds. Amongst all these items lies a large notebook showing a double page dedicated to the study of a Laughing Dove's feathers and anatomy (fig 4.7). A few groupings of sticks, carefully placed on scraps of paper, are distinguishable as birds' nests only because of the apparent deliberate selection and arrangement of the twigs (fig 4.8).

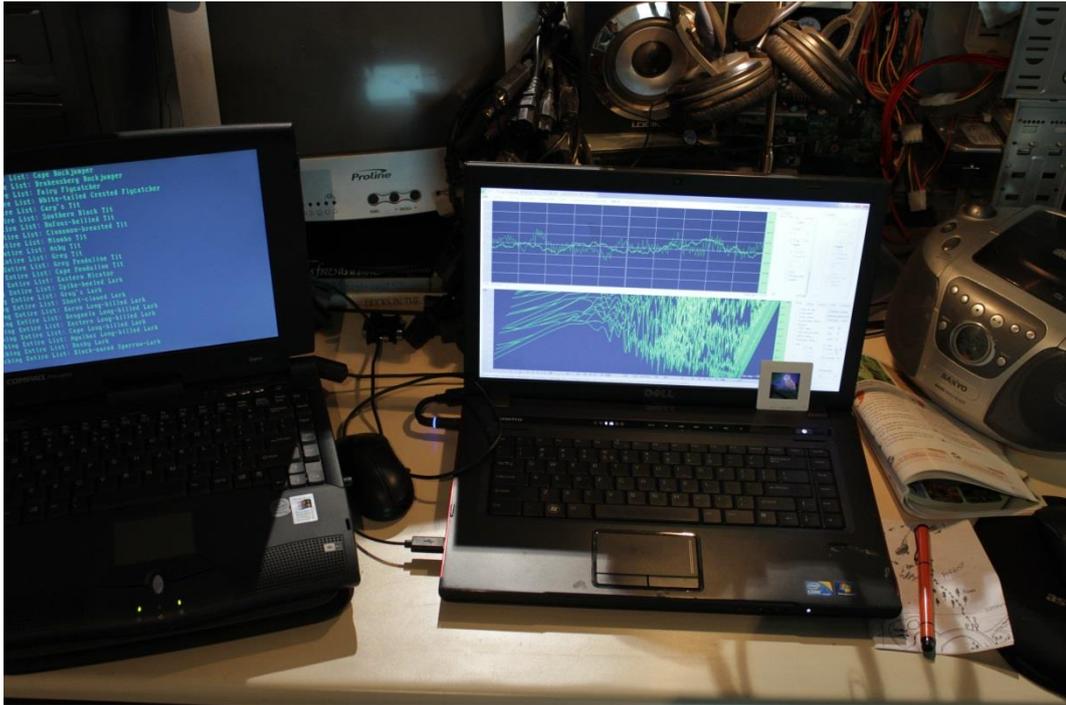


Figure 4.5, Adelle van Zyl, *The Quiet Man* (detail) 2017.



Figure 4.6, Adelle van Zyl, *The Quiet Man* (detail) 2017.



Figure 4.7, Adelle van Zyl, *The Quiet Man* (detail) 2017.



Figure 4.8, Adelle van Zyl, *The Quiet Man* (detail) 2017.

Underneath this desk are photographic slides of birds spread out on light boxes and stacked in containers and plastic filing sleeves. To the right stands a small table from which a video of a Black-shouldered Kite is projected (fig 4.9). There appears to be an attempt at measuring the kite's wingspan, which changes continuously as the bird hovers erratically in mid-air, its wings blurred but its head focused in a single spot. The table is surrounded by audio recording equipment of varying degrees of age and usefulness. Life-size paintings of bird specimens, as well as countless books on birds and birding, are scattered throughout the installation (fig 4.10).



Figure 4.9, Adelle van Zyl, *The Quiet Man* (still from projection) 2017.



Figure 4.10, Adelle van Zyl, *The Quiet Man* (detail) 2017.

Computer parts, cables, old telephones and redundant audio-visual equipment are employed in In *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2) to act as a medium and a metaphor for broken communication. Marshall McLuhan (1964:15) famously stated that the medium is the message, and explained it by saying that “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs”. If the use of modems, telephones and cables as medium sends the message of extended communication and connectedness, then the application of broken and redundant communication devices conveys a message of severed or limited connections and a failure to associate.

My husband started stuttering at the age of six, following a medical trauma. This event changed Danie’s temperament from extrovert to introvert. The experience can be seen as a moment of loss that propelled him towards an immersion in his own world of computers. Danie’s loss of the ability to communicate easily through verbal channels is comparable to Muensterberger’s (1994:3) view of collecting as “a tendency which derives from a not immediately discernible sense memory of deprivation or loss or vulnerability and a subsequent longing for substitution”. The notion that it is a sense of loss that propels a person into collecting is echoed by Bal (2006:276) when she discusses the severing between the self and the other:<sup>20</sup> “This merciless separation between subject and object makes for an incurable loneliness that, in turn, impels the subject to gather things, in order to surround him- or herself with a subject-domain that is not-other”. It can be argued that it is this loss of a connection with others through the spoken word that caused Danie to surround himself with his computers.

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<sup>20</sup> (cf. Chapter 2). Bal (2006:276) refers specifically to the moment in infancy when the child realises that certain things are apart from them, which are “not them”. If the child does not internalise this in a normal way, it could lead to lifelong anxiety towards feelings of exclusion and ‘not belonging’.

The struggle to communicate verbally had a deeply felt impact on our relationship. When Danie and I discovered a shared interest in birding, we found a new point of contact. Over the years, birding has become more than a pastime; it has become a way for us to communicate. We are both introverts, and through the process of birding we also renewed bonds with parents, siblings, in-laws and friends.

Birding can be seen as a type of collecting since the birder (or twitcher)<sup>21</sup> aims to 'collect' each species of bird in a certain geographical area, for instance. As mentioned in section 2.2.1, the idea of collecting all the items in a set relates to Pearce's (1994) systematic mode of collecting and Epstein's (1995) idea of the *example*. For the systematic collector, it is sufficient to collect one specimen of each type. Spotting a single Green Barbet once is enough for Danie and me, and we move on to the next bird on the list.<sup>22</sup> We are thus interested in collecting one example of each of the available items or species.

The seriality inherent in systematic collections implies that relationships are created, according to Pearce (1994:202)<sup>23</sup>. By having an established place in a series, an object (or species) receives a set of meanings in relation to all others that come before and after it. The birder, as they collect specimens and make them their own, can thus be seen as searching for a sense of connectedness, as looking for evidence of the relation between things. This search for associations is implied throughout *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2), particularly through the use of cables that connect the computers to various audio-visual devices.

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<sup>21</sup>Twitcher is a slightly derogatory term for a type of birder who is only interested in expanding their life list (the list of birds they've seen in their lifetime). A twitcher usually goes to great lengths and expense to see new species. Although Danie and I are relatively new to the hobby, we will probably become twitchers, as the main aim of our birding expeditions is to increase our life list.

<sup>22</sup> We make a point of never visiting the same location twice, in an attempt to increase our chances of spotting new species.

<sup>23</sup> The order and seriality of systematic collections is a topic I investigated in my undergraduate studies. For more on this, see Clifford (1994), Foucault (2002), Hodder (1994), Knight (1981), Mayr (1969), Miller (1994) and Stewart (1994).

The concept of mapping is considered in various elements within this installation. Life-size paintings of bird specimens are scattered through the installation.<sup>24</sup> The bird sounds played on the CD player, as well as the sonograms from several birding field guides, can be considered as maps to identify birds, and can further be interpreted as an attempt at communication. Bird guide illustrations can be seen as maps that show the most prominent features or markers of each bird. The illustration of the Laughing Dove becomes a map of the bird's brick-red breast feathers.<sup>25</sup> In this work, I consider maps as tools to help one find one's way and to connect with others.

The installation thus draws on dualities of connectedness versus disconnection, as well as on the entanglement and integration of things versus things being unravelled and disjointed. The sense of a search for meaning and relatedness is contradicted by the chaotic jumble of stuff that fills the space. These are metaphors not only for our struggle to connect and to communicate, but also for the loss of fluent speech Danie experienced, and his disconnect from a verbally coherent self that is fully integrated amongst others. This is shown to reflect the concept of loss that Bal (2006:276) considers to be the beginning of collecting behaviour.

#### **4.2 Meaning in *The Pockets of my Jeans***

This section serves as an exploration of the notions of meaning and transformation that underpin the work. In section 1.3, I stated that the concept of "meaning" comes to the fore in Bal's (2006) discussion on the middle of the

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<sup>24</sup> These can be likened to one-to-one scale maps, a concept which is considered in more detail in section 4.3.

<sup>25</sup> The Laughing Dove is called a *Rooiborsduif* in Afrikaans, literally translated as red-breasted dove. This alludes to a very well-known Afrikaans poem about love and longing by Breyten Breytenbach titled *Allerliefste, ek stuur vir jou 'n Rooiborsduif* (Most beloved, I am sending you a red-breasted dove). Available at <https://maroelamedia.co.za/afrikaans/gedigte/allerliefste-ek-stuur-vir-jou-n-rooiborsduif/>.

collection. I aim to explain how this is reflected in my practical work and, in turn, bring about new approaches to the theory. Notions of the creation and transformation of meaning are further contextualised with reference to Epstein (1995), Eco, Pearce (1994), and the Kabakovs.

*The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3) is a 1.8m wide column of yellow objects that are arranged in categories and stacked from floor to ceiling. Most of the found objects that make up this work were taken from my own collection of mementoes and fit into the realm of the personal and domestic: National Geographic magazines, VHS tapes, books, plastic bath ducks, kitchen items, children's toys, trinkets, tools, paint brushes, haberdashery, souvenirs, teddy bears, pillows, blankets and rugs. The bottom third of these objects are stacked underneath, inside, and on top of a restored wooden shelving unit (fig. 4.11). Above this hangs a shallow wood and glass display unit filled with mementoes (fig 4.12). A layered mass of teddies and linen precariously balances on top of this narrow display unit. The mass of linen and soft toys seem to be on the verge of toppling over onto the viewer as they increasingly protrude forward as they reach the ceiling (fig 4.13).



Figure 4.11, Adelle van Zyl, *The Pockets of my Jeans* (detail) 2017.





Figure 4.13, Adelle van Zyl, *The Pockets of my Jeans* (detail) 2017.

To contextualise this work, I will consider Epstein's (1995:266) view of the meaning of objects in his discussion on the writer Andrei Platonov's concept of the "thriftiness of empathy", where the latter describes a man who collected singular items for the spiritual significance they had for him:

Voshchev sometimes bent down and picked up a pebble, or other sticky bit of trash, and put it for safekeeping into his trousers. He was gladdened and worried by the nearly eternal presence of pebbles in the midst of clay, in their abundant accumulation there; that meant that it was useful for him to be there, that there was all the more reason for a person to live. (Platonov in Epstein 1995:266)

Platonov's collector goes through life, picking up odd markers of meaning along the way and stuffing them in the pockets of his jeans. He connects and identifies with these "lower forms of existence" (Epstein 1995:266) and deems them crucial to a meaningful existence. He sympathises with every singular object. By collecting them he gives them new meaning and as a result, has his own sense of meaningfulness edified. In a similar way I, like many other people, keep sentimentally charged items from my past that serve as mementoes to significant people and events. From there came the title of this work: *The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3). Like Platonov's Voshchev and the Kabakovs' *Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1), I am suggesting that this madness where everything has meaning is perhaps better than the frighteningly desolate alternative where *nothing* has meaning.

The colour yellow has many universal and personal connotations. On a personal level, it is a reminder of my childhood. Being the youngest of three children meant I always received toys and gifts that were yellow instead of the more "beautiful"<sup>26</sup> colours pink and blue, which were reserved for my sister and brother respectively. As such, I developed a conflicting emotional response to

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<sup>26</sup> This was an obvious, if somewhat enforced, opinion I had as a young girl.

the colour. By applying yellow as the main visual device in this work I am reflecting on complex childhood relationships and the value of my personal identity within a familial context.

Bal's (2006:283) notion of the violence done to an object when it is removed from its original context is, again, applicable. She states that "each event of insertion is also an act of deprivation". By taking items in my least favourite colour from my house and keepsakes boxes, I was trying to do as little damage to my physical environment as possible. Yet, I discovered that as I was extracting these seemingly insignificant and missable items from my life and combining them to form a new whole, I was assigning a new sense of importance and relevance to them.

Through the presentation of a vertical column of stacked or layered objects, I am referring to archaeological strata and thus offering a cross-section of the personal prehistory that is my childhood. These strata could be seen as a map of my childhood, with markers of people and events that delineate its territory. That is precisely what souvenirs are: beacons of important events and people. We put them in place as we go along so that we are able to, at will, find our way back to their memories. Where poet James Fenton (in Pearce 1994:195) writes about the museum as presenting "the landscapes of their childhood", this work presents the layers of my formative years and after. Bal (2006:273) speaks of the prehistory of a collection since it is only through the act of unearthing the past that we discover the beginning of a collection, highlighting that "in the plot it [the beginning or first object] is prehistoric". This may have been borrowed from Freud's use of the term to describe the forgotten, infantile past of his patients, as discussed in Forrester (1994:226). This sense of a personal history solidifies the concept of the narrative collection and is considered again at the conclusion of this section.

In *The Visual List*, Umberto Eco (2009:37-47) discusses how artworks employ framing devices to imply that the scene presented is only a selection and that the scene may continue indefinitely beyond the frame. For him, the framing device is

akin to the word “etcetera” at the end of a list, which implies continuation and the possibility of infinity: “[A]n image in sculpture is defined in space (it is hard to imagine a statue that conveys an “etcetera”, i.e., one that suggests it may continue beyond its physical limits), while in paintings the image is limited by the frame” (Eco 2009:37). In *The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3), the ceiling is employed as a framing device, giving the sense that the list of objects presented here is only limited by the available physical space: If the ceiling was higher, the work would have continued further. The same can be said for collections in general – they tend to expand to fill any given space, since it is often only the restraint of available resources (space, money) that stops them from continuously growing.

Each item selected for this work has very strong personal meaning. Most of these are objects that I have kept as mementoes, while some were borrowed from parents or siblings. A few items were bought from charity shops because of their resemblance to items from my past. In her Master’s Degree Dissertation, Lee Ann Thomas (2009:55) speaks of a sense of familiarity – the sense of “*that could have been Mine*”. This sense of familiarity was the criteria for acquiring objects from shops and other people, and only objects that evoked this response were selected. Viewers often reacted in the same way to certain objects, pointing out items they remembered from their own pasts. This reaction relates to Alberti’s (2005) notion of the viewer’s experience of the work and the additional significance it brings to the work. He (2005:569) states that “[i]n museum studies, visitor theory and contemporary surveys are replacing the passive audience with active participants in the construction of meaning”. A collected object is thus able to absorb meaning from its viewers and their reactions.

Our relationship with objects is rarely just between owner and object; it is a complex web of associations involving owner, object, and the person, time or place which is contained within the object (Belk 1988:147). Many, if not all, of the objects that make up this installation are linked to important people or times in my life. Such objects can be seen as souvenirs, which act as a link to past

experiences or people. Pearce's (1994) souvenir correlates with Epstein's (1995:253) relic, which acquires its significance from its contact with important people from the past. According to Belk (1988:149), anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss called this positive contamination.

*The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3) relates to the Kabakovs' installations in terms of the sentiment attached to everyday household items. Many of the items in my installation are not normally regarded as souvenirs but are rather items that come from a domestic setting, like tin can openers, blankets and lampshades. In my work, such objects link the remembered person to their domestic milieu and are markers of affection and comfort, while in the Kabakovs' work, household objects serve as markers of their characters' identities within their cold, restrained spaces.

The authentication of our memories through objects is, according to Pearce (1994:196), what gives our lives substance and meaning. Souvenirs aid in creating an image of our lives as whole and meaningful: "It asks us to believe that life is not fractured, confused and rootless, but, on the contrary, suffused with grace and significance" (Pearce 1994:196). In agreement with this optimistic view of the souvenir, I propose that a person's collection of mementoes is what places him or herself at the centre of their own personal history. This relates to the transformation of objects when they are included in a collection, and how such a transformation, in turn, leads to the edification of the collector who acquires a more integrated sense of *being in* and *belonging to* an external world and its people

The souvenir or relic has a bittersweet connotation as it is the embodiment of a romantic longing for an authentic past (Pearce 1994:195). It creates a picture of a bygone era which was more beautiful, more sensible, and more "real" than our current lives are. This installation serves, in a way, as the embodiment of such a longing for the past. Yet, even though most people collect souvenirs to some degree, they are not to be shared because no one is really interested in other people's keepsakes. The overtly romantic and private nature of souvenirs is,

according to Pearce (1994:195, 196), what makes them “embarrassing”, “boring” and “so depressing to curate and display”. The souvenir is thus not an object that belongs in a proper collection. It belongs to the private, sentimental self. By presenting a mass of souvenirs to the public, I am subverting this notion of the memento as private and embarrassing.

By placing all these items together to form a type of self-portrait, I am looking at myself as the sum of all my influences. This collection of items forms a tableau in which I see a cross-section of my past. By looking at this snapshot of my own personal history, I am searching for a meaningful pattern to arise from the details. This collecting of meaningful items might be a way of asking universal questions like “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” and is a way of searching for evidence of meaning and significance in my life. It is therefore evident that objects and their acquired meanings could be used to create a larger set of meanings for the collector.

### **4.3 Absence in *The Stamp Collector***

*The Stamp Collector* (2017) (fig 4.4) is a replica of my father’s combined study and bedroom, as well as a small adjoining storeroom. All the items in this installation were carefully selected from charity shops, or borrowed from family and friends, to resemble the items in my father’s room as closely as possible.

The small room is delineated by a worn carpet with rich orange, green and brown hues. A large wooden desk overpowers the cramped space. This is stacked with heaps of administrative papers and a conglomeration of home office items (fig 4.14). A chair, covered by layers of jerseys and jackets, faces the desk. Opposite the desk stands a single bed, tidily made with worn linen and thin pillows. A slender wooden cupboard contains the neatly ironed yet threadbare clothes, toiletries and shoes of an older man (fig 4.15). The rest of the room is packed to the brim with an odd assortment of makeshift bookshelves and cabinets which are piled and propped up against each other. Every available

surface is overflowing with books, files and Stanley Gibbons<sup>27</sup> catalogues, as well as a variety of personal and household items ranging from light bulbs to tape dispensers to trophies and souvenirs (amongst others a Little Mermaid statue from Copenhagen and a rock crystal from Namibia). Two large shelves, crammed with boxes, briefcases and files, flank the tiny adjoining storeroom (fig 4.16). Suitcases and boxes stored on top of these shelves reach to the room's suggested ceiling height. The edges of the two rooms are further demarcated by suspended light fittings and curtains. True to my father's actual study, it is not immediately apparent that this room belongs to a stamp collector. It is only upon closer inspection that a number of catalogues and a few misplaced postage stamps reveal the nature of the collection. Almost all his stamps (an incalculable amount, according to him) are carefully hidden away in the numerous boxes, briefcases and files. His collection is shrouded in mystery and secrecy, and even though he is always keen to show interested family members some of his rare stamps, there remains a sense of reluctance from his side to expose all the secrets. This sense of mystery and secrecy forms a core theme in the installation.

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<sup>27</sup> Stanley Gibbons is a famous publisher of voluminous international stamp catalogues.



Figure 4.14, Adelle van Zyl, *The Stamp Collector* (detail) 2017.



Figure 4.15, Adelle van Zyl, *The Stamp Collector* (detail) 2017.



Figure 4.16, Adelle van Zyl, *The Stamp Collector* (detail) 2017.

The Kabakovs' installations of people's peculiar living spaces serve as inspiration for this work. Yet, where the Kabakovs invented their peculiar characters and their worlds, I found a similarly idiosyncratic character in my father. Like the Kabakovs' *Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1), who surrounded himself with his seemingly worthless possessions, my father has literally immersed himself in his valuable stamp collection by combining his bedroom and study into a single space where he spends most of his day.

This notion of immersion is reflected in the decision to create installations that can be entered by its viewers, who are physically engulfed in the works. Graham Coulter-Smith (2006:[sp]) argues, however, that being tangibly surrounded by a work of art does not guarantee a true sense of immersion. Instead, he asks for a sense of absorption that is achieved through narrative<sup>28</sup>. This engagement with the narrative element of a work leads to an intellectual immersion. In contrast to this, I am of the opinion that the physical expansiveness of the work aids in the mental involvement of the audience. Mental absorption in a work is thus mediated through physical immersion.

The limitation of space, as mentioned in the previous two sections, is again applicable. Where *The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3) could potentially expand upward, and *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2) spills over its own border, *The Stamp Collector* (2017) (fig 4.4) is precisely demarcated in space, thus preventing any expansion of its contents, unless the expansion is inwards. This does not seem impossible, since the number of cabinets, drawers and files give the impression that there will always be space to store a few extra items. A stamp, being so thin and small, is an almost two-dimensional object and takes up next to no space. It seems easy enough to just slide another stamp between the pages of a catalogue. The result is a physical density which reflects back to the

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<sup>28</sup> For more on immersion and literary theory, see Marie-Laure Ryan (1999).

richness of humanity that is prevalent in the authentic, lived-in feeling that permeates the Kabakovs' work.

There is a strong connection between maps and stamps as representations and as metaphors for travel. Stamps are at once markers of a global map and souvenirs of journeys never taken. This is applicable to my father, who spends more and more time in his study, even though he was an adventurous traveller in his youth. This is evident from the odd assortment of souvenirs in his room, while reference to travelling is further reflected in the numerous suitcases and bags within the installation. Yet he now does a metaphorical travelling through his stamps. Through this work, I consider the ideas of the one-to-one scale map and the sign, whereby a thing can at once be a metaphor and the real thing. Eco (1994:95) speaks of the absurdity of the one-to-one scale map, and that is what this installation has become: a tangible and absurd full-scale map.

Even though none of these items in the installation belong to my father, they *became* his through the collective whole that was created. The fact that this room so closely resembles my father's study brings a feeling of unease to both myself and visitors to the exhibition. Viewers often expressed the tension they felt as they entered the room. As with some of the Kabakovs' apartments, my father's study is entered by voyeurs, who feel they are trespassing. Even so, they are intrigued by the notion of being in such a personally loaded space. Every time I worked on the room, on several occasions and in different locations, I was aware that this room did not just resemble that of my father's, but *became* my father's. It acquired a sense of imitative magic, where mere resemblance creates a link to something or someone. Yet this work is more than mere resemblance, as there is a powerful sense of imitation at play. There are two types of syntagmatic relations applicable here: one is a kind of synecdoche, whereby a part is seen to represent the whole, while the other is metonymy, whereby one thing bears relation to another (Bal 2006:278). In this work, I am not representing just a room but, by implication, also my father as a whole and my relationship with him. The fact that his collection is, in part, a mysterious secret

kept from his family is echoed in the sense that our relationship is quite complex. My father and I do not engage in deep or emotional talks, and our relationship may even seem superficial to outsiders. In reality, however, we have a deep connection that is reflected in conversations about everyday topics. There is thus a depth to our relationship that is not immediately apparent.

At first glance, and according to my father, his philatelic collection can be seen as systematic since most of the stamps he collects are described in annual stamp catalogues. Pearce (1994:260) draws a distinction between systematic and fetishistic collection on grounds of the notion of presentation as she quotes Susan Steward, who believes that “the boundary between [systematic] collection and fetishism is mediated by classification and display in tension with accumulation and secrecy”. On grounds of the secretive nature of his collection, I argue that his collection is fetishist rather than systematic. This is enforced by the fact that his real interest is not with the stamps described in his catalogues, but with other, more unique objects. In the margins of his collections are numerous odd items which defy the systematic definition of his collection. He is really interested in stamps of such rarity that they are yet to be described in catalogues, and these are the pieces in his collection that he is most proud of. Apart from these priceless stamps, his shelves, cabinets and fire-proof safe are lined with other, peculiar, one piece collections. His collections of oddities hide between the masses of stamp albums and catalogues: clay capsules containing different hues of ochre (he is not sure if they are natural or man-made), a fragment of meteorite, and a gold nugget reported to be a Jew’s tooth filling, extracted by Nazis. The strangeness of his collection, as well as the sense of secrecy surrounding it, leads me to believe that his collection is not systematic at all. His passionate interest in these odd, singular objects, places his collection in the realm of the fetishist, of which my concept of the *collection of one* is a part.

Baudrillard (1996:88) states that “possession depends on the absolute singularity of each item, a singularity which puts that item, fundamentally, on par with the subject itself. The feeling of possession is based on an intimacy with the privileged object.” His description of a collector’s relationship with each individual item matches my father’s passion for his assortment of individual objects.

This love is, however, not limited to the things he collects but is bestowed upon all the objects in his care. I sense in him a reverence for all his 'things', which might be the result of years of frugal living. This relates to Epstein's (1995:261) anti-display window, which is a space where things show their life's worth. He states that there is a scarcity of things that fully reflect the life of their owner, that fully answer for him. Epstein (1995:263) states that these objects are no longer part of a standard or a type, and represent nothing but themselves. My father proudly associates with an older generation of people who believed in living frugally. He has a nostalgic idea that this generation never replaced an item when it was still functional, no matter how old and worn it was. My father's tools - a pair of reading glasses he shares with his wife, pens that are on the verge of running out of ink and multi-plugs that are held together with insulation tape - have been handled so much that they become such singular objects, attesting only to themselves and their owner. My father is thus like the Kabakovs' *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1998) (fig 3.1), someone who sees a deeper significance in every bit of material culture that surrounds him.

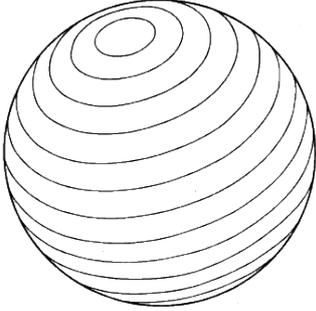
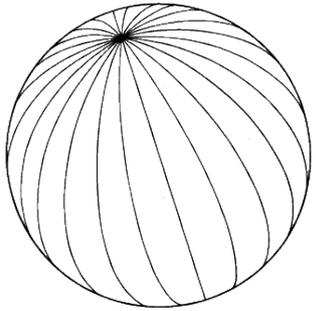
Another theme that is deliberated through this installation is the concept of progression versus regression. Baudrillard (1996:91) talks of the place the collector takes within the collection. As mentioned earlier, he states that people collect themselves and that the collector often becomes the final piece within a collection. This is evident in my father's collections, which is proof of his intellect and the depth of his multi-dimensional character as a human being. Baudrillard's (1996) notion of the completion or finality of the collection forms an important theme in the work, as my father is in the process of concluding his stamp collection in order to bequeath it to his grandchildren. It can be seen that, as his assortment of stamps progress towards a (soon to be) completed collection, he himself is regressing into it, becoming more and more part of his collection. Alternatively, it can be seen that his immersion into his collection, day after day, is what would make it possible for this collection to reach an ultimate conclusion.

The three installations that make up *S(h)elves* are interwoven with each other, as each one's making influenced, and was influenced by, the other two. There are thus several overlaps, both conceptually and formally. From a formal point of view, the three installations were treated with a painterly sensibility in terms of limited colour palettes and in their presentation as three-dimensional tableaus. This is a result of my experience as a painter. Of the three installations, *The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3) is most recognisable as a painterly work, with its flat frontality and obvious yellow hues. *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2) is treated as a tonal composition in shades of grey, while in *The Stamp Collector* (2017) (fig 4.4) I applied rich tones of browns and reds, reflecting the emotional warmth of my father's room.

The structural approach to colour was mirrored by the structure related to mapping, a concept which underpins each of the three installations. *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2) sees mapping as a tool to find connections between things and people, while *The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3) is presented as strata, or a map of a personal history. In *The Stamp Collector* (2017) (fig 4.4), maps are implied as a metaphor for travel through their link with postage stamps and the presence of souvenirs throughout the work.

The concept of mapping also relates to the use of time as a structural device. Maps act as references to space as much as they do to time. A static map is, after all, a representation of a particular part of space at one specific point in time. Both sets of installations discussed, *Ten Characters* (1998) and *S(h)elves* (2017), evoke a sense of narrative time because they tell the stories of their characters' lives. Our approaches differ, however, and I argue below that the Kabakovs present time as latitudinal, and I longitudinal.

**Table 4.1 Latitude and Longitude in cartography, research studies and their practical application to this study.**

	<b>Latitude</b>	<b>Longitude</b>
<b>Cartography</b>	-is symbolised by lines running horizontally from East to West.  	-is symbolised by vertical lines running from North to South.  -symbolises of the diurnal passing of time.  
<b>Research Studies</b>	-refers to studies of a large group of subjects at a single point in time.	-refers to studies of a small group of subjects over a longer period of time.
<b>Practical application In this study</b>	-in Ilya and Emilia Kabakov: presenting a broad range of subjects at a certain point in time.	-in Adelle van Zyl: presenting a limited number of subjects over a long period of time.

As explained in table 4.1, latitude refers to horizontal segments of a map, while longitude refers to vertical segments and, as in the case of the globe, symbolises a passing of time. In research, latitudinal studies imply a wide range of subjects which are viewed at a specific point in time, while longitudinal studies focus on smaller groups which span a longer period of time (Bhatti 2012). For the purpose of this study, the two aspects thus refer to width (latitude) versus depth (longitude). The Kabakovs' ten apartments can be seen snapshots, each taken at a specific point in time. These vignettes give us a broad overview of Ilya Kabakov's characters and their stories, and in their multiplicity present us with a latitudinal study of his characters. My work, on the other hand, reflects a layering of time, as the three installations employ a dense stacking of objects from different eras. This implies a longitudinal approach to the passing of time and a

sense of depth. Instead of presenting a snapshot of a broad range of subjects, like the Kabakovs do, I present a limited number of composite images that tell the characters' stories as they unfolded over time.

The three installations are as intricately linked as the people they represent. Each of these installations contains visual clues that act as cross-references to the other two works. *The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3), for instance, contains a stamp album (referencing my father) and a bundle of yellow network cables, relating to *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2). *The Stamp Collector* (2017) (fig 4.4) contains a few yellow items that could have been included in my autobiographical work. Birds also feature in all three installations. These subtle clues act as markers of interrelatedness between the works.

Both the Kabakovs' and my own inhabitants rise from the disorder of their surroundings: theirs from the chaotic socio-economic state of the USSR, and mine from our unique and idiosyncratic histories. In contrast to the Kabakovs, whose inhabitants see their rooms as prison cells, my installations have a more nurturing narrative to them. They came into being because of compassion and a search for meaning through the creative ordering of personal collections and a reflection on the interwoven relationships of the objects and the people they signify.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

To conclude this study I reconsider the main issues that were posed at the beginning of this paper. The primary research question asked how Bal's (2006) narrative view of collecting can be expanded and applied to a specific visual art context. From this flowed three different areas of concern: firstly, how a literary concept like Bal's (2006) view of the narrativity of collecting could be expanded to bring new insights to the themes of loss, meaning and absence; secondly, how these themes could be applied to the Kabakovs' earlier installations in order to arrive at a new understanding of their work; and, thirdly, to consider how the different manners in the identified themes were applied to my own art-making approaches. The aims of these questions were to gain a deeper insight into the discursive theory surrounding collections and to contextualise such theories in a visual art milieu and through practice. To reflect on how this was achieved, I first give an overview of the core discussions of the thesis, after which I consider new insights that were formed. Lastly, I identify successes and the limitations of the study and address potential new avenues of research.

### 5.1 Core discussions

The key factors that make up the theory surrounding collections and objects were pertinent to this study. The object, as distinguished from our everyday material culture, was defined with reference to Baudrillard (1996). I considered Epstein's (1995) and Pearce's (1994) modes of collecting, namely systematic, sentimental and fetishist while adding *the collection of one* to this list. Bal's (2006) tripartite notion of the narrativity of collections was described, which aided in developing conceptual strategies. Her three areas of concern, namely the beginning, middle and end, served as a structural logic to make sense of this dissertation's theoretical concepts and their application to both the Kabakovs' artworks and my own exhibition.

The Kabakovs' work was described in three sections corresponding to Bal's (2006) concept of the three parts of the narrative. Firstly, poverty in Communist Russia was identified as a theme that correlated with Bal's (2006) notion of loss as the beginning of the collection story. This sense of poverty was analysed in *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1). Secondly, Bal's (2006) idea of the middle of the collection as a space where the creation and transformation of meaning take place was applied to the Kabakovs' *The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment* (1988) (fig 3.3). Finally, Bal's (2006) consideration of the end of the collecting story was correlated with the concept of absence that is evident in most of the Kabakovs' installations. I was thus able to contextualise and apply Bal's (2006) theories to the Kabakovs' work. In this sense, my research contributed to a new reading of the Kabakovs' work as well as an expansion of Bal's (2006) literary theory and its application to visual art.

My own work was, in turn, influenced by the above-mentioned theoretical concepts, as well as by the Kabakovs' work in terms of scale and materiality. In *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2), I considered my husband's speech impediment as a catalyst for his withdrawal into his world of computers. Visually and conceptually this installation relates to the Kabakovs' work *The Man Who Flew Into Space from His Apartment* (1988) (fig 3.3). This correlation is evident in the jumbled space. On a conceptual level, *The Pockets of my Jeans* (2017) (fig 4.3) was informed by the idea of the creation and transformation of meaning in the middle of the collection. In terms of material and media, the installation draws on the Kabakovs' work in general, which includes everyday household objects for their sentimentality and as links to an idealistic past. *The Stamp Collector* (2017) (fig 4.4) was informed by the Kabakovs' *The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away* (1988) (fig 3.1), as well as by Bal's (2006) and Baudrillard's (1996) concept of absence in the end of the collection. These three installations were grouped under the exhibition title *S(h)elves*, which refers to Baudrillard's (1996) notion that we ultimately collect ourselves.

Several other overlapping themes were identified in my installations. The concept of mapping and the delineation of space were identified in all three works, for instance. The works thus stand in relation to one another, attesting to the complex and involved relationships of the three individuals they represent. The development of these installations was thus informed by both theoretical studies and the Kabakovs' work and has proven itself to be a practical contemplation that contributed to theory building.

## 5.2 New Insights

A number of new insights were shaped during this study: in theory, practice and the application of theory to practice and vice versa. The most notable theoretical insights were the identification and emphasis of specific themes (of loss, meaning and absence) in Bal's (2006) notion of the narrative aspect of collecting. This led to a novel interpretation of her work. Baudrillard's (1996) concept of the importance of a single object within a collection was used as a platform to formulate my own theory of the *collection of one*. These new approaches in theory led to unique applications of theory to practice, which formed the second area of innovation. Applying them to the Kabakovs' installations led to new methods of interpreting these works. This, in turn, facilitated the application of these literary concepts to my own art – the third area of innovation. The study of the Kabakovs' work led to a new approach to my own art-making, which saw an increase in scale and a rethinking in my approach to materials and media. For the first time, I employed large-scale installations and the almost exclusive use of found objects as medium (apart from sketchbooks, paintings and the animation in *The Quiet Man* (2017) (fig 4.2), which were created using conventional media). Previous works usually consisted of small groupings of objects or of paintings. A painterly sensibility was applied to my installations in terms formal principles, such as composition and the consideration of elements like colour, texture and tonal values. This painterly understanding of installation was an original direction I explored. These are all new developments in my work which would have been impossible without the prior studying of specific theorists and artists.

### **5.3 Successes and limitations**

Successes are evident in the way research questions were identified, deliberated and answered. The study was restricted by several factors. As in any study, limited time and space meant that only a few voices were considered, making this study selective and by no means exhaustive.

One potential criticism of both the theoretical study and the practical work was the emphasis on a male, Eurocentric vision. In terms of my practical work, the decision to base two of my three installations on male family members (my father and my husband) were made because my relationships with these people are the most complex of all my familial relations, thus presenting the most opportunity for a multidimensional investigative approach. The type of collecting that I consider in this study, namely, the collecting of physical objects for personal reasons, stems from a western material culture of museums and the physical preservation of history. Many other forms of collecting exist, for instance the collecting of oratory histories and traditions. This study, however, chose to focus on a very personal history and culture that has its origins in a European setting.

### **5.4 Potential new avenues of research**

The research area covered in this thesis can be continued in several different directions and exciting opportunities to do so have presented themselves throughout the study. A promising avenue of exploration is Baudrillard's (1996) consideration of the collecting of antiques, since inherited furniture pieces are becoming an increasingly prominent feature in my work. In addition to this, I aim to study towards a deeper understanding of the mechanics of collecting, by means of an interdisciplinary investigation into the sources of this study, both in theory and in terms of my art practice.

## **ADDENDA**

### **6.1 Addendum A: Garbage**

Usually, everybody has heaps of accumulated papers that stream into our homes daily piled up under their table, on their desk, on their telephone table. Our home literally stands under a paper rain: magazines, letters, addresses, receipts, notes, envelopes, invitations, outlines, programs, telegrams, wrapping paper, etc. We periodically sort and arrange these streams, waterfalls of paper into groups, and these groups are different for everyone: a group of valuable papers, a group of momentous, a group of pleasant recollections, a group for every unforeseen occasion – every person has his own principle.

The rest, of course, is tossed out in the rubbish heap. It is precisely this division of important papers from unimportant ones that is particularly difficult and tedious, but everyone knows that it is necessary, and after the sorting, everything is more or less in order until the next deluge.

But if you don't do these sortings, these purges, and you allow the flow of paper to engulf you, considering it impossible to separate the important from the unimportant – wouldn't that be insanity? When is this possible? It is possible when a person honestly doesn't know what is important in these papers and what is unimportant, why one principle of selection is better than another, and what distinguishes a pile of necessary papers from a pile of garbage.

A completely different correlation arises in his consciousness: should everything, without exception, that is before his eyes in the form of an enormous paper sea be considered valuable or garbage, and then, should it all be saved or thrown away? Given such an attitude, the vacillations in making such a choice become extremely agonizing. A simple feeling speaks about the value, the importance of everything. This feeling is familiar to everyone who has looked through or rearranged his accumulated papers: this is the memory associated with all the events connected with each of these papers. To deprive ourselves of these paper symbols and testimonies is to deprive ourselves somewhat of our very memories. In our memory, everything becomes equally valuable and significant. All points of our recollections are tied to one another, they form chains and connections in our memory, which ultimately comprise our life, the story of our life.

To deprive ourselves of all of this means to part with who we were in the past, and in a certain sense, it means to cease to exist.

But on the other hand, simple common sense tells us that with the exception of important papers, memorable postcards and other letters which are dear to the heart, the rest is nothing valuable and is simply junk. For after all, this entire pile of papers consisted of paid receipts, old movie or train tickets, reproductions which were given as gifts or bought, a magazine or newspaper read long ago, a

note about something that either has or hasn't already been done, but in any case, can't be fixed now. But where does this view come from, a view cast from the sidelines onto our papers? Why must we agree with this detached view and allow it to determine the applicability or uselessness of these things? Why must we look at our past from today and not consider it to be our own, or what's worse, to reproach or laugh at it?

Yes, but who can, who has the right to look at my life from the outside, even if that other is that same I, only at 'that' instant, at the moment that these papers are viewed? Why should common sense be stronger than my memories, stronger than all the moments of my life which are connected with these scraps of paper which now seem funny and useless?

Here, of course, one might object that these memories exist only for me, while for others who don't know my memories, these papers are simply trash. Yes, but why do I have to part with my memories that are contained in such scraps that externally resemble garbage?

I don't understand this.

Grouped together, bound in folders, these papers comprise the single uninterrupted fabric of an entire life, the way it was in the past and the way it is now. And though inside these folders there appears to be an orderless heap of pulp, for me there is an awful lot in this garbage, almost everything. Moreover, strange as it seems, I feel that it is precisely the garbage, the very dirt where important papers and simple scraps are mixed and unsorted, that comprises the genuine and only real fabric of my life, no matter how ridiculous and absurd it seems from the outside.

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov in Merewether 2006.

## 6.2 Addendum B: The Dump

The whole world, everything which surrounds me here, appears to me a boundless dump with no ends or borders, an inexhaustible diverse sea of garbage. In this refuse of an enormous city one can feel the powerful breathing of its entire past. This whole dump is full of flashes, twinkling stars, reflections, and fragments of culture: either some sort of book, or a sea of some magazines with photographs and texts, or things that were used by some people ... An enormous past rises up behind these crates, vials, and sacks; all forms of packaging that were ever needed by man have not lost their shape, they did not become something dead when they were discarded. They cry out about a past life, they preserve it ... And this feeling of a unity of the entire past life, and at the same time the feeling of the separateness of its components, engenders an image ... It's hard to say what kind of image this is ... Well, maybe, an image of a certain civilization which is slowly sinking under the pressure of unknown cataclysms, but in which nevertheless some sort of events are taking place. The feeling of a vast, cosmic existence seizes a person at such dumps. This is by no means a feeling of neglect, of the perishing of life, but just the opposite – a feeling of its return, a full circle, because as long as memory exists that's how long everything that is connected to life will live.

... But still, why does the dump and its image attract my imagination over and over again, why do I always return to it? Because I feel that a person living in our region is simply suffocating in his own life among the garbage since there is nowhere to take it, nowhere to sweep it out – we have lost the border between garbage and non-garbage space. Everything is covered up, littered with garbage – our homes, streets, cities. We have no place to discard all this, it remains near us.

I see all life surrounding me as consisting only of garbage. Since it just moves from place to place, it doesn't disappear. In the entrance to our building, a person goes downstairs with the garbage pail, losing half of its contents along the way, and he himself can't quite understand where and why he is carrying it, and he throws away the pail, having never reached his goal ... And this merging of the two spaces – the place from which the garbage must be taken and the place to which it must be taken – this kind of 'unity of oppositions' which we were told about when we were still in school, functions as a real unity, a genuine indistinguishability of one from the other. How does a construction site differ from a garbage dump? The building across the street has been under construction for 18 years already, and it is impossible to tell it apart from the ruins of the other buildings which were demolished in order to build this one. This new one, which has been a ruin now for a long time where some men occasionally swarm about, may at some point be finished, although they say that the blueprints are very outdated and have been redone many times and it even seems that they have been lost, and the first floor is covered with water...

Looking at it, it is difficult to understand whether it is being built or torn down, and it may be both at the same time...

Of course, one may look at the whole unity from an optimistic point of view. A dump not only devours everything, preserving it forever, but one might say that it also continually generates something: this is where new growths appear, new projects, ideas, a certain unique enthusiasm arises, hopes for the rebirth of something, though everyone knows that all of this will just be covered over with new layers of garbage.

But still, sometimes one must wonder – are there no such enormous dumps in other countries? Is there no garbage, are there only ‘clean products?’ I once went to visit my relatives in Czechoslovakia and I remember that the biggest impression was made on me by the cleanliness there. Why, why is it so clean there? I deliberately looked in the corners – our corners are especially dirty and unswept – and they were just as clean as the middle of our rooms. After all, we – I remember from childhood – clean up only the middle a little bit so there is a place to sit and eat, and the edges and corners we clean sometime later, since after all, you can’t see them and no one looks there anyway. But in Czechoslovakia, you don’t need to look in the corner either, but it’s clean, too. It’s as though they clean all the time, scrubbing, taking out the garbage – where do they get the time! – and everything is taken to some other place and not left nearby, everything is taken out, carried off somewhere ‘far away.’ And then it hit me: how can they discard things close by when the building is so clean, and next to it and behind it is also so clean – and there is nowhere to dump the things, they have to be taken somewhere far away ... In our country garbage is discarded right next to the building. All you have to do is to take it beyond the threshold, no man’s land. All the neighbors sweep and discard things in the backyard – look how much land there is that belongs to no one. And what about this land which belongs to no one behind our house and has become a dump? Won’t it return to us, doesn’t it loom threateningly beyond our walls, like an enemy surrounding a fortress, returning over and over again to our building, submerging it?

And what if it’s even worse than that? It’s frightening to even think about it: our entire place, all of our enormous territory is a dumping ground for the garbage from all the rest of the world?

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov in Merewether 2006.

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