

**THE ARTIST'S ROLE AS COLLECTOR OF MEMORY AND SELF**

by

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I declare that *The artist's role as collector of memory and self* 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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**Title:**

The artist's role as collector of memory and self.

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**Summary:**

Artworks that use found or appropriated images and objects often function as collections. These collections simulate the everyday collections of mementos and souvenirs that come to represent aspects of an individual's personality and past. The collections of objects mirror the individual's collection of memories that help to define himself and provide a means of communication with others. The artist as collector takes on roles similar to that of storyteller and anthropologist, providing a narrative of conscious preservation. Through various devices of display and denial a curiosity cabinet / *Wunderkammer* representing and simulating a Self is created and the role of collector is passed on to the viewer.

**List of key terms:**

Collector; collection; memory; self; object; souvenir; memento; allegory; cabinet of curiosity; Wunderkammer; Siopis (Penny); Hiller (Susan); Cornell (Joseph); Kabakov (Ilya); Stewart (Susan); Baudrillard (Jean); Benjamin (Walter).

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## Preface

This dissertation takes the form of a discussion of the artist's role as Collector of memory and Self, which includes an exploration and clear explanation of the functioning of memory, as well as the ideas of collecting and collection. The role of Collector is one that many artists assume through their work. While this dissertation discusses the work of four artists in this context, it is not intended to be a study of any one specific artist or group of artists, but rather it is an exploration of a role the artist (as well as the viewer) fulfills in artwork that uses found objects and images. The nature of this discarded and rescued material facilitates the exploration of memory and Self through the language of collection. The artist's role as Collector is similar to that of the remembering individual as well as that of the anthropologist: to collect, preserve and present that which is essential to an understanding and definition of a Self/society. This dissertation assumes the reader's knowledge and understanding of key theoretical and psychoanalytical concepts and does not seek to explain or extrapolate, but rather use these ideas as a platform for the discussion on the artist's role which is illustrated by specific artworks.

The support and assistance of various individuals has been invaluable during the course of this project. Cindy Andersson, Ryan Bird, Neil Foster, and Brad MacDuff provided much needed feedback and editorial assistance at various stages, for which I

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## A Note on grammar

### Pronouns

In this dissertation on *The Artist's Role as Collector of Memory and Self*, various personal pronouns are used in different contexts and with reference to certain concepts.

*I* and *Me* are commonly used in an abstract sense, most specifically in reference to the subject and object respectively of an experience or artwork. The male singular pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his* are used when discussing an individual viewer, Collector, or Self. As the various understandings and definitions of Collectors are fairly male-oriented, this does not seem an offensive or exclusive term. The first person plural pronouns *we*, *us*, and *our* are primarily used when discussing general memory functions. This is intended to encompass the general functioning and use of memory by all individuals.

In a discussion of these themes and concepts, it is unnecessarily cumbersome to exclude personal pronouns in favour of generalized statements, especially when the specific use of these pronouns provides additional understanding and insight.

### Capitalisation

In this dissertation, various archetypes are capitalised for emphasis and meaning. 'Object' refers to a possessed Thing and is separate from the context of subject/object. 'Self', 'Other' and 'Collector' are capitalised to distinguish their roles as archetypes

within the workings of collection, while 'Truth' primarily refers to the essence of an object, individual or situation.

## Tenses

For the most part this dissertation discusses artworks and ideas in the Present Simple tense. This seems appropriate as the concepts remain unconstrained by temporality, and artworks are continually encountered anew. This does not apply to the discussion of some installation pieces and most importantly, quoted accounts thereof which often use the Past Simple tense.

## Definitions

Following the example set by Jean Baudrillard when he defines the French *objet* (1996: 91), it seems appropriate to use a dictionary definition of certain terms and ideas. This maintains the original and simplified essence of the word or phrase, without the often cluttered framing of various theories which inevitably alter the intended meaning.

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## Introduction

*[F]or the collector...ownership is the most intimate relationship one can have to objects, Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them*

–Walter Benjamin (cited by Muensterberger 1994:15)

Walter Benjamin's take on the relationship between object and owner is a useful framework from which to view a certain kind of artwork – those pieces and artists that use found objects as their primary media. These works often address ideas of memory and Self and some are presented and received as collections.

The intimacy of the relationship between an individual and the objects he owns is more clearly understood in light of the nature of collection and the roles Objects play in an individual's daily life and sense of Self. In order to be able to look at and read artwork that uses the language of collection to present and express a Self or identity, it is necessary to explore the ways in which an individual defines himself through his collections – of both memory and objects. The single most important thing that defines who an individual is, is his memory. An individual learns to identify himself as well as interact with his past, present, and anticipated future through the mediation of his memories. These memories are what tell him who he is, who he was, and who he believes himself to be becoming.

The narrative of an individual's life helps create a sense of identity and belonging. Individuals share their experiences with others through their memory-stories. This narrative is often

constructed in a collaborative situation where the audience and the individual's perception of his audience play an important role in the choice and arrangement of memories. The creation of narrative in a private setting is equally influenced – by the remembered Self as well as the remembering Self. With each telling and reminiscence, these memory-stories are constructed from their various elements and triggers. The individual uses the souvenir or memento as a trigger for his recollection of a specific time or place in his life. As a result, his experiences are invested in and stored in the Object. As a collection, these Objects serve as a definition of a Self – be it the individual's Self in everyday collecting, the artist's Self, or a fabricated Self – with which the viewer interacts and which stimulates his remembering and own sense of Self.

The aesthetically and conceptually varied work of Penny Siopis, Joseph Cornell, Ilya Kabakov, and Susan Hiller provide relevant points for a discussion on the ways in which the artist takes on the role of Collector of memory and Self. The specific artworks chosen demonstrate the various aspects and aesthetics of the artist as Collector; Siopis' work publicly displays a chaotic, 'personal' memory space while Hiller's ordered, 'objective' display exemplifies the aesthetic of the artist as Anthropologist. Kabakov's piece illustrates the relationships between Self, memory, and objects and Cornell's work turns both the 'author' and the viewer into a storyteller.

Artworks that use the detritus of society and Others' lives within the language of collection inevitably present a Self through memories and artefacts. The artist takes on the role of Collector

(and at times, Anthropologist) and places the viewer in a parallel role through the use of these found and rescued objects and images. In these artworks the viewer encounters a familiar collection and Self. Mieke Bal poses a relevant question: “[C]an things be, or tell stories?” (1994: 99). By exploring the ways in which these artworks function as collections of Self; the artist’s role; as well as the viewer’s interaction with these collections, we can begin to understand how the intimate Things of an individual’s life come to be and tell his story.



# Chapter 1

## Collecting Memory

### 1.1 The Culture of Collecting

#### 1.1.1 Collection

Collection can begin to be defined by way of the museum collection which is an assemblage of objects that have “come to us from the past” and are assembled with intent by those who “believed that the whole was somehow more than the sum of its parts” (Stewart 1994: 99). This is clearly an important criterion to consider when differentiating between collections and mere accumulations - a collection is a grouping of objects or ideas that are intentionally put together. As a group the objects become more meaningful than the individual objects themselves. In his discussion of everyday collections, *Collecting: an unruly passion*, Muensterberger defines collecting as the “selecting, gathering, and keeping things of subjective value” (1994: 4) and is eager to point out that the value of these collected items is subjective

because the emotion and often the ardor attached to the collected objects is not necessarily commensurate with its specialness or commercial value, nor does it relate to any kind of usefulness. To the truly dedicated collector, the ‘things’ he collects have a different meaning and indeed even a potentially captivating force (1994: 4).

It is important to establish a difference between collection and accumulation or hoarding. Collecting is a conscious activity, one

that includes the processes of selecting and discarding, whereas hoarding and accumulation involve a more compulsive need to simply 'have' without discernment. The definition of 'hoard' includes the idea of keeping for possible future use (Oxford English Dictionary 2002. Sv "hoard"), whereas in order to become a collection, the usefulness of the objects needs to be removed.

Another characteristic of the collection is apparent in most everyday collections and is expressed by collectors of all types: its inability to be completed. "What makes a collection transcend mere accumulation is not only the fact of its being culturally complex, but the fact that it lacks something. Lack always means lack of something unequivocally defined: one needs such and such an absent object" (Baudrillard 1994: 23). Baudrillard asserts that collection is an activity which is undertaken with the certain knowledge that it shall never be complete; that we do this to ward off death itself. Because an individual invests so much of himself in his collection of things, and uses objects and the collection as a way of defining himself, he desires to keep that definition open and incomplete (Baudrillard 1994: 13). The completion of the collection would put an end to possible variations on that definition of Self, thereby signaling the death of the individual.

### 1.1.2 Things

The souvenir is a commonly collected object, however the souvenir functions differently from the collected object because it "speaks to a context of origin through the language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object

arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia" (Stewart cited by Schor 1994: 255). The souvenir operates within its own mode of purpose; it exists to feed a longing and nostalgia for a specific time and/or place. The souvenir's link to its context of origin is paramount to its existence and meaning; removed from this context the souvenir relinquishes all meaning and potency. A collection operates in a complementary mode, since it is that which "is composed of objects wrenched out of their contexts of origins and reconfigured into the self-contained, self-referential context of the collection itself, and this context destroys the context of origin" (Schor 1994: 256).

Jean Baudrillard's *The system of objects* (1996) is often considered, and rightly so, an authoritative piece on collection. In Roger Cardinal's translation of his *System of collecting*, Baudrillard declares that "[p]ossession cannot apply to an implement, since the object I utilize always directs me back to the world. Rather it applies to that object once it is *divested of its function and made relative to a subject*. ...any given object can have two functions: it can be utilized, or it can be possessed" (1994: 8). An object needs to be removed from its function and purpose in order to be possessed and "once an object stops being defined by its function, its meaning is entirely up to the subject" (1994: 8). This concept forms the basis for many other views on collection and the idea of collecting: an object needs to be removed from its function/purpose to become an Object, one that is worthy of being collected, one which comes to mean more than it was originally intended to, and one with which an individual can have a relationship. James Clifford draws on Baudrillard when he discusses a collecting attitude that is

“predicated on a particular view of subject-object relations as based on domination... To the extent that this is a cultural feature, one cannot simply escape it; the most one can do is ‘make it strange’, make it lose its self-evident universality” (cited by Bal 1994: 104). Clifford proposes that in order to possess objects, the individual needs to separate himself from the object by transforming it into a thing that is totally unrelated to the Self – an absolute Other. This transformation is obtained through the process of removing the object from its original function and context: ‘freeing’ it to become a ‘pure’ Thing. Only then, through this process, can the object truly belong to the individual. It is now not only a Thing but more importantly, it is Mine.

There is a certain violence inherent in the process of collecting, a recurrent violence that is inflicted upon objects as they are continuously removed from their contexts. This happens because “in each episode of collecting, each event of insertion is also an act of deprivation. This is not a one-time act, for meaning changes as the collection as a whole changes. As the narrative develops, each object already inserted is modified anew” (Bal 1994: 111). As the collection evolves and grows, each object is altered by the addition of the new. The context of each piece in the collection and the relationships between objects in the collection are what give the collection, as well as the individual pieces therein, its meaning.

### 1.1.3 Collector

In his *Popular collecting and the everyday self: The reinvention of museums?* (1999), Paul Martin distinguishes three separate modes of collecting: *Unconscious collecting* – which is simply storing things; *Passive collecting* – which includes receiving things<sup>1</sup>; and *Active collecting* – seeking things. It is this last mode of collecting that represents the activities of the Collector as seen by Baudrillard and other theorists. Exactly who this Collector is varies depending on who you read, but there are common themes: Baudrillard sees the Collector as either a child or an older male, linking collecting to sexual activity and fear of castration (Baudrillard 1994:9), while Martin explores the various ways collecting has previously been viewed as a childhood activity, a relaxing adult activity, or a fetishism or obsession (1999: 1).

Much has changed since the social beginnings of collection and the collection as well as the accumulation of things has become a symptom of our Western consumer culture. This accumulation of “the material detritus of consumer society is now a common way of reassuring oneself of one’s relationship to society” (1999: 1). As members of a culture and/or society that values possessions, we cannot help but experience the need to collect and participate in acts of collection (Clifford cited by Bal 1994: 105). The activity of collecting often begins in childhood as “children want to explore and widen their horizons, and the accumulation of such treasures helps them assert themselves” (Muensterberger 1994: 34). Collection “represents the most rudimentary way to exercise control over the outer world: by

laying things out, grouping them, handling them" (Bal 1994: 9) the child is provided a means by which to control a small part of his life. This element of control and its appeal is true even beyond childhood. The control and sense of personal order we bring to our collections is an important aspect of collecting and is often a way in which individuals assuage and control anxiety. While collecting begins in childhood, it is not restricted to that time period as a way to exercise control over the environment and as a means to declare *Me* and who *I* am.

The Collector's relationship to his collection and collected Objects is an interesting one.

...[T]he attitude of the devoted collector toward his objects is similar in many ways to a lover's passion and, further, that overvaluation is, after all, a well known trait among lovers<sup>2</sup> and collectors alike. One must be aware of the fact that the emotion is detached from the outside world and narcissistically[sic] invested in the collected object (Muensterberger 1994: 232).

Baudrillard points out that any object can be possessed, arranged and classified in a collection, thus making the object a perfect mirror "for the images it reflects succeed one another while never contradicting one another. Moreover, it is ideal in that it reflects images not of what is real, but of what is desirable" (1994: 11). In this way, the Objects of a collection and the collection as a whole function as a metamir<sup>3</sup>. The collector sees himself in the objects he collects and in the assemblage thereof, as "it is invariably ourselves that we collect" (1994: 12). The singular object itself exists in a symbiotically defining relationship with the Collector; the object is unique and singular because it is I who possess it and that "allows me to recognize myself in it as a singular being" (1994:12). The object functions not only as a symbol of the set to which it belongs,

but it represents the owner, as “a thing doesn’t speak about itself, but about the one who owns it and why he owns it” (Kabakov 2003: 1176).

Along with possession comes desire, and therefore jealousy because “possession derives its fullest satisfaction from the prestige the object enjoys in the eyes of other people and the fact that they cannot have it” (Baudrillard 1994: 18). In his analysis of popular collecting, Muensterberger acknowledges the differences in taste and the influence of trends “especially as one grows older. Still, despite all possible variations, there is reason to believe that the true source of the habit is the emotional state leading to a more or less perpetual attempt to surround oneself with magically potent objects” (1994:10). ‘Magically potent objects’ is a phrase that connotes ideas of childhood, treasures, and the mysteriousness of and desire for the Other: the exotic. As individuals we are constantly seeking objects to surround ourselves with that represent our beliefs and identity to both ourselves and others. In that our Objects or collections are desirable, inciting jealousy can be seen as affirmation of a life well lived. We collect much more than tangible objects as a way of defining and presenting ourselves — our memories form collections that are the primary way we shape our identity and Self.

## 1. 2                    The Nature of Memory

### 1.2.1 Self

What is clear and mostly taken for granted is the idea that who we are influences not only how and what we store as our memories, but also the retrieval of those stored experiences. The Self naturally changes between storage and retrieval, and it is these different Selves that play equally important roles in the storage and retrieval processes of memory. In his paper on *Early memory, early self, and the emergence of autobiographical memory*, Mark Howe points out that “our self concept is contingent on memory. That is, recollections of ourselves in the context of a past play a critical role in our understanding and conceptualization of who we are today” (2004: 45). These two elements – memory and self – are by nature inconsistent; constantly changing, making the relationship between them equally dynamic. This flux is the very thing that makes it possible to edit and shape our memories and therefore our sense of self – both past and present. “Memory and the self exist in a symbiotic relationship” according to Howe (2004: 46). Symbiosis is by definition a mutually dependent and beneficial relationship (Oxford English Dictionary 2002. Sv “symbiosis”); Memory and Self benefit equally from and require the change of the other. Indeed, memory cannot operate in the way it does without the constant changes of Self and self-concept, and vice versa.

Language and language proficiency play an important role in our understanding of when children begin to identify themselves



simply because we need a medium of communication to begin to understand any individual's thoughts and experiences. Early memories are not necessarily represented linguistically and "concepts are often formed in memory long before the child becomes a language user" (Howe 2004: 47). It is in the second year of life that many language skills are acquired and we are able to explore a young individual's sense of Self and Memory. "In that capacity, language serves to preserve (e.g. through rehearsal, reinstatement) or potentially alter (e.g. through reconstruction) memory records of personally experienced events, but it is not a prerequisite to their foundation" (Howe 2004:49). Among the various theories and research, it is not certain when an individual develops a sense of self, or begins to store and retrieve ideas and images of that Self for himself or others. What is clear is that the use of verbal language makes communication easier and clearer, with less interpretation on the part of the observer. Infants first use a gestural mode (referring to their mirror image or self-referent pointing) to communicate an early awareness of self from as early as six months (Lacan 2003: 620). This awareness of *Self as an individual interacting with and within an external world* is the recognisable beginning of the creation of an autobiographical self. This self is constantly added to and altered and is determined by the various stories that are told by and to the individual. These stories function as snapshots that serve to demonstrate *this is who I am and this is how I behave or interact*.

Autobiographical memories are a subset of narrative processing or storied thought that serves the particular function in consciousness of integrating the subsystems of personality to create an imagery based approximation of goal pursuit preparatory to actual goal-directed behaviours (Singer and Blagov 2004: 127).

Essentially, the autobiographical self system in our memory works to keep us in check, to keep all our goals for the future and memories of the past congruent. We use these stories to define who we are and were, and subsequently as markers against which to measure the accuracy and verity of a memory story or goal.

...[T]here exist at least two fundamental but interrelated aspects of the self, the 'I', a subjective sense of the self as a thinker, knower, and causal agent, and the 'Me', an objective sense of the self with the unique and recognizable features and characteristics that constitute one's self concept (Howe 2004: 48).

This concept of the parts of Self is evident in some of the artworks that will be explored and discussed in this dissertation, where the *I* and *Me* are inevitably separated through the work. In a complex combination of relationships the viewer is separated from the object of display – the *Me* which is a part of the subject – the *I*. In this separation there is a sense of anxiety and a rupture of inner and outer, private and public. Rupture is an appropriate word to use as it connotes a violent tearing apart that leaves the whole separated and longing for that other. The relationship between Self and Other plays an important role in the functioning of both memory and collection.

There are two primary ideas on the emergence of Self. The first being that there is a sudden development of the Self late in the second year of life. Alternatively, prior to "the explicit recognition of

the self as 'Me', there is an 'I' that has been actively developing since birth" (Howe 2004:49)<sup>4</sup>. It would seem that the Self is a constantly developing and growing concept that, with the onset of language acquisition, begins to find an external manifestation or explanation<sup>5</sup>. Howe defines the 'types' of Self as

the ecological self, an awareness of where one is, what one is doing, and what one has done that is rooted in perceptual processes, and the interpersonal self, an awareness of social affordances based on interactions with others... A third aspect of the 'self-as-I' (although not perceived directly by the child) is the conceptual self that enables infants to begin to take themselves as objects of thought. The ability to think about oneself as the subject of experience probably begins to emerge with the realization that one is the object of another person's attention (2004: 49).

We develop an awareness not only of others but of their perception of *Me*, which is what helps the individual identify himself as *I*. The object helps create and establish the subject. But, the *I* has always been, the *I* has been developing since birth and without it there would be no awareness with which to perceive or even conceive *Me*. The two Selves and concepts are mutually dependent and the development of both is reliant on memory.

In terms of the viewing of the artwork discussed in this dissertation, the object on display and the viewer's awareness of *Me* through the object, help create the sense of self – the *I* present in the work – which becomes evident through participation therein. This is a fundamental characteristic that defines these works as memory pieces – the necessity of the viewer's participation. This interaction is not simply on a spatial or physical level (because that is not necessary) but is primarily a conceptual interaction: the engagement of the personality. The influences upon and stimulation

of each other – subject and object – and the interdependence thereof are important aspects of these artworks.

### 1.2.2 Memory transactions

Our remembering often consists of public transactions – which are “the ways in which we share, negotiate, and present our memories to other people” (Engel 1999: 9). The circumstances of telling or remembering interact with the internal images and processes involved in the activity. This action and the combination of these elements is precisely what creates an individual’s memories. This is especially true when one considers that through the telling of memories, words and images are sequentially ordered and put together from feelings, sensations, and events that have had no verbalised base before the telling<sup>6</sup>. In this way “what may have been inchoate becomes sequential. What was fleeting takes on substance. What may not even have been clearly marked as a memory now becomes embedded in grammar that marks it as something remembered, something from the past” (Engel 1999:11). The act of remembering is not always an autonomous act. Often our memories are elicited and created in collaboration with others. As such, Memory moves from the private realm into the public through these transactions/ interactions of recall. When a memory is formed in a collaborative setting, it is created through narrative and not simply translated into narrative, as is the case with the retelling of an experience (Engel 1999: 12). Narrative plays an important role in both the creation and the interpretation of Memory.

In the process of translating experience into language, there often occurs an interference or 'source amnesia'. The individual assembles and collects memories, piecing them together from various sources, times and events and often forgets the origin of specific details and fragments in the process.<sup>7</sup> This also pertains, of course, to a collective memory of events and experiences that are not first-hand, but have been filtered and collated through mass media and the memories of others, helping to create a memory of a shared past. All this input merges into an individual's memory-story. This memory-story (much like all memories) is not stored and later recalled as a whole but with each recollection and retelling, is pieced together from the separate elements and triggers.

"Autobiographical memory is on the one hand a deeply personal, subjective and vivid construction of the past, a construction that reveals, creates, and communicates a personal identity. But we constantly use these memories in public transactions" (Engel 1999: 22). The public use of a private 'commodity' and the spilling of private into the public sphere is something that Penny Siopis talks about and that her artwork addresses. It is an important concept to consider in the discussion of memory and the collections that put a private Self on display. We use the past and our reconstructions thereof as a way to define ourselves as well as to explain why we are the way we are (Albright cited by Engel 1999: 82). As a result, there is a very important and pertinent correlation between the Me now remembering and the Me then being remembered – Me the subject of remembering and Me the object of remembering. Who I remember myself as being is

intricately related to the Me I am now and how I want to remember myself. In addition, the audience of the memory retelling influences the memory (object) self as much as the remembering (subject) self does. We tailor, adapt, and change our memories according to our audience's expectations and what we perceive those expectations to be. In these interactions

you are trying to justify yourself, impress another person, show how you are the same, or different, from others. These situations then end up shaping one's life story as it emerges across time and place. In this way context plays a huge role in determining the self one knows through one's stories about the past (Engel 1999: 87).

The self we recall at a certain time, why and how we modify that story to those circumstances then become facets of the original memory. Because all of our rememberings are reconstructions and not simple file retrievals, this is inevitable.

### 1.2.3 Narrative

Through selecting, discarding, and preserving various memories and ideas an individual shapes and changes how he sees himself and how he presents himself to others. In order to fully appreciate the parallels between this process and those involved in collecting, an exploration into these functions in memory needs to be undertaken. The three primary parts of our memory systems can be explained with a computer metaphor of *input*, *storage*, and *output* (Engel 1999:5). These three components interact in the creation and retelling of a memory. Important to keep in mind here are the two types of memory – *episodic*, which refers to specific events, and *semantic*, which refers to knowledge – and the ways in which they merge and interact.

“Narrative thought organizes information not by abstract category or concept, but through the devices of story, including plot, intention, character, outcome, and theme” (Singer and Blagov 2004: 124). Individuals employ narrative processing as a means to create a life story, and narrative processing is used in our “private thought about past experience, day dreams, fantasies, and dreams” (2004: 124). Not only do we construct our memories as stories to tell others, but we use the same strategy and devices to explain our memories and past experiences to ourselves. We shape who we are through our performed memories, as well as through our private rehearsals. These ‘rehearsals’ are not simply practice for the actual performance in front of others, but a way of solidifying and defining our past Self for ourselves in private – out loud or internally. Our memories and the stories we share are our snapshots – ‘photos’ of candid moments we store and display to not only remember a certain time or feeling, but also to share that with others. There are, of course, differences and an interaction between the Self we create for others and the Self for ourselves – a public as well as a private Me. According to Engel the power and potency of memories lie in their nature as the very things that explain and record who we are (Engel 1999: 98).

Verbalisation and the act of narration edit, refine, and emphasise aspects of any memory or event. The very nature of our memory and self-definition processes work towards the denial and alteration of Reality. Howe explains this distortion succinctly:

In fact, reconstruction of events through conversations with others can lead to systematic distortions of memory details, ones that are congruent with the recaller’s as well as the listener’s current beliefs and expectations...the strategy of verbal rehearsal

can serve not only to reinforce and reinstate memories, but can also lead to a number of errors in recall (2004: 61).

Verbal rehearsal pertains to the social, interactive elements of storytelling that help construct memories. It is important to always keep in mind that memories of events are not stored as whole, edited 'shorts' to be played at will. Rather, the individual elements and triggers are stored and upon retrieval are pieced together and reconstructed from the fragments in a situation where "language can serve to strengthen the content of events to be preserved (or altered) over time" (Howe 2004: 62). The preservation of events and the subsequent memories thereof are closely related to and a part of the alteration of these events through and within memory.

We consciously (and unconsciously) construct our life story through every anecdote or story we relate to others. By telling a story relating to his past, the individual presents his audience with an image of who he was, who he is, as well as making visible his current image of the relationship between Self (rememberer) and Other (audience). By showing *Me* like this, the differences and similarities between *you* and *me* are made apparent. Naturally,

because storage is dynamic and malleable in response to new experiences, it is extremely unlikely that what we remember of early events, especially those not encoded with respect to the self, remains unaltered by the cumulative experiences of a lifetime (Howe 2004:64) .

When considering artworks which explore notions of Memory and Self, it is important to remain aware that the situation of recall can affect the emotional power of a memory because while narrative and self-defining memories "have the power to shake our rational understanding of past experiences" (Singer and Blagov 2004: 126), their affective power is not fixed, and varies according



to the circumstances of recall. Some artists create a situation in which these conjured memories have more resonance, whether the emotionally charged environment is consciously or intuitively created.

## 1.3

### Collecting Self

Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories (Benjamin 1970: 60).

#### 1.3.1 Creating Self

As an individual ages, his memories increase in quality for various reasons, mostly because “advances in our ability to classify and categorise information affords us the opportunity to not only better understand the world we live in and events that occur in our lives, but also can beget more durable memories” (Howe 2004:55). It is an accepted fact that as our cognitive abilities increase, our information storage and retrieval systems improve. As we add features to our idea of Self, these features begin to be recorded as a part of our memories of events – helping anchor them in our concept of time and history. The result is not just a memory of an event, but of an event that happened to Me (Howe 2004: 58). The memories that tend to be best remembered are of transition, the changes we inevitably go through. Self-defining memories are those that have the power to affect an individual emotionally at the time of the experience as well as at the moment of recall. These memories are characterized by being “vivid; affectively intense; repetitively recalled; linked to other similar memories; focused on an enduring concern or unresolved conflict of the personality” (Singer & Blagov 2004: 119). These affectively intense memories help define the Self and serve as ‘touchstones’. The rememberer uses these self-defining memories as a reference to who he is and what he does or does not want. These memories, in fact all

autobiographical memories, help an individual define himself both now and in his past. Identity “is synonymous with the autobiographical narrative individuals construct to weave together their past, present, and anticipated future into a unified whole” (Singer & Blagov 2004: 121); in other words, the ‘who I am’ part of the Self is constructed from the stories an individual recalls.

Susan Engel makes a startlingly simple statement with regards to published memoirs: those snippets of memory that can become more than a personal event by being “a deliberate act of self preservation and communication” (1999: 12). Self preservation and communication are exactly what we see in works of art that function as collections – collections of a Self; be it an imagined, constructed, or projected Self, or the artist’s own Self. Everyday collector’s collections are evidently acts of self preservation: a display of ‘this is who I am and what is important to me’. Both kinds of collection are deliberate acts of self preservation, for truly that is what a Collection of objects or a Collection of memories really is – a way of presenting as well as preserving the Self.

Memoirist Anne Dillard declares that “the main decisions the memoirist must make are what to put in and what to leave out. This is essentially what all rememberers must decide, whether they make these choices deliberately or unconsciously” (cited by Engel 1999: 101). This is true not only of the rememberer, but also of the Collector. A decision is made, even unconsciously, as to what is most important and what captures the essence of Me, this moment, or situation. It is always a process of selection and discarding, with tangible things as well as intangible memories/stories of moments

or events. As individuals, we are naturally and constantly weeding out our belongings, feelings, and attachments, deciding what is no longer pertinent to our situation. We constantly choose what is representative of the story of our lives and personalities – what is important to preserve. Our Things become valuable treasures and artefacts of a life lived. With regards to our memories, we can and do choose not to share publicly, or even to privately ‘forget’, experiences and behaviour that do not fit with the image we have and wish to project of our past or current Self. The memories that are incongruous to the person in the story are discarded or blatantly omitted from the telling. These omissions themselves are evidence of who we are. What is discarded as ‘not Me’ can be equally indicative of identity as that which is preserved. Of course, the ‘not Me’ is bigger and more inclusive than the concept of ‘Me’ simply because there is a lot more in the world (in terms of things as well as concepts and ideas) that an individual does not identify with than there are those that he does; it is the very nature of individualism.

### 1.3.2 Telling stories

“Primo Levi’s idea of a ‘metamir’, a mirror that reflects back the looker’s perceptions rather than the physical reality” (Engel 1999: 102), is exactly what our edited and pieced-together life story and memories are – not reality as such, but what we perceive it to be and to have been. Our edited stories are not only what we perceive, but what we have created of ourselves– our own created Truth and reality. Some artwork functions as a metamir: in Penny Siopis’ chaotic arrangement of *Zombie* (2000) (figs 1-3) the

tableaux collectively act as a mirror, which reflects the viewer (participant) and his life/past. What is seen and experienced is not simply what Siopis has placed, but what we recognise and how we see our own Selves and past. In her choice of objects and system of display, Siopis creates a familial and familiar image that functions as a reflection of the viewer-participant's possible (if not probable) self and past. Past is an important concept in much of Siopis' work as well as the reading of it. A concept of the past always incorporates and relies on Memory, on snippets and snapshots that are not seen or understood in their entirety – fragments. Memory is a piecing together of fragments and selections that are incomplete. In the telling of these memories, as well as in the creation of our own autobiographical memory stories, we often – like a young child – need help and prompting in our remembering and retelling<sup>8</sup>. Siopis gives us pieces and parts of that story in a helpful shove toward remembering. The work functions in that way almost regardless of the setting or viewer. There is an everyman, every time feeling to it. Although, perhaps it feels universal to some viewers because much of the iconography is from their home country and they can identify with it. However, the work seems to translate and be accessible across borders and cultures<sup>9</sup>. While Truth and meaning are relative experiences, and it is difficult for one viewer to declare the relevance of a piece of art across all boundaries, there is a certain verisimilitude to this piece and others.

Our memories – the stories we create and edit of ourselves – are made for ourselves, for private use and reflection, as well as for others. This autobiographical compilation is our primary method

of defining who we are or who we were, and never (or seldom, perhaps) does it truthfully reflect reality. This seems an impossibility, really, given that life is always about perspective, perception, and opinion. Rather, these compilations/stories reflect what we want them to. Renowned author Toni Morrison, whose work is often centred around remembering, declares that “memory (the deliberate act of remembering) is a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it really was – that is research. The point is to dwell on the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way” (1996: 213). Our memories are carefully chosen, discarded and preserved in a system of display that we are the sole curators of. Who an individual sees himself as being now and as having been in the past is based purely on his collection and arrangement of the short stories and snapshots of his past. Of course, when an individual interacts with others, it is important to remain within a reasonable framework of reality or probability to prevent being seen as totally delusional or psychotic. Individuals use autobiographical memories to create their own metamirs and “our autobiographical memories are constantly an effort to communicate with ourselves and others our subjective experience” (Engel 1999: 103). That which is most difficult to explain/share – our subjective and personal experience – is given a language or medium in the discourse of Memory.

Through the interpretive and collaborative sharing of memories (albeit edited and arranged ones), the individual brings his audience to a closer understanding of or empathy with himself. He uses the past to communicate his present Self through these self-constructed images of the past. Autobiographical memories are

our primary form of communication with others as well as ourselves because “the self created through memories is constantly interacting with the self one’s memory creates” (Engel 1999:107). The primary function of autobiographical memory is to develop a life history and this is accomplished by telling others what *I* am like through narrating the events of *my* past. Through our cultural and social practice of telling stories about ourselves, we define ourselves and teach others, especially children, to do the same. We participate in constructing memories and a past that we can all engage in. ‘Telling stories’ is a personally affective phrase, reminiscent of childhood and parents questioning the verity of an account, or an admonishment for fibbing with a brusque ‘stop telling stories’. Regardless of whether that is a commonly used, familial, or culture-specific phrase, it points out the narrative aspect of our natural experience-sharing. It is important to keep in mind that through the telling/verbalisation of any experience, both the experience and memory thereof are altered.

...as time goes on, we repeat a story to ourselves and think of it as our memory and it is the norm rather than the exception to be unable to distinguish between what happened, what you feel about what happened, and what others may have said about what happened (Engel 1999: 16).

Every exchange and interaction we participate in helps shape our past. The malleability and changeable nature of Memory are precisely what allow an individual to have a sense of both past and Self.

### 1.3.3 The Boat of My Life

Ilya Kabakov's installation *The Boat of My Life* (First displayed in 1993) (figs 4-6) is an artwork that clearly presents a visually narrated life story. The piece invokes and utilises aspects of both memory and collection. Set along the deck of a constructed boat are 24 (some reports say 25) boxes, seemingly unarranged. The viewer is forced into a participatory role as the only way to view the work is by entering it and becoming engaged and a part of it. Alighting the boat, the viewer-participant meanders through the boxes and disembarks on the other side after the final empty box. The boxes are open and all but the last are filled with various personal affects, giving the impression of an individual moving or storing their belongings. On closer inspection, the viewer encounters the 'lists' that are placed at the top of each box and which consist of various small things glued to cards with descriptions below. The boxes are ordered and 'labeled' in this way, representing different memories and periods of an individual's life. The viewer-participant walks through this life and is witness to the various memories and experiences of the 'author'. Although this piece is autobiographical, presenting experiences and events from Kabakov's own life, this aspect is somewhat incidental to the overall meaning conveyed.

The piece is encountered much like a museum retrospective display of a significant individual's life, guiding the viewer through the various chapters and phases. The significance of the final box being empty is fairly obvious as an open chapter, a life as yet unfinished. Physically and mentally, as individuals we sort and store



our objects and memories for future use. This is visually manifest in Kabakov's packed boxes, which reference the storage and retrieval systems of our memories as well as the physical sorting and packing necessary in the various stages of an individual's life. In terms of the journey death necessitates between life and an afterlife, the packing and storage of personal belongings is reminiscent of the task family members are often faced with after the death of a loved one – sorting the objects and personal items of their life<sup>10</sup>. The use of a boat itself is significant, referencing the physical and figurative journeys through and beyond life. Charon and his boat ferrying souls across the river Acheron to Hades, as well as the Viking tradition of sending warriors and kings to the afterlife with their useful belongings in boat graves, come to mind when considering this piece.

In the Viking tradition, the items buried with the individual were the useful items of his life – various weapons, textiles, coins and utensils ([www.archaeology.co.uk](http://www.archaeology.co.uk)). In Kabakov's piece it is difficult not to be reminded of this. The boxes arranged on the deck of Kabakov's boat comprise the treasured items of a life lived, including childhood artefacts and items that remind the individual of certain events and circumstances of his life. Kabakov's installation puts the viewer-participant in the middle of his life story, making it tangible and transforming it into a visible collection of memories. As the viewer walks through the artist's life, it is inevitable that he considers his own life and past as Kabakov's trinkets trigger his own memories.

*The Boat of My Life* is a public display of a life lived. The narrative of an individual's life is created and presented through the boxes of stored artefacts and treasures. Alison Gopnik talks about an individual's memories as equivalent to his idea of Self and who he is. Without these memories, the individual loses himself and his identity (1998). This is clear when illnesses that affect an individual's memory functions, such as Alzheimer's disease, are considered.<sup>11</sup> As a corollary, an individual is able to construct his identity through his memories and the collection thereof. Kabakov's piece presents the viewer-participant with a constructed Self. As is the case with many museum collections and presentations, the system of display denies the viewer the closer access and understanding he desires. The very nature of most collections and their display grants access to a variety of personal items and therefore memories, but denies the viewer any tactile interaction. The viewer is not permitted to root through the boxes to discover more personal items, but rather, must be content with the objects (and memories) on the surface of each box, those that the 'author' has deemed publicly accessible. While a very personal and private Self is put on display, it is still controlled by the individual – much like our memory stories and the sharing thereof. Artworks that put a Self on display, especially through the use of objects, act as metamirs in which the viewer-participant is forced to see himself. The artist creates a *Me* (objective self) to be put on display, which the subjective self of the viewer (the *I*) identifies with and sees himself (*Me*) in. The viewer *I*, then, is separated from his own objective self (*Me*) through the piece. When looking at the life of another, we invariably see our own life and Self reflected back at

us, which causes a conflict in our concepts of and the relationship between Self and Other.

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## Endnotes Chapter 1

- 1 If collecting without intent is viewed as hoarding, then both *unconscious* and *passive* collecting would be included in this definition.
- 2 While desire and the Other are discussed further in Chapter 2.2, within this context of the Collector's relationship to his collection it is important to consider the lover's desire in light of the Other. "[T]he lover seeks to possess the loved one and thus integrate her into his being: this is the satisfaction of desire. He simultaneously wishes the loved one nevertheless remain beyond his being as the other he desires, i.e. he wishes to remain in the state of desiring. These are incompatible aspects of desire: the being of desire is therefore incompatible with its satisfaction" (Onof 2006).
- 3 The idea of a metamir is explored further in Chapter 1.3.2 *Telling stories*. Essentially, a metamir is "a mirror that reflects back the looker's perceptions rather than the physical reality" (Engel 1999: 102).
- 4 Lacan declares that "the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject" (2003: 621).
- 5 This idea is supported by research that shows the brains of infants to have approximately one and a half times the active synapses that adults' do (Gopnik 1998).
- 6 There are numerous experiments and that have been conducted over the years that show the effects of verbalization on an individual's memory. Relevant here, is the idea that verbalizing or explaining a visual or sensory experience impedes the true memory/recognition of the event (Schooler 1998).
- 7 Alison Gopnik talks about this source amnesia which is evident in her experiments with children. Often children are unable to be sure where information or knowledge came from, or when they learned it (1998).
- 8 In her lecture *I knew it when I was a little tiny baby: How children's memory differs from ours* at the Exploratorium on November 11, 1998, Alison Gopnik discusses her various experiments with young children. Pertinent here is the specific experiment involving small infants retelling their experiences at the zoo. The things the infants recall and elaborate on are the very things their parents have pointed out and discussed with them, and those the parents didn't point out didn't feature in the infant's recollection.
- 9 This accessibility is evident in the fact that Siopis has been invited to and has installed work outside of South Africa.
- 10 A task Penny Siopis has spoken about repeatedly as being a contributing factor in her work that uses found objects and personal memories (Atkinson in Smith 2005:72).
- 11 Clinical neurologist, Oliver Sacks' writing is filled with various examples of individuals who have lost their sense of self and identity along with their memories, especially their autobiographical memories. See *The man who mistook his wife for a hat* (1987).

## Chapter 2

### Detritus and Me

In acquiring objects, the collector replaces production with consumption: objects are naturalized into the landscape of the collection itself (Stewart 1993: 156).

#### 2.1 Mine

##### 2.1.1 Objects and Self

The collected Object has the ability to store memory. Once an object is no longer considered solely for its function, this becomes one of its primary roles, as Objects speak not only of their intended purpose, but also of their past uses and meanings. This collected past often contributes to an understanding of the current meaning of the Object for the individual who owns it. This history is not necessarily as known<sup>1</sup> or as important as it is for Benjamin's bibliophile, for whom "each book-object evokes the precise memory of where it was acquired and under what conditions; further, each book evokes the original context in which it was housed" (cited by Schor 1994:252). Regardless of the Collector's knowledge or ignorance of the object's past, its current meaning is tied to its previous meanings and uses.

Ian Hodder's succinct paper entitled *The contextual analysis of symbolic meanings* holds that the meaning of an object is threefold. The first two modes of meaning relate to the object's use and its place in a sequence or collection. Neither of these meanings

have much to do with the imposed value of the object: what it means to others, or its context; its history. Within these readings an object is either the thing *I use to do this*, or it is *Mine*. Hodder's third mode of meaning relates to the artefact and the souvenir, where the object's meaning is derived not from its use or its belonging, but from its origins: what it has 'done', or 'seen' and what other individuals have associated with it. It is this third mode of meaning "which makes its use non-arbitrary" (1994: 12), and makes the object a specific and individualised Thing rather than one of a set or one of many. It makes the object unique in that the meaning assigned to it is specific to this one and its history. Of course, "meaning is slippery and variable, both smaller and endlessly greater than what the speaking subject would like to convey" (Bal 1999:10), making it difficult for an outsider to fully comprehend the meaning or value of an object to the individual who possesses it. However, because "a collection results from purposeful acquisition and retention, it announces identity traits with far greater clarity and certainty than the many other objects owned" (Belk & Wallendorf 1994:240). It is the necessary purposefulness in the acquisition of separate and isolated objects and their assemblage and arrangement in a collection which allows the collection (and by extension the Object) to become a representation of the personality/identity of an individual, and undeniably so. The meanings of each object to an individual become a lot clearer within the context of a collection.

When objects are defined in terms of their use value, they serve as extensions of the body into the environment, but when objects are defined by the collection, such an extension is inverted, serving to subsume the environment to a scenario of the personal. The ultimate term in the series that marks the collection

is the 'self', the articulation of the collector's own 'identity' (Stewart 1993: 162).

The things we own and cherish demonstrate who we are, just as our selected and edited memory-stories do. Often a collection of objects functions as a way in which “to demonstrate or to claim high social status vis-à-vis non-collectors as well as other collectors; the distinctiveness of the collection brings distinction to the collector” (Danet and Katriel 1994: 222), in that the more unique<sup>2</sup> or regarded a collection and the objects it contains are, the more unique or regarded the Collector becomes. The collection acts as a signifier of the individual, a mirror. Most of this substitution and symbolism is realised on a sub-conscious level because individuals, for the most part, do not actively set out to compare and liken themselves to collections of inanimate objects. However unintentional or subliminal this mirroring is, it is worth remembering in the discussion of collection, and especially artworks that function as and use the language of collection.

In everyday life (outside the realm of conscious collecting) the objects individuals purchase, treasure, and put on display play a variety of important roles. Relevant here are what these objects say about the individual: they are valued either for their aesthetic or for their origin and memories of acquisition. This Thing is Mine because *I find it aesthetically appealing and that demonstrates and exemplifies an aspect of Me*, or this Thing is Mine because *I got it here and that origin is a part of my life story*. An object can come to have totally different meanings, depending on the mode of display and the individual's attitude towards it – as souvenir or as collected artefact. Although these two kinds of objects are related,

they differ in various aspects, most especially in terms of the role assigned to the object for “while the point of the souvenir may be remembering, or at least the invention of memory, the point of the collection is forgetting – starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie” (Stewart 1993: 152).

An individual's collection of Objects parallels his collection of memories – both collections explain who he is, was, and desires to be (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981: ix). As a result of the intimate relationship between people and the objects they own, in order “to understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished, and why, should become a part of our knowledge of human beings” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton 1981: 1). This Self or identity that is created through a collection of objects is not always a true reflection of the individual. Much like an individual's memories which are edited and selected to reveal and present a somewhat idealised Self, the collection of objects which comes to represent an individual is constructed. The construction of a personal collection is a conscious and at times self-conscious act of preservation. “To arrange objects according to time is to juxtapose personal time with social time, autobiography with history, and thus create a fiction of the individual life, a time of the individual subject both transcendent to and parallel to historical time” (Stewart 1993:154). The preservation of time and of Self within a certain time is evident in much collecting. The individual associates himself with his various objects and invests in them aspects and memories of his past. These Things collectively come



to represent the individual. While this desire to present and preserve the Self in objects is most clearly articulated in the heirloom, it is also evident in many constructed collections and artworks.

### 2.1.2 Owning aesthetic objects

“The collection represents the total aestheticization of use value” (Stewart 1993: 151) because “to relate to an object or an experience as a collectible is to experience it aesthetically” (Danet and Katriel 1994:225). This aesthetic-oriented approach to the collected is paralleled by Baudrillard's assertion that in order to be possessed, objects must be divested of their purpose/function (1996: 92). The use and intended purpose of an object is disregarded in favour of the pure aesthetic of it. It becomes a *Thing to behold* instead of a *functional Thing*.

There are of course “two types of aesthetic objects: those that are aesthetic objects by destination and those that become aesthetic objects by metamorphosis” (Danet & Katriel 1994: 225) - a metamorphosis which is initiated by the Collector through the process of collection. Danet and Katriel have a phrase which captures the serialisation of objects in a collection as well as the individuality of those objects: “How objects rhyme” (1994: 227). In rhyming objects “[t]he occurrence of repetition, of sameness-in-difference within the flow of ever-changing experience creates an illusion of beauty” (Danet & Katriel 1994: 227). While the rhyming of objects is commonly seen in everyday collections and those of

museums, it is also an essential element in many artworks which use collection as a reference or language. Joseph Cornell's *Untitled (Pharmacy)* (1943) (fig 7) in which various "connections and possibilities [are created] through repetition and variation" ([www.tfaoi.com](http://www.tfaoi.com)) is an instance of this rhyming at work, as is Susan Hiller's *Dedicated to unknown artists* (1972 - 1976) (fig 8) with its repeated postcards of a similar style and era.

In interviews with everyday collectors and their analysis thereof, Danet and Katriel touch on the most important element of collecting – the notion of possession, of something being Mine.

...[W]hen asked why owning objects was preferable to seeing them in a museum, a stamp-collector physicist stated, 'It's mine [the collection]. I can do with it what I want. I can arrange it in the album the way I want. I can display it in exhibits.' Ownership is also essential for another reason: the sensuous aspects of collecting – handling, touching, playing with, caring for the collections – are made possible by it (1994: 228-229).

The viewer is denied all these sensuous aspects of collecting, while the Collector is granted total freedom and dominance over his assembled Objects. An essential appeal of collecting is the notion that once *I* own an Object and it is Mine, *I* can do with it what *I* will. This possession and Mine-ness is the very thing that the spectator is denied – he is granted nothing beyond distant, visual appreciation. The individual creates a personal space through his ownership of various Objects. This selection of Objects helps define him to himself and to others, as well as proving his dominance over these material Things. Jean Baudrillard begins his seminal discussion on collecting with a definition of the French *objet* as "anything which is the cause or subject of a passion. Figuratively and most typically: the loved object" (1996:91).

[T]he objects of our lives, as distinct from the way we make use of them at a given moment, represent something much more, something profoundly related to subjectivity: for while the object is a resistant material body, it is also, simultaneously, a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone. *It is all my own*, the object of my passion (Baudrillard 1994:7).

And that is exactly it: The loved object holds my passion because it is Mine, and it is Mine because it is the object of my passion.

### 2.1.3 Mementos and Preservation

The experiences and events of an individual's life are recorded in order to keep them from being forgotten, much like the words of folktales and oral histories (Danet & Katriel 1994:223). In other words, we remember on purpose. An individual's collection of Objects that trigger those memories are important in that they serve both as evidence and as doorways: they are markers. "The marker is an object which acts as a memory cue, a compacted signifier which can trigger a leisurely unpacking of all its symbolism and memories" (Gordon cited by Martin 1999: 55). By purposefully placing memories of specific events and periods of his life in objects, the individual transforms these Things into powerful containers of memory and reminiscence.

Susan Stewart points out two distinct kinds of souvenir – those of exterior sites and those of individual experience. It is interesting to note that "children are the major consumers of mass-produced souvenirs, [which] is most likely because they, unlike adults, have few souvenirs of the second type and thus must be able to instantly purchase a sign of their own life histories" (1993:

138). This need to provide a *sign of my life, evidence that I was here*, is a common trait (especially in our contemporary consumer society) and is seen in the prevalence of both the souvenir and the amateur photographic industries. One needs only to go to any tourist attraction to see both in evidence - people posing for holiday pictures to display on their return home and the various traditional and 'iconic' items for sale by local artisans and merchants. As an individual experiences his life (not only the exotic and unusual events, but everyday ones as well), he collects various objects and images as souvenirs of those experiences. These objects then act as receptacles which both store and trigger memories of events and life experiences. An individual's collected objects serve as artefacts of a life lived. These souvenirs of personal experiences are mementos which become "emblematic of the worth of that life and the self's capacity to generate worthiness" (Stewart 1993: 139).

Artworks which use found objects within a context of collection refer to these personal, often private, collections of mementos and souvenirs, simulating a past and creating a sense of nostalgia. An individual uses his souvenirs and mementos as a means to relive a past event and these "[r]eminiscences have the effect of perpetuating desire and longing. One cannot sustain the permanence of pleasure experienced in the actual world, but one can savour the pleasure of a moment, in part, by recollecting it" (Lichtenstein 2006). Penny Siopis creates walk-in rooms and installations that envelope the viewer, transforming him into a participant in the act of reminiscing, while Joseph "Cornell recombines familiar fragments from his archives to create a new object that looks like a memory trace" (Lichtenstein 2006).

We might say that this capacity of objects to serve as traces of authentic experience, is, in fact, exemplified by the souvenir. The souvenir distinguishes experiences. We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative (Stewart 1993: 135).

Or perhaps the *intervention* of narrative. The souvenir *needs* the story and often the story needs the souvenir. The authenticity of the story and/or memory is in the evidence that the souvenir provides. It is the Thing that proves what *I* did, and by that act of proof, records and stores both the event and the memory thereof. The heirloom functions in a parallel manner, for it is a dialect within the language of the souvenir. It is that Thing that provides evidence; the artefact of an individual and his life.

The difference between the collected Object and souvenir needs to be kept in mind; while both are removed from their original context, for the souvenir, "it is only by means of its material relation to that location that it acquires its value" (Stewart 1993: 135). Much like its subcategory, the heirloom, "the souvenir speaks to a context of origin through a language of longing, for it is not an object arising out of need or use value; it is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia" (Stewart 1993: 135). The heirloom has its own, slightly more complicated context of origin: its past is apparent and the Thing is forever associated with its 'owner'. By bequeathing his possessions, the benefactor guarantees his memory.

"[I]t is through their discontinuous integration within sets and series that we truly dispose of our objects, and thus we truly come

to possess them" (Baudrillard 1994: 14). This is precisely what Penny Siopis is in the process of doing. With her piece *Will* (1997 - present) (figs 9 - 11), Siopis intends bequeathing various personal objects that she has used in her installations and artwork. These objects have varying monetary value, which will naturally increase because of her ownership and act of willing. But most importantly, the symbolic value and meaning of each object will change (and is changing through the process of the artwork). By giving these Things away, she is claiming them as hers more clearly and loudly than ever before – despite their previous inclusion in her various artworks. For the beneficiaries, these objects will come to represent (and possibly even hold) a part of the artist's persona and personality because "the heirloom persists in pursuing and binding the keeper to its benefactor, remaining rooted through tentative threads to its 'originary' owner" (Law 2002: 11).

Baudrillard contends that our possessions are as fundamentally important to our psychic well-being as our dreams, that

if a person were deprived of the possibility of escaping-and-regressing within the game of possession, if that person were prevented from marshaling his own discourse and running through a repertory of objects imbued with self and removed from time, mental disarray would follow every bit as promptly. We are incapable of living in the dimension of absolute singularity in uninterrupted consciousness of that irreversibility of time signaled in the moment of our birth. It is this irreversibility, this relentless passage from birth to death that objects help us to resolve (1994: 16).

If collection is a means to ward off death due to its incomplete nature, then the giving of objects of personal significance to others who will channel their memories through those objects helps keep

the benefactor – the giver – alive. The giving of heirlooms helps ward off the end that death signifies. It is a promise of immortality and of being remembered, a promise that is stronger and an outcome that is certainly more assured than the fickle passing on of blood and genetics. These objects are more personal – they are things an individual has personally selected for their aesthetic, conceptual or sentimental value, and thus represent the personality of the individual. The matching of heirloom to beneficiary is an important aspect to consider, as one would not give objects imbued with Self and personal history to just anybody, but rather to someone who would appreciate the object for either its aesthetic or its link to the benefactor.

Within the context of Siopis' on-going piece (more so than the usual bequeathing of objects), to be *chosen* as the guardian of this Thing has a weighty sense of responsibility, almost a *knighting*. It is a deliberate act of self-preservation – insurance against being forgotten, with “each fragmented heirloom willing itself towards immortality” (Law 2002: 13). This is interesting especially in terms of the items Siopis owns and is planning to bequeath, as many are found discarded objects from the pasts of strangers and family. The objects that have come to be hers contain elements of their past owners and uses. Added to that is their significance to the artist and her use of them in her artworks, which has transformed them into symbols they were not originally intended to be. Now, heaped onto that and into those meanings comes the deliberate act through which Siopis intends to give the objects away.

“[T]he object is that through which we mourn for ourselves in the sense that, in so far as we truly possess it, the object stands for our own death, symbolically transcended” (Baudrillard 1994: 17). The object transcends death because it continues, often unchanged and revered for its timeless nature. By associating myself with this Thing, I too transcend death.

In accordance with Freud's concept of the death instinct, subjects constantly work their way through the difficulty of constituting themselves by re-enacting a primal scenario of separation, of loss and recovery, in order to defer death. Collecting can be attractive as a gesture of endless deferral of death in this way (Bal 1994: 113).

Siopis is directly dealing with the inevitable distribution of her belongings while simultaneously ensuring her legacy with regards to the individuals involved in her life. It is interesting that she chooses to do what is usually a private endeavour in such an open and forthright manner, making the process a public and continuing piece of art. Through the long-term creation of this piece and the catalogue/archival museum style of display Siopis has employed thus far, the inevitability of death is confronted and accepted. “The *Will* as biographical inventory, as an act of contractual sacrifice, is a natural extension of the archive in that it guarantees the continuation of the collection and the persistence of memory through a strategy of projected becoming which forever promises return” (Law 2002:10).

Danet and Katriel explore the different ways that Collectors create a sense of closure in their collections – including the completion of a set/series, filling a space, manipulating the scale of objects, and creating a visually pleasing display (1994: 231-234). These attempts at closure are interesting when one



considers Baudrillard's assertion that the completion of the collection signifies death, prompting the Collector to keep the collection open and incomplete as a means to ward off death. Siopis' piece will experience its own death – it is by its very nature self-destructive in that the completion thereof ensures that it will no longer exist, except as a memory (albeit a well-documented one). The completion of *Will* will be the total dispersal of the collection. What has been displayed in a systematic museum style of catalogued objects will have become an event – the physical will have transformed into a temporal performance.

## 2.2

## Desire

### 2.2.1 Nostalgia and desire

“The pleasure of desire, like that of the archive, is characterised by the perpetual tension between longing and fulfillment” (Hauptman 1999: 40). While the souvenir creates nostalgia and the collection acts in a mode of desire, these concepts are not dialectically opposed but are similar in both purpose and functioning. Perhaps a better word is *desiderate* with its connotations of longing, regret and sense of loss (Oxford English Dictionary 2002. Sv “desiderate”; “desiderium”). Desire, nostalgia and desideration – intricately connected and intertwined – are all essential to the creation of meaning and value in the collected Object. We desire that which we see and wish to possess, desiderate that which we ardently long to have again and are nostalgic towards that which we have lost. Our memories of past experiences – which we can never fully experience again but instead must content ourselves with reminiscing about and reliving – fall into this nostalgic category.

In nostalgia, the past offers a refuge of temporary security blocking out the uncertainty of the present and the future; it is a kind of edited replay as wish fulfillment. The fantasies are constructed precisely to suit one's needs. Nostalgia may produce a recollection of the past as it once actually existed, or it may alter the actual feelings associated with that recollection. This selective memory simultaneously conserves and destroys the past (Lichtenstein 2006).

The temporal distance between the event and the remembering is bridged by the souvenir – the very Thing that comes from that time. The souvenir or personal memento grants the individual

access to relive and remember the original experience. The memory is, of course, possible without such a Thing, but it becomes palpable and more communicable with the physicality of the object. Although,

there is no continuous identity between these objects and their referents. Only the act of memory constitutes their resemblance. And it is in this gap between resemblance and identity that nostalgic desire arises. The nostalgic is enamoured of distance... Nostalgia cannot be sustained without loss" (Stewart 1993:145).

The nostalgic Object is the very essence of the physical collection which comes to represent the Self and an individual's memory collection. Artists do not necessarily utilise these souvenirs/mementos; indeed, how could they, as the memento is a unique object pertaining to a specific individual's past. Instead, many of these artworks refer to the personal through the use of generic, recognisable objects which trigger the viewer's own memories and nostalgic desire. Joseph Cornell's *Object (Rose de vents)* (1942-53) (Fig 12) presents the viewer with a 'treasure box' of sorts – what initially seems to be a constructed three-dimensional diary/journal. Cornell's boxes draw on the Victorian sensibility of collecting and *Object (Rose de vents)* brings to mind how, within the Victorian tradition, "children were encouraged to collect as an educational activity, and the containers for their treasures were dubbed 'schoolboy's museums'" ([www.tfaoi.com](http://www.tfaoi.com)). Cornell's various objects and images are placed within the compartments of the box, creating vignettes. The maps and 'specimens' included are reminiscent of childhood exploring and documentation. Presented as a box of treasures, things are found and placed together in a display intended to preserve both the objects and the moment in an individual's life. The desire to

preserve is evident and there is a definite sense of loss conveyed through the piece. The act of preservation is in itself the very fear of loss – of both memory and physicality. *Object (Rose de vents)* conveys a sense of loss and nostalgia through its viewing in the present and Cornell also “creates a strong nostalgia for the anticipated loss of the present” (Lichtenstein 2006). This desideration is a recurrent theme in Cornell's work. Evident in many artworks of this nature (and stimulated in the viewer) is a desire to return to a lost time or place and the anticipated desire to return to *this* time and place. Simultaneous to the awareness of these desires, is the knowledge of their impossibility.

These contradictory tendencies create the temporary illusion of suspended time – a pause, a rewinding of memory. The knowledge that a retrieval of the past is impossible gives rise to a sense of yearning and loss, turning nostalgia into a bittersweet mourning (Lichtenstein 2006); a desideration.

Theo deBoer points out that desire is, in part, fear. “The curious thing about desire is that it fears the very reality it desires. It is so afraid of the other, which by its very existence puts a question mark against the self-evident nature of the self” (1999: 270). However, Lacan declares that the individual's sense of self is always defined through it's relationship to the Other; due to the Mirror Phase and its role in establishing identity “the idea of the self, that inner being we designate by “I,” is based on an image, an other. The concept of self relies on one's misidentification with this image of an other” (Klages 2001). In essence, desire is for the Other – that which is totally not Self. The very nature of the Other being outside of the Self and what is known evokes fear. It is evident that the acts of desire and nostalgic longing are fraught with the fear of loss, especially when that which is desired has

already been lost to time. Through deliberate acts of preservation, the Collector attempts to capture that which has already been lost or whose loss is anticipated. This is even seen in everyday collecting where “[r]estoration and conservation are a way of seeking closure by turning back the hand of the clock so that the inexorable process of decay will be slowed down at least to some degree” (Danet and Katriel 1994: 233). Through the preservation collection affords and the “construction of public and private memorials” (Lichtenstein 2006), time is stopped, or at the very least captured.

### 2.2.2 Curiosities and the viewer

Called to mind by much of these artworks which reference and use the language of collection is the collecting sensibility seen since the *wunderkammern* (Fig 13) of the Renaissance. Most specifically, the curiosity cabinets of the Victorian era in which

European royalty and affluent professionals from the 1500s to the 1700s gathered works of art, illustrated texts and maps, coins, scientific devices, seashells, and other natural specimens from around the world to create 'cabinets of curiosities'. Dense arrangements in drawers, chests, and glass-fronted cases in private chambers suggested a collector's highly personal view of the cosmos in miniature ([www.tfaoi.com](http://www.tfaoi.com)).

The shift from the three-dimensionality of the enclosing *wunderkamern* to the systematic display of the curiosity cabinet (Fig 14) changes the role of the viewer from physical participant to voyeur. Instead of being engulfed by the surrounding collection and *cosmos*, the viewer is transformed into voyeur<sup>3</sup>, an invited outsider presented with constructed tableaux. “[T]he eye acts like a camera traveling over the treasurescape offered by the cabinet, a sort of

visual caress that elicits the ambiguous joy of touching the cabinet and its objects, yet at a distance" (Olalquiaga 2006). The Collector curates the display and invites the viewer to consider him through his assembled objects. Even granted this permission and invitation, there is often a distinct feeling of intrusion. Through the various systems of display employed, the viewer's invitation to participate and identify with the collection is simultaneously offered and retracted. The viewer is not afforded any of the rights and privileges of the Collector, who is granted tactile access as well as authority and choice in terms of the display itself. He also receives the satisfaction of and identification with the collection as it comes to represent the individual. In many of these artworks, the viewer is put in a position of familiarity due to the nostalgic nature of the objects used. However, the sense of closure that is achieved through acquiring and possessing these objects is denied because it is not Mine. The loss the viewer feels in these situations is initiated by the implied past and loss of the familiar objects and memories put on display which stimulate his own memories. This is then expanded with the realisation that this familiar collection/identity that *could be Mine/Me* is not, creating a nostalgic anxiety through the double loss of the memory and the object.

In considering artworks that function as and use the language of Collection, it is important to keep in mind the constructed nature of this Collector *persona*. While the artist him/herself may well be a Collector and the curator of this display, it remains a portrait-collection. These artworks utilise the systems of display and the assemblage of the collection, while simulating the souvenir, especially the personal memento. However, they are

neither. The piece is not a real collection, but a simulated one. It is neither the artist's, the represented Self's, nor is it the viewer's collection of Objects and memories. Both the collection and the souvenir are invoked and retracted at the same time by the nature of the artwork and display, creating an interesting dynamic between the viewer and the collected Self.

### 2.2.3 Desire, denial and the systems of display

While "collecting always involves one or more of the five senses, and ... is an effort to transcend the ephemerality [sic] of experience" (Danet & Katriel 1994:223), the viewer is often denied the sense of touch. As a result, it is this sense that is the most desirable and sought after. If, as an individual, *I* own something - if it is Mine - then *I* can touch and hold it. However, if this beautiful thing is Mine, *you* are denied such a tactile encounter and intimate relationship with it. With many collections this denial is not only implied or understood through the etiquette of ownership but is reinforced by a very real barrier which, in both formal and informal settings, is often glass.

Glass is the one medium that allows the viewer access while simultaneously denying it. Glass invites and retracts its invitation in the same instant. Glass is also reflective, which

allows it to be a sign signifying and at the same time, the nature of the opposition between the two spaces and their common mediation. The glass in the window through its transparency/reflectiveness unites, and by this physical impenetrability separates inside and outside" (Graham 1996: 833).

This separation and unification paradox is at work in many of these artworks that function as collections (as well as in many museum

displays). The visual and conceptual obscurity within a context of familiarity creates an anxiety that is part of what characterises these artworks and the viewers' responses and reactions to them.

Window glass alienates 'subject' from 'object'. From behind glass the spectator's view is 'objective', while the observed's subject(ivity) is concealed; the observer on the outside of the glass cannot be a part of an interior group's 'inner-subjective' framework. Being itself a mirror-reflective material glass reflects the mirror-image of an observer looking as well as the particular inside or outside world behind him into the image of the space into which he is looking (Graham 1996:833)<sup>4</sup>.

This projection and separation are the very elements that create desire for the displayed object/image. Although Graham discusses the use of glass as a mechanism to create desire through denial in terms of its commercial use, his observations are equally pertinent here. "Glass isolates (draws attention to) the product's surface appeal, 'glamour', or superficial appearance alone ... while denying access to what is tangible or immediately useful. It idealizes the product" (Graham 1996: 834). In the same way, the isolated and separated collection idealises the Objects collected while denying the viewer the interaction he desires. The familiarity of the objects and images works towards uniting the viewer and subject; at the same time these seemingly familiar objects are made strange, put on display and obscured from his full vision and tactile desires.

Images and objects are often obscured as part of a strategy to affect the viewer. Through the obscuring of an image, the viewer is invited to project his own Self and story onto this Object or collection. That which is generic and vague is more possibly something that was Mine than the obviously-unique object on



display. If an object is too defined or clear it becomes too much like something that belongs to another. That which is overtly owned by another has limited power to move the viewer as it is only that which he can identify with that is terrifying in the implication of its loss. In artworks that function as or represent collections, the viewer is frustrated when he is confronted with the often familiar objects that present a possible past and is then, through various visual and physical barriers, denied access to or an interaction with these objects, their associations, meanings and memories. In Susan Hiller's *From the Freud museum* [1991-1994] (fig 15-16), the device of denial is not only the glass between the viewer and the displayed objects, but also the method of display. The highly objective and clinical display transforms the objects which are familiar and could possibly have been Mine, into artefacts: a complete Other that is far removed from any real, lived experience. Siopis' *Zombie* [2000] (fig 1-3) uses a more obvious barrier of netting to separate her viewer both physically and visually from the objects he sees and recognises, while paradoxically enclosing him in a *wunderkammer*. The boxes in Kabakov's *Boat* [1999] (fig 4-6) are a barrier within and of themselves. The viewer is not invited to unpack and rummage through the neatly packed and ready to store boxes that surround him. Rather, he is provided with a limited view and inventory of each box which serves only to pique interest and desire. Many of Cornell's constructions employ glass to separate and unite viewer and objects<sup>5</sup>, while playing on the connotations and implications of the protective box itself. "While these boxes provide the illusion of free movement and access, they are also traps, capturing, framing, and holding their subjects tightly away from the spectator outside" (Hauptman 1999: 50).

There are many mechanisms employed by both Collector and museum to provide a sense of distance and ownership, however, it is glass that “seals a sort of visual pact with the spectator, an exchange treaty whereby the viewer agrees to sacrifice proximity and potential tactility for the pleasure of ocular astonishment” (Olalquiaga 2006).

## 2.3

## Subject and Object

### 2.3.1 Detritus

The “remains of something that has been destroyed or broken up” (Oxford English dictionary 2002. Sv 'detritus') includes the discarded objects and things of society that have been appropriated and through the act of collection have been forcibly removed from their purpose and origins, destroying the original set and context. Repeatedly, objects are violently removed from their contexts and displaced into new sets. This detritus is used in the collection, which often “merely gives us things – bits of obtrusively unreadable matter in odd combination” (Suárez 2007: 149). As Suárez points out, these Things are not seen “as messages to be decoded but as obdurate lumps of matter we brush against in our daily doings” (2007: 149). It is in this way that the collection is encountered. Within the context of the collection, these Things have been divested of their function and used aesthetically and for their *individual* meanings. As such, their history of encounters with individuals is their underlying Truth.

As discussed earlier, the discarded elements of an individual's life are indicative of identity as they represent what is *not Mine* and *not Me*. The transitions and changes of life necessitate a shedding of Things – moving, divorce, aging, and death are some circumstances under which individuals are forced to discard certain possessions and hold onto others<sup>6</sup>. In the event of death, the

individual himself has limited control over the destruction and dispersal of his collection and accumulated Things that have come to represent his memories and identity. The writing and execution of a will provides the individual with a means to exert his control over this distribution. The most telling and intimate objects are however, often simple trinkets and souvenirs that are not 'worthy' of the will and heirloom process. Many artists (including Siopis and Cornell) have cultivated the *flaneur's* practice of searching for and collecting various debris and found objects from the pasts of strangers and loved ones. The detritus of our material culture is plentiful; a walk down any street reveals evidence of the lives and desires of Others. Artwork that uses these objects – discarded by individuals, found by another and collected for their aesthetic – relies on the familiar nature of the found object or image. The viewer's response and interaction with the piece is reliant on this familiarity, the sense of *that could have been Mine*.

After Baudrillard's defining of the French *objet*, the various uses and connotations of the English word *object* are interesting and pertinent here: as a miscellaneous, non-living thing; as something which excites a particular emotion on being seen; as a purpose or intent; and as a grammatical element – the person or thing the verb of a sentence affects. Then, of course, there are the notions of objection (disagreeing with and disapproving of something) and objectivity (which is an often-sought-after ability) – a sense of detachment and unbiased opinion (Oxford English Dictionary 2002. Sv "object"). All of these ideas and concepts play on the word we use to describe what is collected - the physical

Thing. These connotations of the word influence and are contained within the singular physical Thing.

[O]bjects are inserted into the narrative perspective when their status is turned from object-ive to semiotic, from thing to sign, from collapse to separation of thing and meaning, or from presence to absence. The object is turned away, abducted, from itself, its inherent value, and denuded of its defining function so as to be available for use as a sign. I use the words 'abducted' and 'denuded'<sup>7</sup> purposefully; they suggest that the violence done to the objects might have a gendered quality (Bal 1994: 111).

Bal's assertion is correct – there is a violence that is done repeatedly to these objects through the process of collection, a violence necessary to ownership and belonging. As the object becomes more Mine, it paradoxically becomes more and less Itself: more individualised and less of its intended set. The sets and series of collection that objects find themselves in parallel those intended sets of manufacture, but they differ in that they are defined and dictated by the personality of an individual. The loss of identity felt through the implied abandonment of these objects is alleviated by their 'rescue'. The collection's display of found Objects grants the viewer a brief encounter with himself – both past and possible. An encounter made possible by the changes inflicted on the Object through being owned, discarded, found and finally displaced into the Collection.

### 2.3.2 Exposition of the Other

Artworks that function as collections place personal items and memories on display, rupturing the boundary between the two aspects of existence: private and public, “between display and hiding” (Stewart 1993: 155).

An exposition makes something public, and that event of showing involves articulating in the public domain the most deeply held views and beliefs of a subject. ... Therefore in publicizing these views, the subject of exposing objectifies himself as much as the object, this makes the exposition an exposure of the self (Bal 1999: 5).

When an artist collects and assembles the discarded objects of our everyday lives we are often placed in a position of forced compliance. As an invited intruder, the viewer participates through his engagement with the piece. The public display of objects that *could have been Mine* has the aura of personal space, despite the sometimes-clinical museum systems of display and often because of the familial disarray employed. Confronted with these personal effects and displays of private Selves, the viewer is forced to consider his own objects, mementos and associated memories – his identity and the Things he uses to represent himself. These appropriated Objects are souvenirs or mementos of the individual on display and his life. The verity of this is irrelevant; whether the collection is that of a real individual or a consciously created ideal, the objects are experienced as artefacts - evidence of a life lived.

The Other we encounter in these exposition-artworks is not necessarily the exotic Other of the Victorian era, for those romantic days of exploration are over and while we have plenty to explore, we have little left to discover. Instead, we turn to the internal Other situated within the Self - the private unknown of the stranger that somehow mirrors *Me*. An effective way to represent an individual's 'essence' and life, as well as our own, is through his treasured Things, be they words, sounds, images or objects. Film and other recording techniques, while commonly used to this end in our modern society, fall short of capturing anything more than the

fleeting surface elements of an individual. By contrast, the comprising elements of these *portraits* – found and appropriated Things – add an additional perspective: that of the artist/Collector/curator/narrator, the *how I see you* aspect. In addition, the viewer participates and interacts with the objects and collection in a variety of ways, creating additional personalities within and beholding the portrait. “[I]n expositions a 'first person', the expositor or curator, tells a 'second person', the visitor, about a 'third person', the object on display, who does not participate in the conversation” (Bal 1999: 8). The souvenir is a record of an experience, extraordinary or everyday, and the experiences of other individuals will always be foreign to us. For both the curious and the voyeur, the exotic Other lies in the experience of another. Mulder explains this succinctly: “Your knowledge of another person's subjective states can be called objective knowledge since it is presumably part of the world that is 'object' for you, just as you and your subjective states are part of the world that is 'object' for the other person” (2006).

To have a souvenir of the exotic is to possess both a specimen and a trophy; on the one hand, the object must be marked as exterior and foreign, on the other it must be marked as arising directly out of an immediate experience of its possessor. ...the exotic souvenir is a sign of survival – not its own survival, but the survival of the possessor outside his or her own context of familiarity. Its otherness speaks of the possessor's capacity for otherness: it is the possessor, not the souvenir, which is ultimately the curiosity (Stewart 1993: 148).

### 2.3.3 Looking at each other

The various aspects of Self and Other and the ways in which they are conveyed through both the Object and the collection are

exemplified in Joseph Cornell's work. Many of his pieces create "a formal historical fiction: texts composed of fragments and castoffs, past events described through detritus, vocabulary invented from what others have left behind" (Hauptman 1999: 39). *Encrusted clown (Souvenirs for Singleton)* [c. mid 1950s] (fig 17) is a 'love letter' to both movie star Jennifer Jones and her character in *Love Letters* (1945) constructed from what Cornell described as the "flotsam and jetsam of the city streets" (Hauptman 1999: 141). The amnesiac Self of the movie character is presented with and represented in the assemblage of objects and images. The individual constructed in this image is just that: constructed, made up of fragments of knowledge and projected desires. These scavenged and *rescued* items function as a scrapbook of assembled souvenirs, of both "an invented past to replace the one lost by Singleton and ... imaginary tokens of Jones' actual visits to New York City" (Hauptman 1999: 145). Much like the individual in the act of remembering, Cornell only has fragments and glimpses out of which to assemble and create an image. For the remembering individual, it is the memory of a transient event that he tries to capture and contain with mementos and triggers. The Moment itself is by nature resistant to preservation. In an attempt to preserve a fleeting experience the individual destroys the *whole* by appropriating pieces of it.

The Other-ness of the object always plays a role in interactions between it and the individual as possession claims that which is outside the Self.

Desiring expressed in terms of being is aimed at the self. And desiring expressed in terms of having is aimed at possession. But an object is possessed insofar as it is related to me by an internal ontological bond, Sartre argues. Through that bond, the



object is represented as my creation. The possessed object is represented both as part of me and as my creation (Onof 2006).

By taking the Other out of its original context and transforming it into the exotic, the purpose and origin of the Object and memory is lost - the very thing that makes it desirable. For Cornell, it is an attempt to capture and create portraits of individuals and moments from fragments already removed from their origins, already broken and discarded. Preserving this moment by piecing together a *whole* from detritus and debris, Cornell truly *rescues* not only the Things he utilises and creates, but the idea of the individual. The artist preserves his impression of and feelings towards a moment and person in time, thereby collecting and preserving aspects of himself.

Many of his portrait-collections can be seen as elegies where in response "to the imagined or projected loss of his beloved actresses, Cornell erected monuments in their place" (Hauptman 1999: 53). In an impulse which relates well to the use of Collection, Cornell 'kills' his subjects in an attempt to preserve, "in order to love; he envisions his subjects as dead in order to express his desire" (Hauptman 1999: 53). The artist pre-empts his nostalgia by creating a portrait of an individual constructed out of possible souvenirs or *traces* of her<sup>8</sup> presence and experiences, presenting the viewer with the artefacts of a life lived – the evidence of personal experience. *Homage to the Romantic Ballet (for the Sylphide Lucille Grahn)* [1945] (fig 18) demonstrates this well. The piece connotes a personal treasure box storing memories and souvenirs. What the viewer encounters is not a neatly preserved image or moment but the disintegrating *traces* of an experience.

The impossibility of truly capturing something as ephemeral as experience is not only conveyed by the assortment of glitter, beads and tulle fragments; a classic symbol of fragility and transience is also used: butterfly wings. The image on the cover of the box provides the viewer with an additional fragment of the experience that acts as a frame or index.

"To write history,' Benjamin explains, 'is to quote history.' Replacing quotation with collection, Cornell similarly borrows to create his work, producing, as Benjamin had, a layered history" (Hauptman 1999: 39). Cornell's *The Crystal Cage (portrait of Berenice)* (1946) (fig 19) parallels Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (1927-1940) not only in its archival nature but also in its perpetually unfinished state. Cornell never assembled the series of boxes he envisioned, "but he did present a self-contained portrait of this precocious child-scientist that functions as a subset of the Crystal Cage archive" (Hauptman 1999: 170). Benjamin's collection of texts and quotes were likewise never assembled into their intended study but collected and archived, these fragments of Paris provide a portrait to be experienced and remembered anew. Both collections have remained as research archives, presenting an *un-presented*, unarranged collection of fragments and triggers.

*The Crystal Cage* resembles memory and the collection thereof which enables a sense of Self. The viewer creates this Self, piecing together elements, structuring an image and creating narrative. The viewer's Self is explored and defined by the consideration of the Other because "the objectification of the other corresponds to an affirmation of my self by distinguishing myself

from the other" (Onof 2006). In viewing *The Crystal Cage* (and other portrait-collections) the viewer is intricately included in the functioning and meaning of the piece.

[I]f there is only the real, then everything exists on the same plane, and external objects replicate mental processes so that the subject receives from them (from the Other) its own message backward. The object world might be where the subjective and the objective coincide, where external reality becomes 'humanized'. A cipher for the inner mind and the material unconscious is folded into a personalized, private unconscious (Suárez 2007: 153).

Through the act of viewing, the *object* of display turns into the Self of the viewer - who is the *subject* of the experience. The *I* beholds *Me* in the *Other*. That *Other* has been constructed by a different *I* (the artist collector) as a way of explaining *You* and what *You* are to *Me*. While seemingly convoluted, this syntactical approach makes the relationships involved in the process of viewing clearer and more readily understood in all their conflicting, anxiety-inducing connections<sup>9</sup>. The individual (with his memories and mementos) and the viewer are faced with the task of ordering and categorising various Things in an attempt to create a narrative of Self. This task creates a certain anxiety for "the accumulation of things, and their ability to resonate against each other, completely overrides the subject's ability to set them apart" (Suárez 2007: 145). In *The Crystal Cage*, the viewer's role in the creation of narrative and Self is heightened and obvious because in order to view the piece the viewer needs to physically interact with its elements. While Kabakov's viewer is denied the task of unpacking, Cornell's viewer is not merely invited, but forced to take on a role similar to that of the individual dealing with the changes of everyday life by sorting through his (or in the case of death, another's) Things. This unpacking and (re)construction of an individual mirrors the act of

remembering. Here, "there is no prescribed order or map to navigate the material within, and narration is left up to the individual viewer" (Hauptman 1999: 167).

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## Endnotes Chapter 2

- 1 Susan Stewart points out that “[t]he experience of the object lies outside the body's experience - it is saturated with meanings that will never fully be revealed to us” (1993: 133).
- 2 Owning unique objects in a collection is often seen as a desire to dominate, and “feelings of dominance may be mixed with the sense of social distinction that comes from owning something unique” (Danet & Katriel 1994: 229).
- 3 With regards the voyeur and his role, it is worth remembering Freud's scopophilia which he associated “with taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze. His particular examples center around the voyeuristic activities of children, their desire to make sure of the private and the forbidden” (Mulvey 2003: 984).
- 4 It is interesting that Graham is discussing plans for his own artwork in which viewers would be both subject and object of the viewing. See his *Three projects for architecture and video / notes* (1977) in Stiles and Selz 1996: 833-837.
- 5 Viewing many of Cornell's boxes now involves peering through an additional pane of glass as museums put his boxes into vitrines for display.
- 6 Buchli and Lucas' *Children, gender and the material culture of domestic abandonment in the late twentieth century* (2000) discusses, in an archaeological light, a contemporary home suddenly abandoned by a family. The things left behind are indicative of the individuals and family and their relationships. Wilkie's *Not merely child's play: Creating a historical archaeology of children and childhood* (2000) analyses two sites of children's discarded Things in order to explore their social roles. See also Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's *The meaning of things: Domestic symbols and the self* (1981).
- 7 The power of the word 'denude' comes across when one considers its definition - that everything is taken away from the subject (Oxford English Dictionary Sv “denude”).
- 8 Elsewhere in this discussion the individual is kept in a male role. Here, however, it is inappropriate as the individuals Cornell 'collected' and created were women.
- 10 See Klages' (2001) very succinct and clear explanation of Lacan's Mirror Phase and his linguistically informed theory on the development of Self through Other.

## Chapter 3

### The Artist-Collector

It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magical circle, where, as a last shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired), it turns to stone. Everything remembered, everything thought, everything conscious becomes socle, frame, pedestal, seal of his possession (Benjamin 1999:205).

#### 3.1 Collector

##### 3.1.1 Appropriation

Discussing the use of found objects and footage in his work, Bruce Connor elaborates on the artist's practice of appropriation: "How you look at them and how you reject certain things is how you choose what they are" (Stiles and Selz 1996: 327). This is true not only of the artist's or Collector's relationship with the objects he uses but also of the ways in which the viewer encounters the collection. "[T]he creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act" (Duchamp in Stiles and Selz 1996: 819). Such an interpretation on the part of the viewer is necessary and required because the Artist-Collector subjects his appropriated images (and objects) to manipulations which "work to empty them of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning... As a result, they appear strangely incomplete - fragments or rune which must be deciphered" (Owens 1996:1027).

The use of rescued detritus encourages the viewer's interpretation and individualisation of the artwork.

Found and appropriated objects and images are rescued as well as *stolen* by the Collector. The *theft* of another's memories and objects is usually not literal (especially considering the discarded and abandoned nature of this detritus), but it is an underlying element of the act of Collection.

Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. ...He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured... Rather, he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds, however, he does so only to replace; the allegorical meaning supplants the antecedent one; it is a supplement (Owens 1996: 1027).

The displacement of meanings is something the collected Object is subject to in each of its encounters with individuals; the original meaning and set of manufacture is removed in order for it to become Mine. This memento, along with the memories it holds, is then displaced into a collection of a (often fabricated) Self. The viewer encounters the Object within its context of the collection and artwork-as-collection, again denuding it of its meaning, imposing his own memories and associations on it. The meanings and interpretation of the Thing are repeatedly discarded, disregarded, forgotten, remembered, elicited, imposed, projected, and rediscovered. As such, the Collector operates in much the same way as the Allegorist.

Walter Benjamin points out that the Allegorist and Collector are, in some respects, polar opposites, for while the Collector brings together things which belong together, the Allegorist

dislodges them from their context. “Nevertheless – and this is more important than all the differences that may exist between them – in every collector lies and allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector” (1999: 211). In the context of the artwork discussed in this dissertation, the sets and series to which objects obviously and originally belong are less important than the new sets created by the Collector and the viewer. These new sets of belonging are not defined by manufacture or temporality, but by memory; the collection comes to be an expression or portrait of Self. The Collector in this sense then *is* an Allegorist, for he dislodges Things from their context in order to impose his own set of meaning and belonging on them, creating the collection of a Self.

### 3.1.2 Collection and the photograph

“An appreciation of the transience of things, and the concern to rescue them for eternity, is one of the strongest impulses of allegory” (Benjamin cited by Owens 2003: 1027), and is also inherent in the act of collecting. The photograph is a naturally allegorical object as it captures the transient and attempts to create an enduring artefact of the ephemeral. What the photograph offers is “a fragment, and thus affirms its own arbitrariness and contingency” (Owens 2003: 1027). Here 'contingency' is read as “[t]he condition of being free from predetermining necessity in regard to existence or action; hence, the being open to the play of chance, or of free will” (Oxford English Dictionary 2002 Sv “contingency”). This is exactly the state in which the possessed Object exists: freed from its purpose and function, it is open and accessible to the individual.



Photographic recordings are not fully dimensional. While often powerful, they fail to capture more than framed surface detail. In contrast, the Object and the collection provide a layered and more individualised encounter. Things are so much more emotive and affective due to their physical nature, and more importantly because of our personal relationships with them. As such, the collection is as much a portrait as the photograph, and perhaps is more accurate in fulfilling its role. The *photograph* is, of course, no longer simply the image on paper. It has become an Object in its own right. As such it does hold memory and anchors the Self for many individuals and is often used within artworks not simply as a photographic image but as a Thing. In everyday life,

the activity of reminiscence when looking at or thinking about old family photos [...] is an activity in which signs of loved ones or past experiences are communicated, certain moods associated with those people are induced, and a stream of thought about 'how it was' is brought about from a person's current perspective on how things are now (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 174).

The treasured photograph is clearly and quite obviously a device deferring death and loss. The photograph not only "transforms the subject into an object, that is, displaces the subject from life to death" (Barthes cited by Stiles and Selz 1996: 501), but through the photograph, the captured present has become the past and is constantly re-lived and re-remembered through an individual's conscious encounters with the object.

The photograph emerged as an object, and as a memory-object, with the daguerreotype (fig 20) of the nineteenth century. "The inflexible metal plate as well as its encasing gives the

daguerreotype a weightier appearance than a two-dimensional picture: it is an object" (Hauptman 1999: 120). This origin of the portrait as a portable and personal object is used by Joseph Cornell in his *Untitled (Greta Garbo)* (c.1939) (fig 21) to capture and elicit an impression of a Self. In their study of families and their 'special' objects circa the late 1970s, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton point out that photographs of loved ones were frequently treasured by an individual (1981:66 - 69), often as a way to reinforce the Self and his place both in history and within a familial or cultural context. It is interesting to consider this with the changes Western society has undergone in the subsequent years, and how much more image-based our culture has become, in mind. In contemporary art the use of the photographic image is widespread and varied in intention. When surrounded by and in the context of other rescued detritus, it serves a similar function as that of the physical Object: as memento or artefact of a Self and an Other.

### 3.1.3 Gender and the Collector

As "[g]ender is one of the most important ways in which individuals construct their personal identities and the collecting process has a significant relationship to this activity" (Belk and Wallendorf 1994: 240), it is important to consider the role(s) gender plays in collection. In her discussion of the feminine in collecting, *Collecting Paris*, Naomi Schor comments on what she sees as "the extraordinary sexism" (1994: 257) of Jean Baudrillard's analysis of collecting. In light of the fear of castration he attributes to the Collector<sup>1</sup>, she points out that "[I]acking the phallus, women, at least implicitly, cannot in Baudrillard's analysis

collect" (Schor 1994: 257). For Baudrillard the collection instinct is seen as "a powerful mechanism of compensation during critical phases in a person's sexual development" (1994: 9), namely childhood and the adult male's late forties. The work of Joseph Cornell fits neatly into this definition, but that of Penny Siopis and Susan Hiller are excluded on the basis of the artists' gender<sup>2</sup>.

The fear of castration does not, however, need to be seen as a female-exclusive concept. Castration in its definition as *mutilation* is certainly not gender-specific (Oxford English Dictionary 2002 Sv "castration"), and a fear of castration can be seen to be relevant and relative for both genders based on stereotypical views of sex and sexuality. If the male fears the loss of his phallus<sup>3</sup>, and by extension his 'maleness', the idea of female circumcision (often called *mutilation*) and the loss of the clitoris can be seen to be an act inducing fear in the female parallel to that of the male's of castration. Perhaps, then, collecting is not about the phallus but more about our gendered ways of controlling and defining our *essential* beings as individuals - as female and as male. In this light, Baudrillard's Collector's fear of castration extends to the feminine Collector.

Belk and Wallendorf point out stereotypically gender-specific characteristics of the collecting impulse:

The stereotypically masculine personality traits congenial to collecting include aggressiveness, competitiveness, mastery and seriousness. On the other hand, a set of collecting-congenial personality traits stereotypically considered feminine in Western culture includes care, creativity, nurturance and preservation (1994: 242).

Hiller and Siopis employ these stereotypically feminine traits of care, preservation and nurturance to create their curated and assembled displays, as does Cornell. The violence inherent in the acts of possession, appropriation and collection is counter to this 'feminine' idea, and yet, it is displayed by all Collectors in their activities. Like the remembering individual, the Collector destroys the *whole* of an ephemeral experience by capturing fragments in an attempt to fulfill the feminine urge to preserve. The tension and relationship between the male and female aspects of collecting is better understood as a dualism. The two are not competing opposites, but united aspects of a whole. This dualism can be envisioned as the Taoist symbol of Yin-Yang, where opposites are contained within each other and are in a complimentary relationship of definition. The Collector, as well as the remembering individual, needs and displays the complimentary male and female traits of collection; collecting is not simply feminine or masculine but, like much of life, a complex combination of both. This is of course, easier to see in our present social circumstances and acts of collection, which have changed and morphed from those male-dominated activities displayed in *wunderkammern* into a much more integrated collecting sensibility, accessible to and embraced by both male and female Collectors.

Since "collecting supports a consumer culture [, it] allows both genders to participate in the feminine world of consumption in a way that simultaneously supports the masculine world of production" (Belk and Wallendorf 1994: 251). Schor characterises Susan Stewart's Collector as "a late capitalist consumer" (1994: 256), Jean Baudrillard's as a neurotic, and Walter Benjamin's as

childlike. These are not completely separate characters; rather, the Collector is all of these: a neurotic child participating in a society of consumption and attempting to assert himself in such a culture. The rescue and preservation of ephemeral moments requires the purposeful removal and destruction of the appropriated elements' contexts of origin. These contrasting tender and violent acts are necessary if the individual is to define and understand himself or if the Collector is to present a Self the viewer can encounter and project himself onto.

## 3.2

## Storyteller

### 3.2.1 Private collector

Jennifer Allen discusses how an artist's *oeuvre* can be read as a private collection: “[n]ot a museum collection, which remains at the disposal of the public, but a private collection, which is driven by an individual whose personality is as unique as the artworks themselves” (2004: 29). In the context of this dissertation, the collection put on display is exactly that - one determined by the “personal tastes, whims, and, above all chance encounters” (2004: 29) of an individual. The Artist-Collector is this private collector assembling his collection of Objects and images which reflect himSelf and his passions. He is also an archivist-biographer, collecting and assembling the artefacts of an Other Self, which are then presented as a private collection. The chance encounters Allen mentions are the realm of another aspect of the Artist-Collector: that of the *flaneur* who collects moments and fleeting images as he walks the city streets<sup>4</sup>.

The pleasures of the private collection are seen in Walter Benjamin's essay *Unpacking my library* (1970: 59 - 67). In the process of the aforementioned task, the author becomes lost in reminiscence, where “personal and collective histories are fused through acquisition and possession of the book itself” (cited by Allen 2004: 31). Owning these Things provides Benjamin's bibliophile a means through which to access the 'chaos of his memory' (1970: 60), recalling fragments and *snapshots* of his past. Objects trigger seemingly random thoughts and memories as the

individual encounters and re-encounters them. This *chaos* of an individual's memory is mirrored by the chaotic nature of the origin of a private collection, which "is in continual conflict with the apparent order in the display of the objects. In a way, the private collector writes a diary with objects" (Allen 2004: 29).

This storytelling through fragments recalls another of Benjamin's essays, *The storyteller: Reflections on the works of Nikolai Leskov* (1970: 83 - 109), wherein he states that "it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it" (1970: 89). The Collector presents his viewer with fragments of memory in order to tell a story - the story of a Self. It is a narrative in Objects – a collection of mismatched and displaced Things. The fragments, wrenched out of their original context of meaning and displaced into the collection, are encountered as mementos - artefacts of a Self's life. They are also Things which could have been Mine. The identification of the Objects and images as possibly his own allows the viewer to consider the collection as having belonged to an Other.

The most extraordinary things, marvelous things are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them" (Benjamin 1970: 89).

The physicality and detail of the exotic object are present in the collection. What is not is the 'psychological connection of the events' - the memories and meanings the Object holds and has held for its possessor(s). The viewer is left to piece together an idea and memory of a Self, just as the storyteller leaves the task of assigning meaning and order to his audience.

### 3.2.2 The public display of a private Self

If ownership is an intimacy afforded the Collector of Objects, then the public display of these Things is surely a betrayal of that relationship, for just as one does not “lend out one's phallus” (Baudrillard 1996: 106), one does not discuss the private intimacies of a lover. The Collector presents his collection of personal<sup>5</sup> Things, but does not provide the anecdotes of experience. The *details* of the story are in the objects themselves, not the narrative, for that is (for the large part) absent. While narration is a task left for the viewer, the public display of the private is always moderated – either by the Collector's selection and omission or by the passage of time and the (real or assumed) death of the individual. The Collector's choice of included Objects (and by extension, those excluded) shapes the narrative possibilities afforded the viewer. With the passing of an individual, the collected artefacts of his life are either left without an accompanying narrative, or that narrative is passed on and shared through the Self of an Other. The narrative of the collection is not that of a first hand encounter; it is construed and retold from fragments and clues.

The public display of Things is a constructed portrait for the “collection allows the collector to play with multiple images of the self and multiple images of others” (Belk and Wallendorf 1994: 245). Like the remembering individual constructing his sense of Self from his fragmented memories, presenting his audience with a narrated experience the Artist-Collector uses the detritus of our



lives to establish a protagonist, encouraging the viewer to narrate the past. The collection can “tangibilize [sic] the individualization process of constructing an identity through personal myth” (Belk and Wallendorf 1994: 247). Since myths are essentially agreed-upon stories of a past, all memory –personal and collective – sits on the threshold of myth. Myths fulfill an individual's or society's need for an origin (or metaphor thereof) to anchor themselves in the past as a way to explain the present and approach the future. As Baudrillard contends: “we need a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends, since ultimately we have never believed in them” (1984) The individual creates and repeats certain memories and memory-stories in an effort to explain his present Self. He offers the narrative of his past through Objects as evidence of this Self.

The affectively intense autobiographical memories of an individual are often 'stored' in tangible objects that either facilitate its remembering or represent the event itself<sup>6</sup>. Using these personal Objects amid other seemingly unrelated detritus and debris, the Artist-Collector puts his viewer in an uncanny space, “mingling the familial with the strange” (Law 2002: 31). Simultaneously comfortable and uncomfortable in such a familiar and strange space, Penny Siopis' viewer confronts the personal, private objects of an Other. In *Reconnaissance: 1900 - 1997 (1997)* (figs 22 - 23), Siopis displays a miscellany of Things in piles and arrangements of seemingly ordered categories. However, the organised system of display is somewhat superficial and the contrast of incongruous objects is at times jarring.

What good Victorian woman, for example, would collect pangas, and line them up with a child's cricket bat? What child would keep a small black voodoo doll with her satin ballet slippers? What adult would place a *coco de mer* near a heap of bleached human bones? And what collector would place some precious items so as to obscure others, frustrating the viewer's ability to see, insisting on the voyeurism of the scene, the silent screaming of a hundred little secrets? (Atkinson 2005: 72).

The *secrets* held in these objects and their assemblage demand the viewer's attention through the familiar nature of the Things themselves. Recognising that these Objects have been possessed by an Other, the viewer is compelled to consider their past meanings and roles. These Things have stories to tell, yet remain silent. The narrative of their secrets has been removed and stifled by the collection that seeks to preserve it. The Artist-Collector reconstructs and builds a new context for each Object within the set, instigating possible outcomes of meaning for the viewer. The voyeurism of the scene initially created through the displacement of personal Objects – those private Things of the individual - into the public sphere of the collection is continued through the system of display employed by the Artist-Collector and the overt denial of tactility.

In *Reconnaissance 1900-1997*, the objects have been laid out, raised just above the floor, in an arrangement reminiscent of a flea market or yard sale. The viewer-buyer looks down at the groupings of miscellaneous Things. Here he becomes a Collector/scavenger sorting through the detritus and Things of an Other's life, searching for something that might be useful or appealing. Much like Kuspit's archaeologist, the viewer (in collusion with the Collector) *excavates* the belongings of an Other as "a way of preserving, even resurrecting in however attenuated a form, the idea of something that was once necessary to life, and may still

secretly be, which is why it is excavated and its ruins cherished" (1998). The viewer is reminded of his status as voyeur and intruder and brought out of his reverie as he looks at these Things of an Other that have seemingly been made available and open to him. The Collection's location of display and the nature of it as artwork and not personal artefact is enforced by the museum- or gallery-standard bold text 'Please Do Not Touch' printed on the dais. Not only is collecting a tactile activity, but the Object itself is a thing to be experienced tactilely. "The sensuality of simulacra demands contiguity. Our curiosity is fuelled by a childlike instinct to touch, to hold the object to us, particularly where such tabooed transgressions are forbidden or unrealisable" (Law 2002: 22). Within the space of display, this tactile and intimate interaction is denied, leaving the viewer's desire unfulfilled and superseded by a sense of uncanny longing.

### 3.2.3 Disarray

The constructed space of the encounter with the Object dictates the viewer's level of interaction with the Collection, as well as his narration of the Other's Self. Siopis' various pieces move between the chaotic environment of the *Wunderkammer*, and the more controlled system of the curiosity cabinet. Within a dark, chaotic *Wunderkammer* permeated with red, the viewer of *Charmed Lives* (1998) (fig 24) encounters wild beasts – stuffed and skinned; fragmented bodies – in mannequins and on video; and seemingly random detritus.

Stepping into the main room was a foray into a theatre of the absurd, a surreal setting of personal props that had no business being on public display, the bed of the sea dredged and sifted, its

treasury of archetypes wildly grasped at and proffered as if to say *Look! Look at me! These are the props of my identity; these objects are, to a great extent, me* (Atkinson 2005: 78).

*Sacrifices* (1998) (figs 25-26) re-used many of the Objects seen in *Reconnaissance* in what Atkinson describes as a “compelling anti-archive of historically saturated remnants” (2005: 75). The Things of *sacrifices* are densely arranged into vertical 'images' where the textures and colours of the three panels dominate and the incongruity of the Objects placed together parallels the earlier installation. Here the objects are so closely arranged that they overlap and obscure each other physically, becoming difficult to see and consider as individual Things. *Sacrifices* was displayed with an accompanying 'narrative' – the artist had a colleague list and describe all the things she saw in the three panels and displayed these lists alongside the work's label. The lists are ostensibly objective, however “the archivist never 'simply lists' or 'just describes': interpretation, description, and misrepresentation are inherent to archiving; there is no such thing as a neutral observer of history” (Atkinson 2005: 77). As a result, the archival style of listing the items within the collection aids in limiting and controlling the viewer's narrative. Given words and names for Objects, the viewer begins to search for specific Objects as his perception of others is shaped and altered. The Collector's control of view and narrative, along with the cluttered display of these Things as two-dimensional assemblages, mirror that of the curiosity cabinet.

“To meddle in the space between the biographical object and its owner is always, potentially or really, the act of the voyeur” (Morin cited by Hoskins 1998: 9). In *Zombie* (1998) (figs 1-3), the

viewer is distinctly a voyeur. While the Objects are amassed and presented as in other works, here the space is a staged home. "The inhabitants were not visible, but the contents of these rooms were eerily evocative of their dreams, their nightmares, their desires, their lives" (Atkinson 2005: 80). This piece forces the viewer to see the detritus of an Other's life within the context of that life. The Things are not removed from their current context of meaning (which is itself a new context of origin) but are presented to the viewer in situ. The scene is reminiscent of a museum display of a historical figure's home, which has been preserved or restored to the context of the individual's life. In this setting, the viewer-tourist encounters a still life of the subject's living environs and by extension his personality/Self. In *Zombie*, Siopis invites the viewer to consider the Self she has created through his objects and within his personal space. It is, however, only the viewer's gaze that is invited, and that invitation is offered with certain conditions and limitations. Instead of using the visually-open velvet rope barrier or glass vitrine employed by the museum or historical site, Siopis impedes her viewer's visual ability with dim lighting and military netting. With these physical barriers, the viewer cannot be sure what he sees and needs "to squint, blink, and refocus" (Atkinson 2005: 81) in an attempt to see through the mesh.

The viewer's intrusion is conveyed through these netted barriers that hang between him and the collection. As the viewer encounters the Objects of an Other, he is only permitted glimpses of that Self and of his own Self which he inevitably sees in the Other. The physicality of the barriers employed here make the

viewer aware of both his watching and being watched – his role as both subject and object of the display.

When I peep through the keyhole, I am completely absorbed in what I am doing and my ego does not feature as part of this pre-reflective state. However, when I hear a floorboard creaking behind me, I become aware of the other's look. My ego appears at the scene of this reflective consciousness, but it is as an object for the other" (Onof 2006).

Both the footsteps announcing the approach of the Other, and the keyhole itself bring the viewer-voyeur to an awareness of himself. The furtive glimpses and purposeful peeking through the keyhole and the mesh are conscious activities that highlight intent with their physicality. The viewer moves this way and that, adjusting and readjusting his eyes in order to gain a clearer impression or image of the display before him. The image, thus obscured, is more desirable simply through its clandestine and obtainable nature. The denial of desire is doubled - not only can the viewer not participate and interact with the Collection that seems so familiar (especially in *Zombie*, with its familial stage/tableaux), but his vision is obscured, disrupting and limiting his visual encounter.

*Zombie* moves between the *Wunderkammer* and the cabinet of curiosity. Standing in the *Wunderkammer*, surrounded by the exotic and strange, the possibility of a tactile experience with the Objects is never explicitly denied. The viewer is permitted the fantasy of being this Self. With the curiosity cabinet, the boundaries between Mine and You are clearer. By arranging and enclosing his collection in a cabinet – often fronted by glass doors – the Collector overtly declares his possession of and dominion over these Things (and by extension, over the viewer). The viewer is invited to look, but his gaze and reverie are obstructed by the display and the

arrangement of the Objects. With both the curiosity cabinet and the *Wunderkammer*, the arrangement of the collection is at the discretion of the Collector. However, within the context of a curiosity cabinet, the viewer is permitted a much more limited view. By piling Objects together, categorising them in odd combinations, and creating dense arrangements of Things, Siopis acts as a Private Collector, placing his exotic and personal Things within a system of display that allows and limits associations and interpretations of narrative. *Zombie* encloses the viewer in a three-dimensional familial space that is potentially a *Wunderkammer* wherein he can interact with and encounter the Objects unmediated. However, through various physical and visual devices, his physical and autonomous participation is denied and the viewer is faced with a curiosity cabinet through which his views are limited and controlled.

### 3.3

### Critical Distance

[T]here is no coherence that dwells within events or social structures themselves. Coherence is imposed by the work of story makers, and much of what the anthropologist does in writing up her material is to try to devise a coherent story line that will shape fragmentary episodes of experience into something intelligible (Hoskins 1998: 6).

#### 3.3.1 The Collector-Anthropologist

Anthropologist is an appropriate role for the Artist-Collector as it comes out of the same impulse as collection – a Victorian desire for classification and knowledge, which is exemplified by the collection of Things, artefacts, and souvenirs of the exotic. In this context the Anthropologist's role extends that of the Collector – to gather up the knowledge and experience that the Object alone cannot, in order to better capture the exotic. The ethnographic study is the collection of all that cannot be tangibly grasped or taken back Home. The anthropologist relies on his objectivity; for the success of his endeavor depends on it. To be immersed in a culture or Self denies the possibility of critical distance; the outsider, deliberately putting himself in totally alien, foreign surroundings, is more adept at regarding and recording the Truth of an experience. Personal experiences are considered, of course, as evidenced by the interview techniques employed and the 'good' anthropologist's acceptance into the world of the Other. These personal experiences are, however, always viewed by an Other – the Anthropologist-Collector who is outside of the tradition, and



then again by the Other of the viewer. Paralleling the shift in the physical collection of the Other, the more contemporary anthropologist does not necessarily study the 'primitive' exotic of far-away locales, but considers his own modern society and culture from the distance afforded by his profession.

As an idealised 'type', the Anthropologist is truly *objective*, for even after years of study, observation, and possible assimilation, he remains outside of the culture or society he records. The Victorian idea of the anthropologist or archaeologist is that of the finder of Truth in the exotic. He sets out to explore and discover languages, customs, cultures, and people totally unlike what he knows and understands, a complete antithesis: the Other. He comes to the society as a voyeur and ultimately leaves as one, with his exotic Other preserved in his notes, observations, and memories. The Anthropologist is the Self encountering the Other, and through that interaction he encounters himself. Being outside of a tradition and mode of thought affords the anthropologist the distance necessary to understanding.

Since it is difficult to have an objective view of something that has played a part in the shaping of one's being, a certain distance and detachment is necessary in order to gain both complete and fragmentary insight into, as well as an understanding of, a topic or situation. The ethnographic study entails the description of a society with its "customs, habits, and points of difference" (Oxford English Dictionary 2002 Sv: "ethnography") in contrast to others. This allows the Anthropologist to study and attempt to preserve or protect as much of societies and their

customs as possible – preserve and protect from the influence and 'contamination' of other societies and cultures (often, paradoxically, his own). The Artist-Collector has a similar task to that of the Anthropologist: to preserve and protect the past and the present for and from our own future. The Artist-Collector attempts not only to preserve but to create that which would be preserved. He assembles and presents his viewer with the detritus of Others' lives. The Artist-Collector is "the artist as recorder, only here what is taken down is how the raw materials of experience connect through the artist, who acts as a registering surface" (Suárez 2007: 146).

"Qualities that encourage success in this field [anthropology] include a nonjudgmental, inquisitive mind; patience; and the ability to make inferences from incomplete information" ([www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com)). These are all qualities the Collector exhibits. With a 'democracy of medium' shown through the use of detritus and appropriated Things, the Collector exhibits a nonjudgmental attitude towards experience and influence. The inquisitive, curious voyeurs of the Collector and the viewer merge in this anthropological model. The Collector attempts to remove the evidence of his own inquisitiveness and perspective with a detached/objective system of display in order to invoke the viewer's curiosity. The 'ability to make inferences from fragmented information' is paramount in both the Collector and the viewer. The Collector uses detritus and debris – fragments of lives – to create and collate the 'whole' image the viewer encounters. The viewer needs the skills of the Anthropologist here, for although the fragments have been assembled and put into a context of reference

and self-reference, they always remain fragments to be deciphered - especially when an objective system of display is employed.

### 3.3.2 The Artist-Collector as Anthropologist

The Artist-Collector often takes on the anthropological role of objective outsider. The visual evidence of this sensibility is an ordered museum display where the personal narrative has been removed from these collections and objects. The *details* are left in place, but the *personal* context is purposefully removed (at times, in its entirety). This paradoxically allows the viewer's creation of narrative and limits it; the removal of the Self reinforces the Self and his presence in the Objects. The Anthropologist acts as a recorder of narrative, and his objectivity is always stressed. As Collector of that which is important, that which should be preserved, that which is essential to an understanding of this culture or Self, the Anthropologist appropriates narrative, context and meaning. His role is often an allegorical one and it is worth remembering allegory's capacity "to rescue from historical oblivion that which threatens to disappear" (Owens 1996: 1026). The narrative that is contained within the Objects and the collection itself is altered through the system of display: in an objective, detached museum display, the *personal* Object loses its *personality* and has it restored through the same devices.

Penny Siopis' *Will* (figs 9-11) is interesting in this regard because, contrary to most of her other object pieces, here her system of display isolates the Things and de-personalises them at the same time as the *willing* ties each Object and the collection to

the benefactor. The archival museum display of *Will* contributes a layer of meaning to the Objects themselves and highlights the ways in which the museum itself preserves the Object. Like Siopis' Things, "ripped out of their original contexts, the fragments Cornell collects and institutionalizes only represent or refer to their former lives and eras; they enter the 'afterlife' of the museum, where they are forever preserved" (Hauptman 1999:20). However, with the promise of the completion of *Will* these Objects which have been *rescued* by the collection will be discarded and displaced once again.

### 3.3.3 Order and the viewer

"In the collection such systematicity results in the quantification of desire. Desire is ordered, arranged, and manipulated, not fathomless as in the nostalgia of the souvenir" (Stewart 1993: 163). Contrasting the *wunderkamern* and curiosity cabinet systems of display, which are both *messy* in their traces of individuals, an objective museum system of display isolates the Object and frees it of its narrative. The narrative thus removed the Thing returns to its fragmentary state. It is not a complete return, however, as the Object has been altered through its interactions and displacements. It is now a 'new' Thing and not simply a piece of what it was. The removal from the Object's various and ever-changing contexts of origin is more sharply felt in this kind of objective display. Encountering the anthropological museum collection, the viewer encounters these Things that are not only *possibly Mine*, but *never Mine* because of their exoticism and their display which is removed from familiar or familial surroundings. In

this way, these personal, obviously previously-owned appropriated Objects are lost to Me forever.

The pregnant and resonant thing about the archaeological fragment; any fragment, is that its retrieval makes manifest that which cannot be retrieved, suggests orders that must remain lost. Each fragment is like the minutest tip of an iceberg of histories and narratives and stories which we can feel tugging at us on the edge of consciousness or knowledge, but which we know are to remain for-ever invisible and unknowable: to hold a fragment in your hand is to trigger a massive act of imagination to try and see it *when*, and this act achingly underscores the knowledge that its presumed past is forever beyond our direct experience (Grayson 1998).

Similar in their varying senses of loss created by the use of fragments are Joseph Cornell's *Untitled (Pharmacy)* (1943) (fig 7), Penny Siopis' *Will* (1997-present) (figs 9-11), and Susan Hiller's *From the Freud Museum* (1991-1997) (figs 15-16), all of which employ a detached objective system of display. Cornell's *Pharmacy* consists of repetitive jars holding memories in the *traces* of an ephemeral experience or moment, anticipating the loss thereof. The display of Siopis' ongoing and primarily conceptual piece, *Will*, is the archive of a Self's life in his Objects, anticipating the loss death brings. The objectivity of Susan Hiller's *Freud Museum* is obvious with its anthropological museum system of display, which shows the preserved and categorised Things of an Other, encouraging the creation and reading of further relationships and connections between them.

It is no coincidence that these works all employ the box and the vitrine as a device:

The collection relies on the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined by these boundaries, just as the shelf is invited to expand with the confines of bourgeois domestic space. For the environment to be an extension of the self, it is necessary not to act upon and transform it, but to declare its essential emptiness by filling it (Stewart 1993: 157).

Hiller combines the objective/democratising/ narrative-neutralising box within the language of museum display and the physically encasing vitrine. Cornell's fragments are captured in their glass vials, labeled and categorised before display in the glass-fronted case. Siopis leaves her objects naked in the stark emptiness of her vitrines but labels them with the anecdotes of acquisition. The objects, and by extension the Self they refer to, are made vulnerable under the gaze of the viewer-voyeur-anthropologist. Like many of the Collector's roles, the role of Anthropologist shifts, at times, to the viewer. The Artist-Collector makes his viewer an accomplice in this act of exposure for there is no exposing or exposition without the voyeur - he is the reason for it.

The 'first person' [Collector] remains invisible. The 'second person' [viewer], implicitly, has the potential 'first person' position as a respondent; his or her response *to* the exposing is the primary and decisive condition *for* the exposing to happen at all. The 'third person' [Self on display], silenced by the discursive situation, is at the same time the most important element, the only one *visible* in the discourse (Bal 1999: 8).

The detached language and system of seemingly scientific research presents a fiction to be assembled by the viewer in a factual setting and manner. Within the conceptual space of the archive museum, the viewer creates an identity/Self from the rescued detritus of an Other.

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### Endnotes Chapter 3

- 1 "If you do not lend your car, your fountain pen or your wife to anyone, that is because these objects, according to the logic of jealousy, are narcissistic equivalents of the ego: to lose them, or for them to be damaged, means castration. The phallus, put in a nutshell, is not something one loans out" (Baudrillard 1996:105-6).
- 2 In light of Baudrillard's discussion of the Collector, it is appropriate here to put aside Freud's castration anxiety — which is manifest in the male as a fear that his penis will be removed and in the female as penis envy — (See Freud's essay "The infantile genital organization" 1923) and the psychoanalytic theories and consequences thereof, in favour of a consideration of the fear of the act of castration.
- 3 Although 'castration' technically refers to the removal of the testicles (Oxford English Dictionary 2002 Sv "castration"), the anxiety and fear associated with castration is of the loss of the phallus.
- 4 See Walter Benjamin's *The arcades project* (1999: 416-455).
- 5 Even if not 'personal' in the sense of being private, these objects belong to an individual who had chosen them and thereby they are imbued with that *personality*.
- 6 See Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton's *The meaning of things: domestic symbols and the self* (1981).

## Conclusion

In daily life, the individual is constantly and necessarily creating collections of both memory and Objects. These are the collections that help define and communicate an individual's Self to both others and himself. When an artist appropriates the Objects of an Other's life and rescues the discarded Objects and images of society, he asks his viewer to contemplate his own Self and his collections thereof. Through its presentation of a Self, the collection functions as a trigger for desideration and contemplation. Because "the collection distils relations not immediately apparent in the world; it seeks to clarify the world by producing a simulacrum and therefore bears a metaphorical relationship to it" (Suárez 2007: 164) – it acts as a metamir for contemplation.

Through the personalisation of environment, the individual turns himself into the object of being and observation. As Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton point out:

We are mysterious creatures who mark our time on earth through tangible remembrances. We transform time itself, as it were, into tangible space through our makings and doings, personalizing our environment while objectifying ourselves (cited by Danet and Katriel 1994: 236).

The Artist-Collector presents his viewer with this objectified Self as a means to communicate with the viewer's own Self and as encouragement for his exploration of Self through Other. This is ultimately what the Artist-Collector achieves through his collection: the transference of the role of Collector onto the viewer. Artist-anthropologist Susan Hiller declares the dualism of collection and viewing: "We are all simultaneously participants and observers"



(Withers 2004: 184) – the viewer, Collector, artist and Self are all subject and object of the exposition in which Objects tell stories.

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Fig 1. Penny Siopis, *Zombie* (A child's room), 2000.



Fig 2. Penny Siopis, *Zombie* (Family room), 2000.

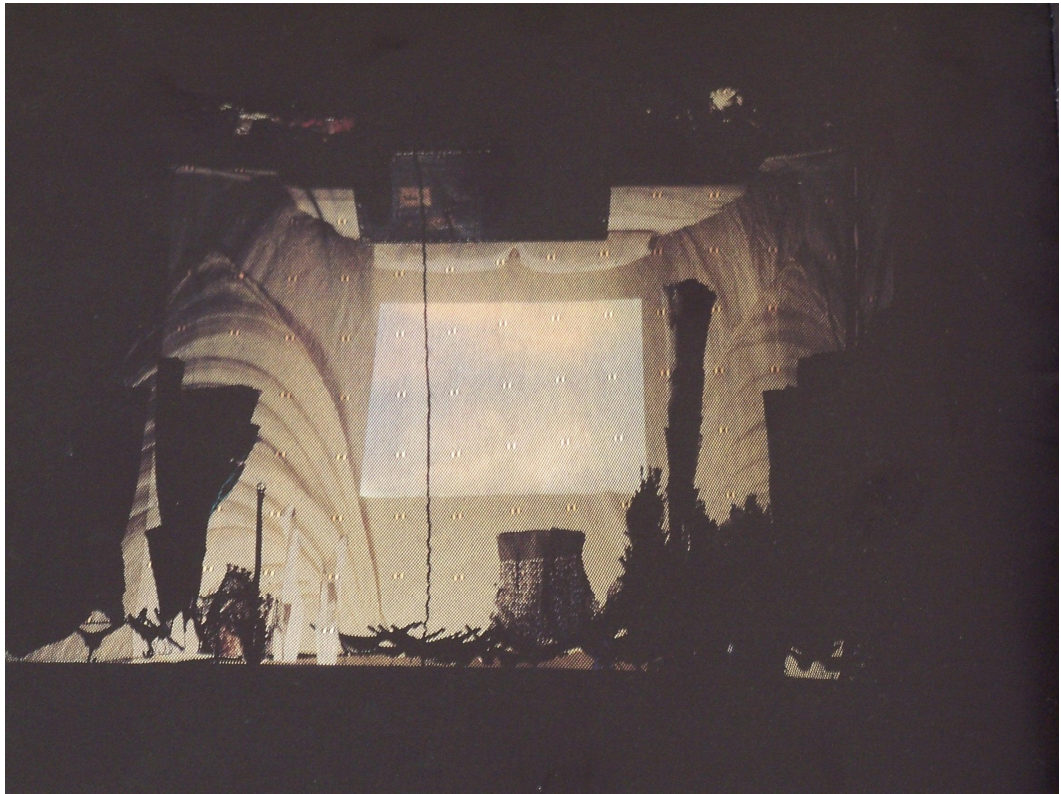


Fig 3. Penny Siopis, *Zombie (Parents' room)*, 2000.



Fig 4. Ilya Kabakov, *The boat of my life*, 1993.



Fig 5. Ilya Kabakov, *The boat of my life* (detailed view), 1993.

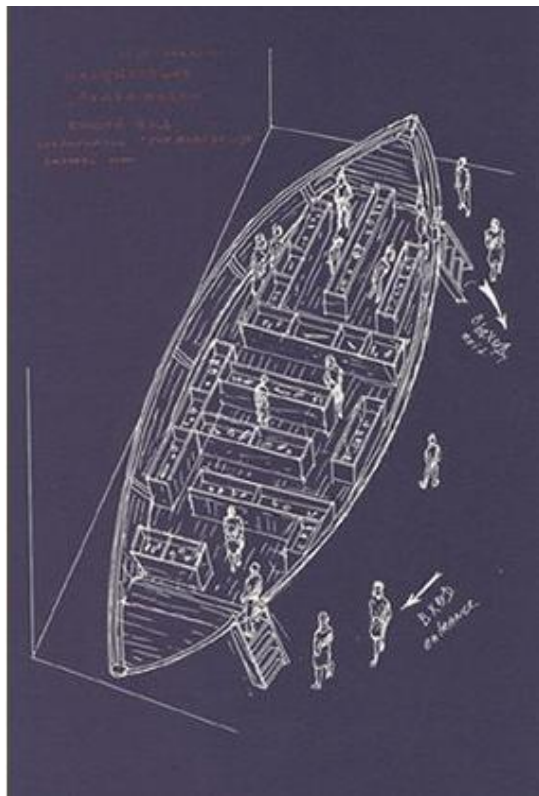


Fig 6. Ilya Kabakov, *The boat of my life* (sketch), 1993.



Fig 7. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Pharmacy)* (1943).



Fig 8. Susan Hiller, *Dedicated to unknown artists*, 1972 -76.



Fig 9. Penny Siopis, *Will* (installation view from *Sympathetic Magic*) 2002.



Fig 10. Penny Siopis, *Will* (installation view from *Sympathetic Magic*) 2002.



Fig 11. Penny Siopis, Objects from *Will*, 1997 - present.

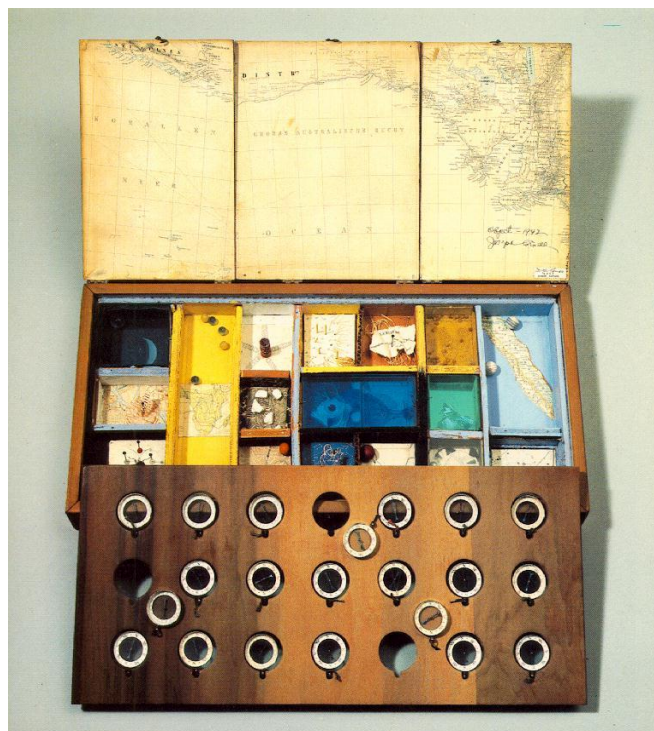


Fig 12. Joseph Cornell, Object (*Rose de vents*), 1942 - 1953.



Fig 13. Ole Worm's, *Museum Wormianum* , 1655



Fig 14. Anonymous, Cabinet of Curiosities (late seventeenth century).





Fig 14. Susan Hiller, detail of *From the Freud Museum*, 1991 -1997.



Fig 15. Susan Hiller, detail of *From the Freud Museum*, 1992-1997.

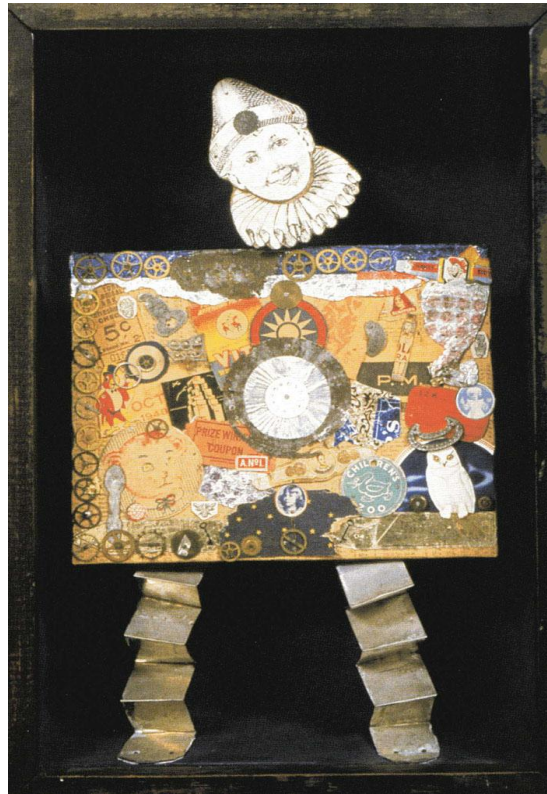


Fig 17. Joseph Cornell, *Encrusted clown (Souvenirs for Singleton)*, c. mid 1950s.



Fig 18. Joseph Cornell, *Homage to the Romantic Ballet (for the Sylphide Lucille Grahn)*, 1945.



Fig 19. Joseph Cornell, *The Crystal Cage (portrait of Berenice)*, 1946.



Fig 20. Daguerreotype, undated.



Fig 21. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Great Garbo)* c. 1939.



Fig 22. Penny Siopis, *Reconnaissance 1900 - 1997* (1997).



Fig 23. Penny Siopis, *Reconnaissance 1900 - 1997* (1997).



Fig 24. Penny Siopis, *Charmed Lives* (1998).



Fig 25. Penny Siopis, *Sacrifices* (1998).



Fig 26. Penny Siopis, *Sacrifices* (1998).