

Ian Maleney

Notes on Collecting

Written in response to **Mairead O'hEocha**, *Tale Ends & Eternal Wakes*

“The most powerful spell cast by the collector is to enclose the individual item within a magic circle where, even as the final shudder (the shudder of having suffered acquisition) runs through it, it turns to stone.” – Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library”

1. One should never trust a collector. Collectors are strange animals. Their hideous activity repels me. Butterflies pinned in a picture frame; plastic action figures lined up – original packaging! – on a bedroom shelf; call cards in poly-pockets, stamps, coins, records, books—hoarded, catalogued, inert. It’s disgusting, and inhumane.
2. To collect is to set against time: it is a way of encircling a set of objects, notionally protecting them against the pressures of timeliness. A collection remains stately; even as it ages it commands respect. The individual object is quickly old, ragged, alone. It falls out of time in a way that a collection, being outside time from the beginning, never can.
3. For this reason, a collection is often somehow otherworldly. Because it has no time, it rarely has a place, which is to say it almost never belongs anywhere. Though it might represent a time or a place, it does not itself occupy that time or place.
4. It can be quite difficult to feel any great sense of kinship with a collection. Ownership perhaps, but rarely kinship.
5. A true collection is never complete, which is to say that it exists in a state of permanent incompleteness. This is accepted by the collector; he understands, on some level, that completeness is not (can not be) the goal.
6. Because a collection is never complete, a collection may expand or contract at any given time without troubling its ontological status as a collection. A library may be diminished by the lack of a single book, but it is still a library. A museum does not, with the loss of one painting, cease to be a museum. The multiplicity of the collection is the foundation of a defence not given to single objects. An uncollected object either is or isn’t.
7. A collection is tough but malleable. The uncollected object is hard, brittle, vulnerable.
8. In my parents’ house, there is a bundle of magazines I bought as a child – glossy and colourful monthlies related to the then-current Nintendo 64 games console. Though they are twenty years out of date, irrelevant, and worthless even as “collector’s items”, I find myself thinking of them a collection. A monolithic air has fallen on them, making something solid of their yellowing pages and torn covers. They exist out of time and all together. I have felt hesitant about throwing them out. If I had just one such magazine I would dump it immediately, but their common identity has so far saved them.
9. Who is the collector? He is the conqueror who seeks to disappear inside his conquest and emerge again, remade. His victories are private, though they may be acknowledged by those peers who share his proclivities, for whom they may be experienced as personal defeats.
10. By taking ownership of a notable collection, the collector hopes he may become an object of fascination in himself. Gleaming, he stands beside the fruit of his private labour and says, is it not beautiful? Am I, the one who has gone to such lengths to assemble this gathering, not also beautiful? Does it not provide evidence of my beautiful mind, my impeccable taste, my considerable means?

11. The collector hopes, always, to overtake his collection. That his collection's worth would finally be derived from the fact of his ownership, from the overwhelming force of his personality. When this inversion is complete, the collection becomes an institution.
12. The early Roman Catholic church collected relics from the holy land – fragments of the cross, the bones of the apostles, the soil of Golgotha. These items were placed on display as signifiers of the material basis (the word made flesh) of the empire's new religion. The existence of these relics as a collection, which superseded their existences as disparate objects, bestowed a degree of legitimacy on the church which drew them together. Through its ownership of the physical evidence of spiritual life, that church became – and sustained itself as – an institution.
13. The collection has an important role in the sciences, by which I mean any discipline which places great value on close examination, reproducibility, and standardised access. Our greatest centres of learning are built on collections: of people, of knowledge, of artefacts. Scientific progress has long been dependent on such collections – items returned from the field, carefully stored, and made available to the scholars of the future.
14. The collector is not always the one who finds the objects which are collected. Nor is he always the one who makes use of them. His role is one of delimitation, of drawing together and keeping safe.
15. If the collector has not himself discovered what he has collected, then he has likely bought it. The one who has sold the object is, stereotypically, the adventurer, the hunter; he is newly returned from the colonies, from the darker parts of the map, and he brings with him treasures of all kinds.
16. How unexplored the territory, how audacious the retrieval; how rare the treasure, how fashionable the logic which compelled its capture – this is how the price is set.
17. To say that a collection is never of the place it represents, is also to say that the objects which make up the collection have been removed in some way from their place. The specific object must be torn from its previous life before it can become part of a collection. The objects in a collection are, by definition, never free. They are, as Benjamin suggests, turned to stone.
18. Collections I have seen: bog bodies; fascist paraphernalia; modern art (many such); peasant furniture; analogue synthesisers; Native American wickerwork.
19. What is the relationship between the hunter, the collector, the scientist, the spectator? The hunter may never see his catch displayed, or even know its value to the collector; the spectator may never understand what the scientist has learned from the exhibit. And yet all pass through the shadow of the collection that outlasts them, that lives on in its now fascinating, now oppressive sameness.
20. Is a collection that functions as an encyclopaedia distinct from that which functions as a trophy cabinet? It may be difficult for a collector to know the nature of that which he has amassed.
21. Kate Briggs, *This Little Art*: “There must always be a share for the ephemeral: for what happened once and fades.” Ephemerality is a product of timeliness, and the collection rejects the very concept. In the eternal life of a collection, nothing happens once and nothing fades.

Ian Maleney is a writer from Offaly. *Minor Monuments* is the title of Ian's debut collection of essays (Tramp Press, 2019) on the theme of home, memory and belonging. His writings have been highly praised for their poetic serenity and reflective qualities. He has been published by Winter Papers, gorse, and the Dublin Review. He is the founder of Fallow Media, an inter-disciplinary publication for music, photography, and long-form writing on the internet.

The **Temple Bar Gallery + Studios Writing Commission** aims to expand ideas around writing about art by inviting Irish authors to create a series of pieces inspired by the exhibitions at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios. In 2020, TBG+S has commissioned Ian Maleney to make a piece of writing inspired by each of the exhibitions in the gallery programme.

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