

THE COLLECTOR OF ART

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How are lives lived with art? Why do people buy works of art, and what roles do the works play in collectors' lives? What are the relationships between private and public collections with regard to the curatorship of national heritage? Cobi Labuscagne visits private art collectors and their collections in Johannesburg and discovers a network of private activity that may constitute the nation's future archive.

In 2009 a collective called, 'Empty Office' embarked on a project that they called, 'Joburg Art Bin'. It was an initiative aimed at encouraging corporate and private art collectors to 'give back' their art to a version of a public. For this collective the buying of art and the hanging of art in private spaces was an assault on that art work's integrity because it no longer had a life in the public realm. The name of the project's close resemblance to the Joburg Art Fair, a trade fair for buying art from galleries, is, I believe, no coincidence. I came upon the Joburg Art Bin project during my ethnographic research on the company that produced and owned the Fair. Along a, perhaps, similar trajectory, a Wits academic remarked in a newspaper article leading up to the first Joburg Art Fair that "elitist yuppies" are sure to buy the works at this event. While I was not that interested in debates around art works *either* as goods for private consumption *or* as a public good, these two responses led me to focus my research into the



Agapanthus
lambda on metallic paper, 2006
22.5 x 45 cm, edition 5
Flickr: Nathaniel s 

Joburg Art Fair on trying to understand more about how lives are lived with art.

The collector of art, like the art public, is not one kind of individual, a fact sometimes lost in theory that considers 'collecting' as a practice. In a chapter in *Revisions*, a 2006 book on South African art, Ivor Powell suggests that "collecting art, as much as the more abstract and attendant business of discourse

generation, is an active and dirty process that takes place in real, profane time, and in the always compromised real world". Yet for Powell, in South Africa there is also a political agency involved in collecting works of art as it shows art works 'at work':

the fact that a private collection is ineluctably idiosyncratic at some level, reflecting personal choices, preferences and tastes ... also gives it a coherence that other species of collecting lack ... constructing a serious and systematic art collection represents a dynamic rather than a static engagement with history and reality. At every level what is demanded of the collector, as well as practitioners engaging at different levels with the cultural discourse of the time, is that art needs to be conceptually wrenched from the morass of over-determination to which it has been subjected. At the same time and in the same gesture it needs to be revisioned and recontextualised in ways that allow elements of a different telling of history to emerge.

Powell proposes that a person's private art collection is at once about the collector, and allows for a recontextualised version of periods in history of art, or the history of a place. Thus, while the work naturally refers back to the artist, it also speaks of a time in 'history of art', a place where it was produced, and, once bought, of the person who made the purchase. Both Jean Baudrillard and Mieke Bal have theorised this relationship between collection and collector; between the act or impulse to collect and social traits.

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Baudrillard writes within a tradition that attempts to see acts of consumption as fundamentally social and referential. He makes an analytical distinction between 'objects' and 'utensils' to denote the dimension of ownership as he understands it. In an essay published in the 2009 volume *The Object Reader*, Baudrillard explains: "[i]f I use a refrigerator to refrigerate, it is a practical mediation: it is not an object but a refrigerator. And in that sense I do not possess it. A utensil is never possessed, because a utensil refers one to the world; what is possessed is always an object abstracted from its function and thus brought into relation with the subject". The main point here is the notion that the collector is perpetually in a process of 'collecting' versions and ideals of the self – the objects exist within the realm of inter-subjectivity.

Bal, in an attempt to come at the concept and process of 'narrative' from a different angle (narrative being one of her core and long-held conceptual interests), reads the process of collecting as a story with a beginning, middle and end. She quickly realises that collecting has no beginning, since the first few objects might be argued to serve functional roles. In the 2006 anthology of her work Bal asserts in response to this realization that, "the beginning, instead, is a meaning, not an act. Collecting comes to mean collecting precisely when a series of haphazard purchases or gifts suddenly becomes a meaningful sequence. That is, the moment when a self-conscious narrator begins to 'tell' its story, bringing about a semiotics for a narrative of identity,



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Jessica Meuninck-Ganger and Nathaniel Stern
lithograph, LCD with video, 10 x 14 x 2 inches, 2009
Flickr: Nathaniel s

history, and situation." Her point is thus similar to that made by Baudrillard in that what she sees as the fundamental dynamic at work within collecting is the telling of personal stories, searching for ever more authentic meaning structures within which to better understand the self – the self as reflected, narrativistically, through objects within a choreographed series.

These explanations of the power and function of collecting art works were both corroborated and questioned by collectors I interviewed in Johannesburg. In one discussion, for instance, a young independent journalist explained her enthusiasm for art and her "logic" of art buying as one "led by a personal mythology", and asserted that she would sometimes spend up to half her salary or more on buying art. After having done a couple of interviews with buyers, this had become a familiar register for me and I

was no longer surprised by how seldom my respondents bought art as a result of having read particularly favourable reviews or art critical comments on the work, or because they had some money lying around.

The journalist lived, at the time, in a cottage-style house in Melville, Johannesburg, with walls covered in many small artworks. Standing in front of her art collection, she pointed to two prints by Fiona Pohl. She explained that while one of the reasons she had bought these works was because of 'the strong line and color', primarily it was because they reminded her of Paris: "I just love Paris", she added. This set the tone of our art discussion, which followed a fairly lengthy theoretical dialogue on the state of art in South Africa, the place of the Joburg Art Fair and her analysis of the country more broadly. After passing a small oil painting of a giraffe, which she bought from a Zimbabwean curio shop, she pointed to two other works: a print by Claudette Schreuders and another by Lisa Brice. "Both", she explained, are of "woman drinking on their own. This one very awkwardly at a cocktail party, which reflects all my art openings – terrible awkward standing, but also about autonomy – sitting in bars on their own." Her attractions to these two works, both by well-established and successful South African artists, lay in their ability to capture or demonstrate an experience central to her life. In this way this collector's life with art reflects what Mieke Bal describes in her essay on collecting: "If I try to integrate my professional interest in narrative with the private one in collecting, I can imagine seeing collecting as a process consisting of the confrontation between objects and subjective agency informed by an attitude". Bal goes on to interpret collections as made up of objects, each of which have

been “turned away, abducted from itself, its inherent value and denuded of its defining function so as to be available for us as a sign”.

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Another interview took me to the eastern Johannesburg suburb of Benoni, to the house of a successful surgeon. Inside, the house had many different reception areas, each with its own interior decorating identity and filled with works of art – mostly South African, but some seemingly from Cuba (the doctor later confirmed that he had visited the Havana Biennale on two occasions) and one or two by artists from other areas in Africa.

The room in which I was stationed had dark, un-plastered face-brick walls, black slate tiles, a very large flat-screen television and bed-sized black leather sofas. On the wall opposite the television hung one of Sam Nhlengethwa’s ‘jazz’ works spanning almost the entire wall area – also in dark purple and grey tones, so adding to the general murkiness of the room.

In contrast, the room next door was brightly painted, sported a purple and green carpet and was decorated with small, drawing room-style chairs. On one wall hung a series of medium-sized Robert Hodgins’ paintings. And opposite, all on the same wall, a relatively large William Kentridge print, a similar-sized Johann Louw drawing and small collaborative prints between Zwelethu Mthethwa and Nhlengethwa that I had never seen before.

During the course of the interview, I asked the doctor to point out one work that he would like to



Ross and Felix

Pigment on watercolor paper, 18 x 28 inches, 2010

Flickr: Nathaniel S 

discuss; one which for him held special significance. This had become one of my standard question to buyers and, as was the case with every one of them, the doctor had to give it serious and considerable thought. Eventually, he led me to the other side of the house past a series of bedrooms to the main bedroom at the end of a corridor. Along the way we passed early Johannes Phokelas, Santu Mofokengs, and a remarkable, signature Joachim Shonefeldt wood and paint piece that the doctor had commissioned from the artist depicting his mother’s grave and his childhood home. But the doctor pointed to the piece right above the bed and explained:

This work by Nhlanhla [Xaba], he was a very visionary artist; he was kind of before his time. I bought it some seven years ago, it was during the height of the genocide in Rwanda, and I was so touched. This is a river, full of ... you don’t see the river actually it is corpses in the reeds and even the refugees that are running away from the genocide. And you can see there is nothing

growing here; it is all scorched earth. And these are the little kids trying to run away. And these were unfortunate; they were not able to make it; they died. And this is a messenger of death; it is a person who has been decapitated; no head. And these were the ones who were able to, who were fortunate to cross over, and it is a passage. And after that Nhlanhla died in a fire, he died in his studio in Newtown, and it was so –.And it is in my bedroom: I think about life and I think about the transition and how easy it is to move from a point of comfort to nowhere; and the recent xenophobic attacks in South Africa reminded me so much of this painting.

It is clear from the doctor’s own description of the work that he finds it eternally moving and evocative despite having bought it some time ago. He feels a very strong connection to the artist, who had been a friend of his, and equally so to the subject matter depicted. At first sight and for the briefest of seconds the work appears abstract and pleasantly colorful. It is a medium-sized oil painting, yet he never mentioned this fact, nor the fact that it is brightly colored and painted in a loose, expressionist style. For him this piece, and many others that we discussed, were first and foremost important as *texts* reflecting his thoughts, or his life, or his beliefs. His was an interest in content rather than form. Asked why he bought art, he replied that it served two purposes: for “embellishing” his house and, more importantly, for a “spiritual” purpose.

The work that the journalist decided to foreground as one to discuss specifically for the interview was the first work she bought and hung in her study above her writing table. Her chosen work was

a medium sized (about 1m by 1,2m) charcoal drawing depicting the face of a woman in extreme close up, where the whole picture-frame consists of the upper part of her face (eyes and nose only), with the words ‘Good Vision Should be Maintained’ written at the bottom quarter of the canvas in large font. It is a work by South African artist Mark Hipper who recently passed away (<http://www.artthrob.co.za/News/Artist-Mark-Hipper-dies-at-49-by-Rat-Western-on-17-August.aspx>). She explained:

It just always makes me think. I just love that phrase: ‘Good vision should be maintained’, it is such a strange term. I often think about it, because if you take it un-ironically, I totally agree, firstly literally, you know, you need good vision, you need to see, you know, especially if you like art, but then there is also good vision needs to be maintained, like you have to maintain a good vision in this world, but then there is the irony as well as the fascism of the statement, you know it is a fascist statement as well, because what is good vision? It is like, moralistic and it could be pure fascism, like good vision should be maintained, it could be nationalistic. And then she is wearing glasses, I love ... that is another theme that I am into, spectacles, because I love that whole idea about vision and refracted vision.

Another buyer explained to me that he found himself only interested in buying works on paper – which he mused might be connected to his profession as writer. He described in detail how he could still, after years of having acquired certain pieces, place a chair in front of a work and just stare at it, “the way one listens to music”. A comparable experience was



Blossom on the Dodder
lambda print on matte, 2007
220 x 300 mm, edition 9
Flickr: Nathaniel s 

related by a young, art-buying advertising executive who remarked: “when I bought this piece [a Conrad Botes] I could just sit there for hours and just stare at it, it is amazing”. The writer’s art collecting philosophy was that a work has to be jarring and ‘difficult’ initially for it to sustain its spell over the collector throughout a lifetime. A similar sentiment emerged in conversations with other buyers who often mentioned that when one buys an ‘easy’ work, one risks getting bored with it.

Echoing some of Bal’s ‘collecting’ theories, the writer I interviewed quoted Roland Barthes to explain that the buyer of art picks up the process of art-making where the artists left off to *‘kyk dit klaar’* (to complete the work by looking at it). For him this is an active process, a responsibility even, that the buyer takes on. The meaning, he went on to explain, that the buyer then ascribes to the work might not be the definitive meaning, but will always be a *valid*

meaning, since the status of the work changed when it become part of the owner’s collection. In this way the buyer-looker is tremendously empowered to be part of the process begun by the artists.

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I came across many other art works in private or office spaces during my fieldwork period. In gallerist Linda Givon’s house, for example, is a display of all manner of art objects, hung in salon-style from floor to ceiling. She pointed to them in relation to biographical information and as markers of specific times or events in her life, as others might page through photo albums. Many of the works in her office, where we had our discussion, were small sketches that told the narrative of political struggle during the years when she was one of the few gallerists to show work by black artists locally and abroad. These were gifts, or pieces that she had specifically bought. Should one look for Powell’s re-conceptualised or re-contextualised history of this country, Givon’s study, bedroom, sitting room, and kitchen would provide ample material.

Perhaps it is appropriate that Linda Givon has the final word: as one of South Africa’s leading gallerists, and as an avid personal collector, she stands at the nexus between public and private ownership and consumption. She is well placed to pronounce on the collecting of art within the very particular context of early twenty first century South Africa. Significantly though, many other people that I interviewed expressed similar sentiments. For Givon it is the *duty* of the private sector to buy art at this time and so

treasure national heritage. As a student of history of art, one becomes used to this role being performed by the state of the day, and so, at first it was defamiliarising for me to see well known art works, and works by well known artists inside the thoroughly domestic environments that constituted the homes of the collectors I interviewed. For instance, an exemplary jolt was produced by my encounter with a black and white Andrew Tshabangu photograph of two black figures standing in the mist by a grave site, hanging above a rose-coloured, marble counter-top in a kitchen next to the toaster.

[it is the *duty* of the private sector to buy art at this time and so treasure national heritage](#)

Nevertheless, at a time and in a country where national museums are given miniscule acquisition budgets, the job of archiving the present through art is primarily taking place within the private spaces of people's homes – and not only those of “elitist yuppies”. What results is a dynamic process whereby the private versions of the self reflected in the choices and series formulated by individual collectors, is also a curated version of the memory of our present.

Editors' note on choice of visual material

We have chosen to juxtapose the text of this article with works by the USA-South African artist Nathaniel Stern because he interrogates a number of issues the article raises through his art making and dissemination. In particular Stern challenges the boundaries between creating and owning art in the internet age (see: nathanielstern.com/2009/wikipedia-art). Further, much of his work is available on the internet under a Creative Commons license: Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0). His flickr name is Nathaniel s. However, if art collectors should wish to buy his work, it is available from Gallery Art on Paper in Johannesburg (galleryaop.com).