

MAKING THINGS TALK

HOARD, COLLECTION, ARCHIVE

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ARCHIVE
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HOARDING
STORYTELLING

We store things in our everyday spaces –objects, artefacts or images– that over time betray their original function to become stories. As they accumulate, they lie in wait for someone to find the time to interrogate them and bring them back to the present time.

Whether they be large or small, digital or physical, public or private, hoards prevent access to the stories of the things they contain. To give a group of things a structure than can last over time, guaranteeing controlled development

and greater access to the stories they contain, hoarding is not enough: the hoarded objects can only begin to talk and tell their story if they are organized into a defined order, if they are curated, either through the work of an archivist or the criteria of a collector.

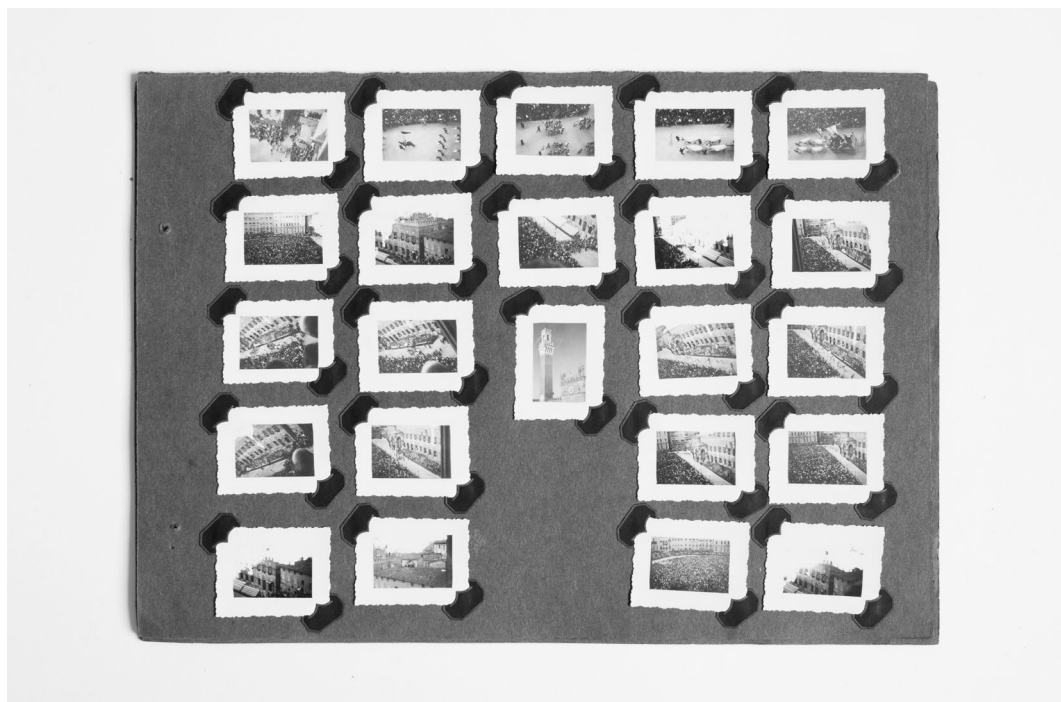
This paper considers the hoarding of objects in every possible sense, reflecting on their narrative power and on the capacity of artefacts to constitute a recorded historical memory, be it personal or collective.

INTRODUCTION: HOARDING

Fig. 1 Sestini family Photo Album, dating back to the late 1930s. A hoarding of family photos is mostly intended to survive over time to tell the private stories of those who know the people and places portrayed. Without discards, without selection, these images remain locked up in the circuit of household things. On the contrary, by working on them a selection, inspired by the criteria that guide the construction of an archive or a collection, can become objects through which to compose new stories, no longer linked to private memories.

Our everyday spaces become repositories for objects that betray their original function over time to become stories. “Without things, we would stop talking. We would become as mute as things are alleged to be” (Daston, 2004, pp. 9-24). As they accumulate, they lie in wait for someone to find the time to interrogate them and bring them back to the present time. Their content is varied, corks, postcards, aeronautical magazines, telephone books, subway tickets, souvenir photos, as well as newspaper clippings and illustrated images from various periods in time: all the most loyal servants of the realm of the past, recent or distant, lend themselves to this transformation, from functional objects to tools of narration.

For the transformation to occur, it is not enough that they survive the conditions dictated by the time and space in which they have been stored. If nothing or no one intervenes, these objects are destined to simply accumulate, to take up space with no functional purpose other than to become a hoard.



Whether they are large or small, digital or physical, public or private, hoards prevent access to the stories of the objects they contain. In a hoard, the only rule is to hoard. There is no waste, no selection. The order does not matter, there are no rules. The hoard adapts to the space it has. Nothing in a hoard may truly be said to have been saved. It all just floats, awaiting retrieval to begin a new dialogue with the present time¹.

To give a group of things a structure than can last over time, that can guarantee controlled development and greater access to the stories they contain, it is not enough to hoard: the hoarded objects can only talk and tell their story if they are organized in a defined order, if they are curated, either through the work of an archivist or the criteria of a collector.

COLLECTION AS A NARRATIVE VECTOR

Originally it was the *Wunderkammer*, a phenomenon that developed in the fifteenth century to define chambers of wonders in which erudite scholars and wealthy patrons once collected and conserved extraordinary objects in order to study them, to cultivate social relationships and at the same time, to establish a position and assert their personal status².

This approach to gathering objects is that of a collector and is founded in a desire to use them to build a unique story, usually an intimate, personal and subjective one, without necessarily establishing a system of rules by which to distinguish them. For Roger Cardinal (1994), the collector is someone who creates “a concerned gathering of selected items which manifest themselves as a pattern or a set, thereby reconciling their divergent origins within a collective discourse” (p. 71). In a collection, the objects acquire full value only when they are considered as a whole: the individual object is thus defined exclusively by its relationship with the other objects in the collection.

According to Mieke Bal (1994), the desire to collect is an essential human characteristic that derives from the need to tell stories, but for which there are no words or other

Fig. 2 Fausto Sestini, *Travel slides*, 1952-1963. Dealing with a backlog of familiar images, in order to access new stories leaving aside private memories, one must make choices based on objective criteria, such as a particular format, a photographic genre, references to specific historical events. In this way, a new set can be taken away from the hoarding, a selection of images that no longer depend on the private stories of the person who took them.



conventional forms of narration (p. 97). Collecting objects may therefore be equated with telling one's story through them, because "the potential inwardness of objects is one of their most powerful characteristics, ambiguous and elusive though it may be. Objects hang before the eyes of the imagination, continuously re-presenting ourselves to ourselves, and telling the stories of our lives in ways which would be impossible otherwise" (Pearce, 1992, p. 47)³.

Massimiliano Gioni, in presenting the exhibition titled *The Keeper*, dedicated to 'the act of preserving objects, artworks and images and to the passions that inspire this undertaking', described the 'unreasonable act of iconophilia' comparing it to the figure of the junk dealer: "To me, this man has in some ways come to symbolize the essence of the collector, not the kind that crowds auction rooms, but the collector as the ragpicker of memories and things: the Lumpensammler,



Fig. 3 Clara Sestini, short film using pictures coming from her family photo hoarding (Figures 1, 2). Its frames narrate a new story in which the users can recognize themselves in contents completely far apart from their original contexts, 2018.

the collector of the forgotten and of the disregarded, the lover of the inferior, who incarnates the drama and perhaps even the romance of an individual trying to complete himself through the objects with which he surrounds himself. For collecting is always a struggle between order and disorder: to achieve the wholeness of a collection, one creates order and gives meaning to objects so that they form a universe of their own, which, in turn, becomes a mirror of the world in which those objects originated” (Gioni, 2016).

The collections that speak of their owners are the focus of the exhibition titled *Magnificent Obsessions: The Artist as Collector*. It gathered the private collections of established artists in the second half of the twentieth century, revealing their fetishes, the personal or intimate introspective aspects of their research: in this regard, artist Hiroshi Sugimoto said: “My collection is my mentor [...] It trained my taste and sensi-



Fig. 4 Fiona Tan, *Inventory*, 2012. Through a contemporary projection on six screens, this video installation presents a series of images from the collection of Greek and Roman antiquities by the English neoclassical architect John Soane (1753-1837), housed in his London house-museum.

tivity” (Yee, 2015, p. 195). And so we discover that Walker Evans collected postcards that portrayed everyday life in America even before his *American Photographs* (1938)⁴, Andy Warhol collected ceramic cookie jars, Matisse was obsessed with exotic fabrics, Martin Parr with the Soviet memorabilia of space dogs⁵, and Damien Hirst was an admirer of taxidermy.

When an object becomes part of a collection, it is separated from its original function to acquire a new one designated by the collector/narrator. A collection is therefore also a place in which objects become rhetorical instruments to tell a story, recreating miniature scenarios of the past.

Collections serve to reconstruct the past by passing down stories, yet at the same time they offer the possibility of telling new ones, as they come to identify themselves through the perspective of their owners. In the film *Kingdom of Shadows* by Fiona Tan (2000), Sandor Kardoj talks about his col-



Fig. 5 The images of *Inventory*, through the simultaneous display of the elements of an accumulation of fragments of classical sculptures, represent the deepest soul of collecting: the desire to stop time. Courtesy of Fiona Tan.

lection of amateur photos. He owns millions of photographs, anonymous snapshots, that show what these anonymous photographers wanted to preserve of themselves, of their surroundings, of what in many cases they appeared proud of (their wife, their car, their children). Theirs (ours) is an attempt to preserve despite memory, “we organize frenetically with the purpose of saving things, nevertheless they continue to be lost. The same thing happens to souvenirs, and to photos, they disappear or are forgotten because they are not important”. Quoting Susan Sontag (1978) Kardoj sustains that “photographing is like cataloguing the world, selecting only those fragments that are valuable to us”.

During her career, Tan has become increasingly preoccupied with museal collections and their setting and staging, researching the forerunners of the contemporary museum: early art collections, *Wunderkammer* and cabinets of curiosity.

Such collections have been likened to the so-called “memory palace”, the Ancient Greek method of memorizing knowledge by setting out objects within an imaginary architectural course. The museal maintenance and storage of these objects then allows them to serve as triggers for memory and meaning (Tan, 2012) (Figures 4, 5).

BETWEEN ARCHIVE AND COLLECTION TO NARRATE HISTORY

In the second half of the 1920s, Aby Warburg, the German historian and art critic, developed the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-1929) to map the “afterlife of Antiquity”, or more simply, to examine how images of Western antiquity reappear in the art and cosmology of later eras and places, from Alexandrian Greece to Weimar Germany (Warburg, 2020). The atlas, of which there are photographic reproductions and posthumous reconstructions made by the *Warburg Institute* in London, consists of 40 wood panels covered in black fabric, on which over 1000 images have been pinned from books, magazines, newspapers and other vernacular sources, organized on the basis of 14 themes chosen by Warburg and involving recurring elements in the evolution of art and history. *Warburg's* original intention was to recreate a universal memory, consciously assembling and composing images that would represent the history of Europe in its entirety. Warburg believed that the use of images was the most efficient way to quickly transmit and evoke the memory and impression of an event (“To the image, the word! - zum Bild das Wort”) because they have the primordial but powerful capacity to evoke and express collective memories with energy and vitality (Johnson, 2013).

A similar example –which relies on reproductions rather than originals– is the concept of an “imaginary museum” by André Malraux. He assembled and organized montages of photographic reproductions to create “*Le Musée imaginaire*”,

a “museum without walls” that questioned the conventional concept of artwork, shifting attention from the artistic object to the idea and how it was developed. This subversive approach, which gives greater significance to curatorial practice over artistic reproduction, clearly states that the importance of the work lies in the creative, performative act, in the process of assembly, grouping and visualization of the works rather than in the artifact per sé, advancing art’s loss of authority, previously theorized by Walter Benjamin and John Berger (Malraux, 1974)⁷.

To draw a contemporary parallel, it is worth considering the trend, particularly widespread on social networks such as *Instagram*, to collect, catalogue, disseminate or analyse monothematic series of artefacts, images and objects from a more or less recent past. The intent of these accounts –present-day digital archives about the widest variety of disciplines– is strictly related to what in recent years has come to be known as *Public History*: a set of practices that run parallel to the traditional sciences, which purport to communicate history “outside the academic environment” (Tucci, 2018)⁸.

CONCLUSION: THINGS THAT TALK

“Each object is designed to amuse, annoy, bewilder, mystify, inspire reflection” (Man Ray, 1961, p. 48).

We live in a time that is extremely fortunate for fans of taxonomies of the most varied typologies. Thanks to enlightened policies of dissemination adopted by public and private institutions, such as the *Rijksmuseum* of Amsterdam, the *Met* in New York, the *Wellcome Library* of London, or projects such as *Google Arts & Culture*, to name just a few, the quantity of artefacts, or rather their reproductions, available in the public domain is infinite.

Objects talk. According to Anthony Hudek, “Objects define us – where the ‘us’ becomes an answer to the multiplicity and collectivity of objects and things inviting us into their midst” (Hudek, 2014, p. 15).

Removed and evolved from the hoard, the objects-gathered within the various definitions of series analysed above shed that indefinite quality, acquire distinct coordinates in time and space, establish relations with one another through a precise system of rules that protects each and every individual story, and at the same time, tells a single and collective story in which we can recognize ourselves⁹.

NOTES

1 A further reflection on this particular aspect has been recently provided by Steven Heller, 2020, np.

2 On this topic see Impey and MacGregor, 1985. Starting with the concept of *Wunderkammer*, an interesting contemporary evolution on the theme is presented in *The Spitzmaus Mummy and Other Treasures* (Anderson & Malouf, 2019), a recent exhibition that sought to question the traditional canons of curation as defined by museums, proposing new relations between these institutions and their collections, between the professional figures and museum audiences.

3 To further pursue this argument, Lorraine Daston and Antony Hudek provide an interesting account of the narrative potential of objects and their storytelling function: any object, if analysed in detail together with the surrounding context, noting its material and meaning, is able to tell a story, to become a pretext for research and a narrative vector (see Daston, 2004 and Hudek, 2014).

4 Over the last two years of his life, Walker Evans took over 1000 photographs portraying his friends and students with a Polaroid SX-70. Like a collection, the Polaroids are taken with no mannerism or style, in an impulsive and uncontrolled manner. They are however unique representations, and Evan's care in achieving this result is tangible: his lack of attention to both the nature of the pose and his way of shooting the picture, goes beyond all visual ambiguity. A single photo says little of the subject, but the series –considered in its entirety– describes an era (Fineman, 2000).

5 On this subject see Hollingham and Parr, 2019.

6 For more on this topic, see Ragaglia, Hapkemaier & Carazzato, 2019.

7 Malraux adds that for all those users who do not have the chance to see the original in person, the reproduction itself becomes the work of art (Malraux, 1974, pp. 13-14). Here it is necessary to acknowledge a lineage that follows up on Marcel Duchamp's non-art and ready-made, concepts that seek to elevate everyday items into works of art by placing them in artistic contexts (museums, galleries, art magazines). Only thus does the object acquire value and artistic meaning. These can be interpreted as a critique against art, its market and its aesthetic, and the arbitrariness with which a museum/gallery labels one item rather than another as art, a critique which in reality was sterile and immediately assimilated into the

very system that it was criticising, turning the ready-made into ‘a kind of “idea” art’. The ready-made considers the work of art as a ‘binary opposition’, i.e. only when it is in the museum context is it art; outside of it, it is non-art. Drawing a parallel, the work of art in book form is as critical of the institutions as was the ready-made. In addition, the artist’s book also levels this criticism in non-artistic contexts, making it as independent as possible of the art industry. As regards the critique of the art world, Gwen Allen argues that rather than the dematerialisation that critics hoped for, it produced ‘a strange subset of documents—texts, photographs, maps, lists, and diagrams— which served as evidence, as stand-ins, as archival traces of the artistic act. With its reliance on textual and photographic documentation, conceptual art ushered in a dramatically new set of exhibition practices, practices that no longer revolved around the display of unique objects but were instead based on the reproduced page (Allen, 2011, p. 15). In this regard, it is worth considering Seth Siegelaub’s idea of “Primary information” as used in relation to the artists’ publishing practices: “the use of catalogues and books to communicate (and disseminate) art is the most neutral means to present the new art. The catalogue can now act as primary information for the exhibition, as opposed to secondary information about art in magazines, catalogues, etc., and in some cases the “exhibition” can be the catalogue” (Harrison & Siegelaub, 1999, p. 199).

8 The parallel between the traditional archive and popularization accounts on the Internet is a hyperbole. They do however have many points in common, for example the comparison between an archive label and a hyperlink as a string, both are characteristic each of its own source to make their indexing clear.

9 Contributions: text conceived by Gianluca Camillini (first/lead author), who wrote and edited all sections of this publication. The collaboration of Clara Sestini (second author) and the support of Roberto Gigliotti (third author) were helpful to collect materials and draft sections “Introduction: hoarding” and “Collection as narrative vector”. This text is inspired by Clara Sestini’s Thesis research study, presented at the Faculty of Design and Arts, Unibz on November 30th 2018, under the supervision of Prof. Roberto Gigliotti (supervisor) and Dr. Gianluca Camillini (co-supervisor).

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