

ASKING BROC BLEGEN SOME QUESTIONS

by Chris Hontos

Chris Hontos: Tell me about your interest in the idea of the “collection” or “catalogue” as an art practice?

Broc Blegen: I’m fascinated by what objects people choose to collect and live with - everyone has a collection of some kind, its such a bizarre human activity. Collections can reveal a lot about their owners, what they value, a demonstration of their aesthetics, or even just an idiosyncratic fascination. It’s particularly exciting to see the collections of other artists - Andy Warhol immediately comes to mind - but recently I saw this great film by Tacita Dean that shows Claes Oldenburg in his studio as he gently handles and dusts the small objects that line his bookshelves. It was so poetic - an old man, a legend, a ritualistic process that he repeats periodically, a focused and intellectual engagement with each object. Time is such an important aspect of living collections - returning to an object again and again throughout your life, in relation to the addition and subtraction of other objects.

My own collection arose out of a desire to live with interesting artworks, have access to them whenever I want, and experience them physically in space rather than in books, websites and google searches. The pieces I really wanted will forever be out of my price range (\$10,000-\$1,000,000+), so I decided to make accurate replicas of them instead. It’s a rather simple proposition but as the collection develops I’m really excited by its potential to create new space to maneuver.

CH: There are two ways I see your collection - as an active archival experience for yourself; and as a sort of grift wherein you fabricate meaningful works and engage with them despite their lack of authenticity. Do you see yourself as a grifter or an archivist?

BB: I would gravitate more towards being an archivist. I appreciate the learning process that accompanies the collection - both the artistic knowledge gained in the course of building these things, but also the curatorial and intellectual knowledge gained through my engagement with the various artists and artworks in relation to each other. When I’m interested in a particular artwork, I’ll usually research the artist fairly extensively, reading interviews and essays whenever they are available, jumping around in a sort of amateur-scholarly way. On my computer I maintain a series of folders sorted by artist name, probably over 200 by now, and whenever I encounter something interesting it goes into a folder. I usually let some time pass before eventually deciding to fabricate something, as I’ve found that many pieces don’t hold my interest and aren’t worth making.

Of course, it’s always nice to feel like you got a good deal on something. For example, Bruce Nauman’s RUN FROM FEAR FUN FROM REAR (1972) sold at Christies for \$427,500 in 2002, and I was able to have it fabricated by Neon Images, a local neon shop, for \$625. So I’ll admit that there is a strange satisfaction in the fact that it is a grift, that I’m finding a way to engage with these things that aren’t meant for me to own. It’s like a way of asserting control - objects are usually only available on a temporary basis through exhibitions, you’re at the whim of the local museum curator or gallery director. And if you happen to really dig something you need to keep returning and try to burn it in your memory, lest you forget. It’s sort of an unintentional ephemeral or performative quality that objects acquire through public exhibition.

CH: I think that the desire to control or own these works gives you a unique experience of them. But part of the experience of so much art, I’ll cite Tino Sehgal as an obvious example, is in the pure experiential action of its performance. Are you interested in the re-creation of this kind of performance?

BB: That’s a good question, I’ve actually considered copying Tino Sehgal’s work, a couple years ago I recorded an audio clip of This is Propaganda just in case I decided to copy it someday, to get the pitch and rhythm right. But I’ve been grappling with whether its possible to copy his performance, because so much of his work is about the economic and institutional structures it exists in - its sort of a holistic approach or gesamtkunstwerk in the sense that every aspect is carefully considered and part of the piece. Even the rituals of purchasing and transferring ownership are choreographed performance - oral agreements in the presence of a legal notary, no material or written documentation can be produced, just a handshake and exchange of cold hard cash. He’s fantastically absurd and rigorous about every detail. So with Sehgal the experiential performance that occurs in the gallery is really great but is only the tip of the iceberg. (Dorothea von Hantelmann elaborates on these other elements really nicely in her book, How To Do Things With Art) So I don’t know, Tino Sehgal might be one of those artists I just can’t touch, I can’t copy.

But that brings up an important distinction about my collection, in that I’m really focused on the material presence of objects. I usually don’t copy performances, and I try to avoid pieces that are overly process-based or tied to a specific artist’s biography - I want to see if the object can survive by itself. But there might be a few exceptions, ones that come to mind are Jiri Kovanda’s actions (like, On an escalator...turning around, I look into the eyes of the person standing behind me...), Jonathan Monk’s Waiting for Famous People, and Francis Alÿs’s Turista. All performances occur in public space, are carefully documented through photographs, and seem like they could be re-performed by others. These pieces are also interesting to me because they’re aware of their dual audiences and contexts - a very general or mainstream audience that unexpectedly experiences the live performance as a rupture in their daily life, and a more specific or art-world audience that experiences the photograph in a constructed exhibition of art. But either way, sculpture and other artworks are meant to be experienced in person, in space, in relation to your body and other artworks, objects, people, cultural context, histories, sounds, smells, whatever. Most of my encounters with art come through photographic reproductions online or in books, so I want to see what they’re like when brought to life.

It’s like, instead of having a poster of something I’d prefer to make a full-scale, three-dimensional copy. Just a quick tangent that might be related...on a road-trip with my friend Srijon we stayed at his relative’s house in the suburbs outside Boston, and upon entering I was amazed to see the walls were lined with full-scale painted replicas of Van Gogh paintings, like ten of them, everywhere. It was a fairly humble house in a typical American suburb, and Srijon’s relative was this super spiritual yogi from Bangladesh, who told us we should chew our food twenty times before swallowing and that the nearby and historic Walden Pond had a metaphysical vortex of energy that slowly sucked you towards the center. It was

totally bizarre and seemed incompatible, for a guy to be so spiritual yet obsessed with these material Van Gogh paintings, but he was so sincere and honest about it, you could tell that they really brought him significant amounts of joy every day. It didn't matter that they were 'fake' - they were materially and maybe even spiritually real to him.

CH: Regarding the institutional and economic structures that the work that you're recreating exists in, how do you feel that your MAEP show will be represented and what form will it take in the specific place of the MIA gallery?

BB: Oh boy, this is such a multi-layered question, I'm not sure how to answer - it could go in so many directions! But let's just start with the form of the exhibition itself. I wanted to curate an exhibition that I would love to experience as a visitor, one that I would never expect to see at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The show is titled Coming Out Party, and will be organized much like a traditional group exhibition, with objects by Andy Warhol, Robert Mapplethorpe, Glenn Ligon, Bruce Nauman, Jenny Holzer, Felix Gonzalez Torres, Jim Hodges, Paul McCarthy, Jonathan Horowitz, and maybe a few others. While most of these artists are relatively well known and 'important,' the pieces I've selected are certainly not their most iconic. Instead, I'm interested in objects that engage with mainstream culture and art history, often in an iconoclastic way, and collectively explore ideas related to queering. To queer, queering, this might be the best way to describe the active and subversive state of the objects. Both the content of the original artwork and my mode of acquiring and presenting these objects embody this attitude in some way.

The exhibition also references an emerging curatorial form - the group exhibition curated from a private collection, often displayed in a public museum. One of the most notable and controversial examples of this was an exhibition titled "Skin Fruit: Selections from the Dakis Joannou Collection" at the New Museum in 2010. It was curated by Jeff Koons, and was a spectacularly massive blockbuster exhibition with over 100 artworks by loads of international art stars...a tremendous display of wealth and power. The crux of the controversy centered on the Greek billionaire's position on the nonprofit museum's board of trustees, since the exhibition would significantly boost the prestige and monetary value of the collection. But also, it was a sign of how collectors have become more influential in the art world, displacing the role of curators, critics, and even museums.

But the Skin Fruit exhibition and rise of powerful collectors is most troubling to me as a symptom of larger problems, namely, wealth inequity, and its dramatic implications on the structure of our society. It is an especially urgent problem in the United States, as we've become a nation more unequal than any other developed country, even places like Cameroon, Iran, and Russia (according to the gini index, which tracks income disparity worldwide). Incredible wealth and power has accumulated in the hands of a few people. We've seen how this has influenced politics, especially since the recent Supreme Court ruling opened the doors for unlimited corporate spending on elections. And we've seen signs of resistance, like the Occupy Wall Street movement.

CH: You say that you want to make War with Art. When you combine those two words you get wart.

BB: (laughs) Thanks for reeling the conversation back in! This sounds like the makings of a David Shrigley drawing or something. But I suppose what I mean is that I like art that has a sense of urgency, where there is something at stake. So much art that is I've seen lately is politically impotent.

By the way, have you read this essay by Andrea Fraser, "L'1%, C'EST MOI"? (It was her contribution to the Whitney Biennial this year and is available for free online - http://whitney.org/file_columns/0002/9848/andreafraser_1_2012whitneybiennial.pdf) Anyway, it does a great job explaining how the art world and its institutions benefit from and perpetuate income inequality, even exposing specific collectors and museum trustees whose wealth was built in questionable ways - basically, she says what I would like to say in a much more eloquent, properly researched, well-cited manner. Classic Andrea Fraser. So, just for a preview, here's a quote that I appreciated: "Any claim that we represent a progressive social force while our activities are directly subsidized by the engines of inequality can only contribute to the justification of that inequality - the (not so) new legitimization function of art museums. The only "alternative" today is to recognize our participation in that economy and confront it in a direct and immediate way in all of our institutions, including museums, and galleries, and publications. Despite the radical political rhetoric that abounds in the art world, censorship and self-censorship reign when it comes to confronting its economic conditions..." Go to war with that!

