

# THE CULTURES OF COLLECTING

*Edited by John Elsner and  
Roger Cardinal*

HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS  
CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

1994

First published in the United States of America  
in 1994 by Harvard University Press,  
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Published in Great Britain in 1994  
by Reaktion Books, London

Copyright © Reaktion Books Ltd, 1994

All rights reserved

Designed by Humphrey Stone  
Jacket designed by Ron Costley  
Photoset by Wilmaset Ltd, Birkenhead, Wirral  
Printed and bound in Great Britain  
by The Alden Press, Oxford

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 93-81-271

ISBN 0-674-17992-7

ISBN 0-674-17993-5 (pbk.)

The editors and publishers would like to thank  
Editions Gallimard for permission to publish a translation  
of Jean Baudrillard's 'Le système marginal', a chapter of  
*Le Système des objets* (Paris: © Editions Gallimard, 1968);  
and the University of Chicago Press for permission  
to publish a revised version of Naomi Schor's  
'*Cartes Postales: Representing Paris 1900*', which appeared  
in *Critical Inquiry*, xviii (Winter 1992), a journal  
published by the University of Chicago Press.

## Contents

	Photographic Acknowledgements	vi
	Notes on the Editors and Contributors	vii
	Introduction <i>John Elsner and Roger Cardinal</i>	i
1	The System of Collecting <i>Jean Baudrillard</i>	7
2	'Unless you do these crazy things . . .': <i>An Interview with Robert Opie</i>	25
3	Identity Parades <i>John Windsor</i>	49
4	Collecting and Collage-making: The Case of Kurt Schwitters <i>Roger Cardinal</i>	68
5	Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting <i>Mieke Bal</i>	97
6	Licensed Curiosity: Cook's Pacific Voyages <i>Nicholas Thomas</i>	116
7	From Treasury to Museum: The Collections of the Austrian Habsburgs <i>Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann</i>	137
8	A Collector's Model of Desire: The House and Museum of Sir John Soane <i>John Elsner</i>	155
9	Cabinets of Transgression: Renaissance Collections and the Incorporation of the New World <i>Anthony Alan Shelton</i>	177
10	Death and Life, in that Order, in the Works of Charles Willson Peale <i>Susan Stewart</i>	204
11	'Mille e tre': Freud and Collecting <i>John Forrester</i>	224
12	Collecting Paris <i>Naomi Schor</i>	252
	References	275
	Select Bibliography	303
	Index	305

around us, both cultural and natural, in all its unpredictability and contingent complexity. The narratives we have found to be most enlightening have not been those of the careers of collectors like Henry Clay Frick, J. Paul Getty or Charles Saatchi, for whom building a collection of things is inseparable from building up wealth and prestige. Instead we have been drawn to the less publicized stories of those less perfect collectors whose vocation sends them across the confines of the reasonable and the acceptable. These last – people like John Soane, Charles Willson Peale, Kurt Schwitters, Sigmund Freud and Robert Opie – exemplify a genuine exposure to existence: indeed their project, at times melancholy, even morbid, and perhaps ultimately tragic, often carries with it an intimation of the failure that is always on the cards once mortal desire reaches the limits of what can and cannot be done. Suddenly such collectors emerge alongside Noah, at the margin of the human adventure, that pivotal point where man finds himself rivalling God and teeters between mastery and madness.

## I

*The System of Collecting*

JEAN BAUDRILLARD

Among the various meanings of the French word *objet*, the Littré dictionary gives this: 'Anything which is the cause or subject of a passion. Figuratively and most typically: the loved object'.

It ought to be obvious that the objects that occupy our daily lives are in fact the objects of a passion, that of personal possession, whose quotient of invested affect is in no way inferior to that of any other variety of human passion. Indeed, this everyday passion often outstrips all the others, and sometimes reigns supreme in the absence of any rival. What is characteristic of this passion is that it is tempered, diffuse, and regulative: we can only guess at its fundamental role in keeping the lives of the individual subject or of the collectivity on an even footing, and in supporting our very project of survival. In this respect, the objects in 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.

## THE OBJECT DIVESTED OF ITS FUNCTION

The fact that I make use of a refrigerator in order to freeze things, means that the refrigerator is defined in terms of a practical transaction: it is not an object so much as a freezing mechanism. In this sense, I cannot be said to possess it. Possession 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*. In this sense, all objects that are possessed submit to the same *abstractive operation* and participate in a mutual relationship in so far as they each refer back to the subject. They thereby constitute themselves as a *system*, on the basis of which the subject seeks to piece together his world, his personal microcosm.

Thus any given object can have two functions: it can be utilized, or it can be possessed. The first function has to do with the subject's project of asserting practical control within the real world, the second with an enterprise of abstract mastery whereby the subject seeks to assert himself as an autonomous totality outside the world. The two functions are mutually exclusive. Ultimately, the strictly utilitarian object has a social status: think of a machine, for example. Conversely, the object pure and simple, divested of its function, abstracted from any practical context, takes on a strictly subjective status. Now its destiny is to be collected. Whereupon it ceases to be a carpet, a table, a compass, or a knick-knack, and instead turns into an 'object' or a 'piece'. Typically, a collector will refer to 'a lovely piece', rather than a lovely carving. Once the object stops being defined by its function, its meaning is entirely up to the subject. The result is that all objects in a collection become equivalent, thanks to that process of passionate abstraction we call possession. Further, a single object can never be enough: invariably there will be a whole succession of objects, and, at the extreme, a total set marking the accomplishment of a mission. This is why the possession of an object of whatever kind is always both satisfying and frustrating: the notion of there being a set of objects to which it belongs lends the object an extension beyond itself and upsets its solitary status. Something similar can be said to operate in the sexual sphere: for if it is true that the amorous impulse is directed at the singularity of a given being, the impulse of physical possession, as such, can only be satisfied by a string of objects, or by the repetition of the same object, or by the superimposition of all objects of desire. A more or less complex pattern of connections and correlations is vital if the individual object is to achieve a degree of abstraction sufficient for it to be recuperated by the subject within that experience of embodied abstraction known as the sense of possession.

The product of this way of dealing with objects is, of course, the collection. Our everyday environment itself remains an ambiguous territory, for, in ordinary life, function is constantly superseded by the subjective factor, as acts of possession mingle with acts of usage, in a process that always falls short of total integration. On the other hand, the collection offers us a paradigm of perfection, for this is where the passionate enterprise of possession can achieve its ambitions, within a space where the everyday prose of the object-world modulates into poetry, to institute an unconscious and triumphant discourse.

## THE LOVED OBJECT

'The taste for collecting', suggests Maurice Rheims, 'is like a game played with utter passion'.<sup>1</sup> For the child, collecting represents the most rudimentary way to exercise control over the outer world: by laying things out, grouping them, handling them. The active phase of collecting seems to occur between the ages of seven and twelve, during the period of latency prior to puberty. With the onset of puberty, the collecting impulse tends to disappear, though occasionally it resurfaces after a very short interval. Later on, it is men in their forties who seem most prone to the passion. In short, a correlation with sexuality can generally be demonstrated, so that the activity of collecting may be seen as a powerful mechanism of compensation during critical phases in a person's sexual development. Invariably it runs counter to active genital sexuality, though it should not be seen as a pure and simple substitute thereof, but rather a regression to the anal stage, manifested in such behaviour patterns as accumulation, ordering, aggressive retention and so forth. The practice of collecting is not equivalent to a sexual practice, in so far as it does not seek to still a desire (as does fetishism). None the less, it can bring about a reactive satisfaction that is every bit as intense. In which case, the object in question should undoubtedly be seen as a 'loved object'. As Rheims observes, 'The passion for an object leads to its being construed as God's special handiwork: the collector of porcelain eggs will imagine that God never made a more beautiful nor rarer form, and that He created it purely for the delight of porcelain egg collectors . . .'.<sup>2</sup> Such enthusiasts will insist that they are 'crazy about this object', and without exception, even in circumstances where no fetishistic perversion is involved, they will maintain about their collection an aura of the clandestine, of confinement, secrecy and dissimulation, all of which give rise to the unmistakable impression of a guilty relationship. The boundless passion invested in the game is what lends this regressive behaviour its sublimity, and reinforces the opinion that an individual who is not some sort of collector can only be a cretin or hopelessly sub-human.<sup>3</sup>

Hence the collector partakes of the sublime not by virtue of the types of things he collects (for these will vary, according to his age, his profession, his social milieu), but by virtue of his fanaticism. This fanaticism is always identical, whether in the case of the rich man specializing in Persian miniatures, or of the pauper who hoards matchboxes. This being so, the distinction one might be tempted to make between the collector as

connoisseur – one who adores objects because of their beguiling singularity and differentness – and the straightforward collector, whose passion is to fit his acquisitions into a set or series, breaks down. In either case, pleasure springs from the fact that possession relies, on the one hand, upon the absolute singularity of each item – which means that it is equivalent to a human being, and eventually the subject himself – and, on the other, upon the possibility of envisaging a set or series of like items, in which is implied a prospect of limitless substitution and play. The quintessence of the collection is qualitative, while its material organization is quantitative. For if possession entails a certain intimate delirium as one fondles and scrutinizes the privileged piece, it equally involves activities of seeking out, categorizing, gathering and disposing. Actually, there is a strong whiff of the harem about all this, in the sense that the whole charm of the harem lies in its being at once a series bounded by intimacy (with always a privileged final term) and an intimacy bounded by seriality.

Surrounded by the objects he possesses, the collector is pre-eminently the sultan of a secret seraglio. Ordinary human relationships, which are the site of the unique and the conflictual, never permit such a fusion of absolute singularity and indefinite seriality. This explains why ordinary relationships are such a continual source of anxiety: while the realm of objects, on the other hand, being the realm of successive and homologous terms, offers security. Of course it achieves this at the price of a piece of sleight-of-hand involving abstraction and regression, but who cares? As Rheims puts it, 'for the collector, the object is a sort of docile dog which receives caresses and returns them in its own way; or rather, reflects them like a mirror constructed in such a way as to throw back images not of the real but of the desirable'.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE PERFECT PET

The image of the pet dog is exactly right, for pets are a category midway between persons and objects. Dogs, cats, birds, the tortoise or the canary . . . , the poignant devotion to such creatures points to a failure to establish normal human relationships and to the installation of a narcissistic territory – the home – wherein the subjectivity can fulfil itself without let or hindrance. Let us observe in passing that pets are never sexually distinct (indeed they are occasionally castrated for domestic purposes): although alive, they are as sexually neutral as any inert object. Indeed this is the price one has to pay if they are to be emotionally comforting, given that castration, real or symbolic, is what allows them

to play, on their owner's behalf, the role of regulating castration anxiety, a role that is also pre-eminently that of the objects which surround us. It can be said that the object is itself the perfect pet. It represents the one 'being' whose qualities extend my person rather than confine it. In their plurality, objects are the sole things in existence with which it is truly possible to co-exist, in so far as their differences do not set them at odds with one another, as is the case with living beings. Instead they incline obediently towards myself, to be smoothly inventorized within my consciousness. The object is that which allows itself to be simultaneously 'personalized' and catalogued. And there is never a hint of exclusivity about such subjective inventorizing: any thing can be possessed, invested in, or, in terms of collecting, arranged, sorted and classified. The object thus emerges as the ideal 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 only of what is desirable. In short, it is like a dog reduced to the single aspect of fidelity. I am able to gaze on it without its gazing back at me. *This is why one invests in objects all that one finds impossible to invest in human relationships.* This is why man so quickly seeks out the company of objects when he needs to recuperate. But we should not be fooled by such talk of recuperation, nor by all that sentimental literature that celebrates inanimate objects. We cannot but see this reflex of retreat as a regression; this sort of passion is an escapist one. No doubt objects do play a regulative role in everyday life, in so far as within them all kinds of neuroses are neutralized, all kinds of tensions and frustrated energies grounded and calmed. Indeed, this is what lends them their 'spiritual' quality; this is what entitles us to speak of them as 'our very own'. Yet this is equally what turns them into the site of a tenacious myth, the ideal site of a neurotic equilibrium.

#### A SERIAL GAME

Of course, this recourse to objects looks superficial: how could consciousness be so easily fooled? But here is where subjectivity demonstrates its cleverness. The recourse to the possessed object is never superficial: it is always premised on the object's absolute singularity. Not in real terms: for while the appropriation of a 'rare' or 'unique' object is obviously the perfect culmination of the impulse to possess, it has to be recognized that one can never find absolute proof in the real world that a given object is indeed unique. On the other hand, subjectivity is entirely capable of working things to its advantage without such proof. It is true that one peculiarity of the object, its exchange value,

is governed by cultural and social criteria. And yet its absolute singularity as an object depends entirely upon the fact that it is *I* who possess it – which, in turn, allows me to recognize myself in it as an absolutely singular being. This is of course a colossal tautology, yet it never fails to hasten the intensity with which we turn to objects, and the ridiculous facility with which they afford us a glorious, if illusory, gratification. (True, there will always be disappointment in store, given the tautological nature of the system.) But there is more: while the same sort of closed circuit can also be said to regulate human relationships (albeit with less facility), there are things inconceivable in the intersubjective encounter that become quite feasible here. The singular object never impedes the process of narcissistic projection, which ranges over an indefinite number of objects: on the contrary, it encourages such multiplication, thus associating itself with a mechanism whereby the image of the self is extended to the very limits of the collection. Here, indeed, lies the whole miracle of collecting. For it is invariably *oneself* that one collects.

We are now in a better position to appreciate the structure of the system of possession: a given collection is made up of a succession of terms, but the final term must always be the person of the collector. In reciprocal fashion, the person of the collector is only constituted as such by dint of substituting itself for every successive term in the collecting process. We shall see that there is, at the sociological level, an exact congruity of structure with the system of the series or the paradigmatic chain. For we shall find that the collection or the series is what underpins the possession of the object, which is to say, the reciprocal integration of object with person.<sup>5</sup>

#### FROM QUANTITY TO QUALITY: THE UNIQUE OBJECT

The weakness of this hypothesis might seem to be the decisiveness with which the passionate collector reaches out for a given piece. But it should be clear that the apparently unique object is, precisely, no more than the final term embodying all previous terms of a like kind, the paramount term of an entire set (whether virtual, invisible or implicit, is of no consequence). In short, the unique object epitomizes the set to which it belongs.

In one of those literary portraits in which La Bruyère demonstrates how curiosity can be the most extravagant of passions, we meet a collector of engravings who voices the complaint: 'I suffer from an affliction I cannot ignore, and it will oblige me to give up collecting engravings for the rest of my days. I now possess the whole of Jacques

Callot, apart from just one piece, which is, in truth, not even one of his better productions. On the contrary, it is one of his weakest, and yet it is the one I must have to round off Callot. For twenty years I have striven to lay my hands on that engraving, and now I've got to the point where I've given up all hope. It's so cruel!' Here we may discern, in strictly arithmetical terms, an equation between the entire set minus one item, and the single item missing from that set.<sup>6</sup> This last, for lack of which the set at large remains meaningless, is a symbolic summation thereof: it is thereby imbued with a strange quality, the very quintessence, so to speak, of the entire preceding cavalcade of quantities. Certainly, as an object, it is perceived as unique, given its absolute position at the end of the series, which ensures its illusory air of embodying a special finality. This is not so remarkable, we might think; yet it is worth noting how quality is in fact activated by quantity, given that the value concentrated within this single signifier is one which spreads along the entire run of intermediary signifieds making up the paradigmatic chain. Here we find what might be called the symbolism of the object, in the etymological sense (*symbolein*) whereby a chain of significations is subsumed in a single one of its terms. The unique object is indeed a symbol, not of some external factor or quality, but essentially of the entire series of objects of which it constitutes the final term (while simultaneously being a symbol of the person who owns it).

La Bruyère's example allows us to draw out another law, which is that an object only acquires its exceptional value *by dint of being absent*. It is not just a matter of the glamour of a mirage. What we have begun to suspect is that *the collection is never really initiated in order to be completed*. Might it not be that the missing item in the collection is in fact an indispensable and positive part of the whole, in so far as this lack is the basis of the subject's ability to grasp himself in objective terms? Whereas the acquisition of the final item would in effect denote the death of the subject, the absence of this item still allows him the possibility of simulating his death by envisaging it in an object, thereby warding off its menace. This gap in the collection may be experienced as painful, but it is equally that rupture through which is signified a definitive elision of the real. We should therefore congratulate La Bruyère's collector for not having tracked down his last Callot, since he would otherwise have ceased to be the living and passionate individual he still was! It could indeed be added that the point where a collection closes in on itself and ceases to be oriented towards an unfilled gap is the point where madness begins.

Another anecdote, relayed by Rheims, confirms this way of seeing things. A bibliophile with a magnificent collection of unique books learns one day that a bookseller in New York has placed on sale an item identical to one of the volumes he owns. He takes the plane, purchases the book, and then arranges to have a notary public present when he sets fire to the second copy, in order to ensure a formal attestation as to its destruction. Whereupon he slips the attestation inside the first volume and retires happily to bed. Does this act represent the annulment of a series? Only apparently: in fact, the unique volume owes its value to all virtual volumes, and the bibliophile, in destroying the second copy, merely re-establishes the perfection of a symbol that had been compromised. Whether denied, forgotten, destroyed or virtual, the *series* always remains operative. As much in the humblest of everyday objects as in the loftiest of rarities, it is the indispensable nourishment of ownership and the passionate game of possession. Without the series, there would be no possibility of playing the game, hence no possibility of ownership, and, strictly speaking, no more object either. Indeed the truly unique object – absolute, entirely without antecedent, incapable of being integrated into any sort of set – is unthinkable. It exists no more than does a pure sound. And just as in music the harmonic series exists to help identify the particularity of the note we hear, so do the paradigmatic series or sets implicit in collecting, in their greater or lesser complexity, promote the symbolic propensity of objects, at the same time as they prepare them for the human processes of possession and play.

#### OBJECTS AND HABITS: THE WRIST-WATCH

Any object may be said to float midway between a practical specification or function, which can be likened to its manifest discourse, and its absorption within a collection or set, where it enters a latent and repetitive discourse, the most elementary and tenacious of discourses. This discursive object-system is homologous to the one which informs our everyday habits.<sup>7</sup>

Now, habit has to do with repetition, and also with discontinuity (rather than continuity, as common usage might suggest). It is through our cutting up of time into those patterns we call 'habits' that we resolve the potential threat of time's inexorable continuity, and evade the implacable singularity of events. Likewise, it is through their discontinuous integration within sets and series that we truly dispose of our objects, and thus truly come to possess them. Here we confront the very discourse of subjectivity, of which objects represent one of the most

privileged registers – interposing, in that space between the irreversible flux of existence and our own selves, a screen that is discontinuous, classifiable, reversible, as repetitive as one could wish, a fringe of the world that remains docile in our physical or mental grip, and thus wards off all anxiety. Not only do objects help us master the world, by virtue of their being inserted into practical sets, they also help us, *by virtue of their being inserted into mental sets*, to establish dominion over time, interrupting its continuous flow and classifying its parts in the same way that we classify habits, and insisting that it submit to the same constraints of association that inform the way we set things out in space.

The wrist-watch is an excellent example of this sort of discontinuous and 'habit-like' functioning.<sup>8</sup> It epitomizes the dualism inherent in the way we deal with objects. On one level, the wrist-watch keeps us informed about objective time: chronometric exactitude being, of course, a factor indissociable from material constraints, social intercourse, and death. Yet, all the while it makes us submit to this temporal tyranny, the wrist-watch, as an object, also helps us to make time our own. Just as the car 'eats up' miles, so the wrist-watch-as-object eats up time.<sup>9</sup> By treating time as a substance that can be cut up, it turns it into an object of consumption. Time ceases to be the perilous dimension of praxis and becomes a domesticated quantity. Not only does civilized man know what o'clock it is, but also, thanks to an object which is his and his alone, he can now 'possess' time, enforcing its ceaseless registration within his presence. This fact has become part and parcel of the experience of modern man, his very security. Time is no longer situated back at home, within the beating heart of the grandfather clock, but is now, through the wrist-watch, registered throughout the day, with the same organic satisfaction as the throb of an artery. Thanks to the wrist-watch, time allows me full latitude to objectify myself, on the same footing as a domestic possession. In truth, any kind of object might support this analysis of the recuperation of the dimension of objective constraint: because of its direct bearing upon time, the wrist-watch is simply the most clear-cut example.

#### OBJECTS AND TEMPORALITY: THE CONTROLLED CYCLE

The problematic of temporality is fundamental to the collecting process. As Rheims observes, 'a phenomenon often associated with the passion of collecting is the loss of all sense of the present'.<sup>10</sup> Yet are we speaking merely of nostalgic escapism? A collector who elects to identify with Louis XVI, down to the very legs of his armchair, or who is infatuated

with sixteenth-century snuffboxes, is naturally at odds with the present day by virtue of this historical alignment. However, in this context, such an alignment is a secondary issue, for what really matters is the systematic of the collection as it is experienced. In fact the profound power exerted by collected objects derives not from their singularity nor their distinct historicity. It is not because of these that we see the time of the collection as diverging from real time, but rather because *the setting-up of a collection itself displaces real time*. Doubtless this is the fundamental project of all collecting – to translate real time into the dimensions of a system. Taste, curiosity, prestige, social intercourse, all of these may draw the collector into a wider sphere of relationships (though never going beyond a circle of initiates): yet collecting remains first and foremost, and in the true sense, a *pastime*. For collecting simply abolishes time. Or rather: by establishing a fixed repertory of temporal references that can be replayed at will, in reverse order if need be, collecting represents the perpetual fresh beginning of a controlled cycle, thanks to which, starting out from any term he chooses and confident of returning to it, man can indulge in the great game of birth and death.

This explains why it is that to be surrounded by our personal possessions – the collector amid his private collection being the extreme example – is a dimension of existence as essential to us as it is imaginary. It means every bit as much as our dreams. It has been said that if, in an experiment, one were to prevent a person from dreaming, severe psychological disturbances would rapidly ensue. It is equally certain that if a person were deprived of the possibility of escaping-and-regressing within the game of possession, if that person were prevented from marshalling 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 signalled in the moment of our birth. It is this irreversibility, this relentless passage from birth to death, that objects help us to resolve.

Naturally enough, such equilibrium can only be neurotic, just as the panic reaction is regressive: for we have to concede that time is indeed objectively irreversible, and that even those objects whose function is to shield us from this fact must in due course be snatched away by time. And naturally enough, the strategy of discontinuous defence at the level of objects cannot be anything less than a constant paradox, given that the world and mankind form a continuum. All the same, can one really speak of normality or anomaly here? To seek refuge within a synchronic haven

might be seen as a denial of reality and a form of escapism, if it is indeed thought that objects are being invested with what 'ought' instead to be invested in human relationships. And yet the immense power of objects to regulate our lives depends on just this option. In our era of faltering religious and ideological authorities, they are by way of becoming the consolation of consolations, an everyday myth capable of absorbing all our anxieties about time and death.

We should dismiss the cliché that man survives through his possessions. Creating a safe haven has really nothing to do with securing immortality, perpetuity or some sort of afterlife by way of a *mirror-object* (man has never really maintained any serious belief in this), but is a far more complex game which involves the 'recycling' of birth and death within *an object-system*. What man wants from objects is not the assurance that he can somehow outlive himself, but *the sense that from now on he can live out his life uninterruptedly and in a cyclical mode, and thereby symbolically transcend the realities of an existence before whose irreversibility and contingency he remains powerless*.

Here we find ourselves not so far away from that ball which, in Freud's analysis, the child makes vanish and re-appear in order to experience the alternating absence and presence of its mother – *fort / da / fort / da* – the anguish of lack being dispelled by the sustained cycle of re-appearances of the ball. Here we can appreciate the symbolic resonances of serial play. Indeed we might be prompted to say that *the 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. That is to say, by dint of introjecting the object within an enactment of mourning – in other words, by integrating it within a series based on the repeated cyclical game of making it absent and then recalling it from out of that absence – we reach an accommodation with the anguish-laden fact of lack, of literal death. Henceforth, in our daily lives, we will continue to enact this mourning for our own person through the intercession of objects, and this allows us, albeit regressively, to live out our lives. The man who collects things may already be dead, yet he manages literally to outlive himself through his collection, which, originating within this life, recapitulates him indefinitely beyond the point of death *by absorbing death itself into the series and the cycle*. In this respect, it would make sense once more to invoke the analogy with dreams: to the extent that each object is, in terms of its function (be it practical, cultural or social), the mediation of a *wish*, it constitutes equally, as one term among others within that systematic game we have just described, the articulation of a



*desire*. And this last is that which, on the indefinite chain of signifiers, brings about the recapitulation or indefinite substitution of oneself across the moment of death and beyond. It is by a not dissimilar compromise that, just as the function of dreams is to ensure the continuity of sleep, objects ensure the continuity of life.<sup>11</sup>

#### THE OBJECT CONFINED: THE JEALOUSY SYSTEM

Pursuing regression to its final stage, the passion for objects climaxes in pure jealousy. Here 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. The jealousy complex, symptomatic of the passion of collecting at its most fanatical, can exert a proportionate influence over the reflex of ownership, even at the most innocent level. What now comes into play is a powerful anal-sadistic impulse that tends to confine beauty in order to savour it in isolation: this sexually perverse pattern of behaviour is a widespread feature of object relations.

What does the object come to represent when thus isolated? (Its objective value is secondary, for it is the fact of its confinement that constitutes its charm.) If it is true that one is hardly inclined to lend another person one's car, one's pen, one's wife, this is because these objects are, within the jealousy system, the narcissistic equivalents of oneself: and were such an object to be lost or damaged, this would mean symbolic castration. When all is said and done, one never lends out one's phallus. That which the jealous person commandeers and guards in close proximity is, beneath the disguise of an object, nothing less than his own libido, which he endeavours to neutralize within the system of confinement – the selfsame system thanks to which the collection deflects the menace of death. The jealous owner castrates himself through fear of his own sexuality; or rather he enacts a symbolic castration – the confinement of the object – in order to dispel the fear of literal castration.<sup>12</sup> It is this desperate endeavour that gives rise to the awful pleasures of jealousy. One is always jealous of oneself. It is always oneself that one watches over like a hawk. And it is always in oneself that one takes pleasure.

Clearly this pleasure steeped in jealousy stands in stark contrast to the background of utter disappointment that accompanies it, since regressive behaviour, however concerted, can never completely cancel out one's awareness of its inadequacy in the face of the real world. And so it is with the collection: its sovereignty is a fragile one, and the superior authority of the real world lurks behind it as a constant menace. Even so, this very sense of disappointment can be seen to be part and parcel of the system.

For it is the fact of being disappointed, quite as much as being satisfied, that activates the system: this is because disappointment is never focused on the world, but always on the next term in the series, so that disappointment and satisfaction emerge as the stages of a cyclical process. It is this built-in disappointment that often makes the system seem so frenzied and neurotic. The series tends to rotate ever faster upon itself, with the result that differences get worn away with the acceleration of the mechanism of substitution. Then it is that the system may rush headlong towards its own collapse, equivalent to the self-destruction of the subject. Rheims cites examples of collections that are violently 'done to death' in this way, in a kind of suicide reflecting the impossibility of ever circumventing death itself. Within the jealousy system, it is not at all uncommon for the subject to end up destroying the very object or being he has confined, driven by his sense of powerlessness at ever being able to withstand the encroachments of the world and of his own sexuality. This is the logical and highly irrational outcome of the jealousy system.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE OBJECT DESTRUCTURED: THE SYSTEM OF PERVERSION

The efficacy of this mechanism of possession is in direct ratio to its regressiveness. And this regressiveness echoes the modalities of perversion itself. If it is true that, in terms of object choices, perversion manifests itself most classically in the form of fetishism, we can hardly overlook the fact that, throughout the system, the passion for, and possession of, an object are conditioned by comparable purposes and modalities, and can indeed be seen as what I would call a *discreet variety of sexual perversion*. Indeed, just as possession is coloured by the discontinuity of the series (be it real or virtual) and by the targeting of just one privileged term, so sexual perversion consists in the inability to grasp the partner, the supposed object of desire, as that singular totality we call a person. Instead, it is only able to operate discontinuously, reducing the partner to an abstract set made up of the various erotic parts of its anatomy, and then exercising a projective fixation on a single item. Whereupon a given woman stops being a woman and becomes no more than a vagina, a couple of breasts, a belly, a pair of thighs, a voice, a face – according to preference.<sup>14</sup> Henceforth she is reduced to a set whose separate signifying elements are one by one ticked off by desire, and whose true signified is no longer the beloved, but the subject himself. For it is the subject, the epitome of narcissistic self-engrossment, who collects and eroticizes his own being, evading the amorous embrace to create a closed dialogue with himself.

This mechanism is neatly illustrated in the opening shots of Jean-Luc Godard's film *Le Mépris*, where a sequence of 'naked' images is accompanied by the following dialogue:

'How do you like my feet?' the woman asks. [Be it noted that, throughout the whole scene, she inspects herself, detail by detail, in a mirror. This is hardly innocent, for what she is doing is to valorize herself as a set of separate, ready-framed images.]

'I love your feet.'

'How do you like my legs?'

'I love your legs.'

'And my thighs?'

'Oh yes,' he repeats, 'I love them.'

[And so on, from bottom to top, until they have reached her hair.]

'So, you must love me all over?'

'Oh yes, all over.'

'Me too, Paul', she says [as if to sum up the situation].

Conceivably the film-makers meant to convey the algebraic brilliance of a passion entirely undisguised. It remains the case, nevertheless, that this absurd ticking-off of the desirable is fundamentally inhuman. Reduced to a set of anatomical parts, the woman becomes a pure object, and is subsumed within the series of all object-women, of which she is but a single term among hundreds. Within the logic of such a system, the only conceivable room for manoeuvre is the game of substitution. And this we have seen to be crucial to the fulfilment of the passion of collecting.

This kind of step-by-step destructuring of the object within a perverse, auto-erotic system is less likely to occur within a true amorous relationship because of the partner's integrity as a living being.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, it is typical of all cases where there is an orientation toward non-human objects, and especially fabricated objects of sufficient complexity to lend themselves to mental fragmentation. I might, for instance, refer to the car I drive in terms of 'my brakes', 'my steering-wheel', 'my bonnet'. And no-one thinks twice about saying 'I braked', 'I changed gear', 'I drove off'. Each component, each mechanical function can be referred back to the subject in the modality of possession. This is not to be seen as an activity consolidating the social persona, but as an activity of self-projection. It is located not within the order of having, but within the order of being. If we turn to the example of the horse, historically one of man's most astonishing instruments of power and transcendence, we find that this kind of assimilation fails to work. This is because the horse is simply not made out of component parts, and above all because it has a sex. I might refer to 'my horse' or 'my lover', but that is as far as the

possessive denomination can go. That which has a sex is resistant to fragmented projection, and thus to that mode of passionate appropriation that we have seen to be a species of auto-eroticism and, at the extreme, a perversion.<sup>16</sup> Faced by a living creature, I might say *my*, but I can never say *I* in the way I do when symbolically appropriating the functions and components of the car. It is impossible to regress any further. One could list a whole clutch of symbolic meanings that have been invested in the horse (it represents headlong sexual lust, it embodies the wisdom of the centaur; its head is a terrifying phantasm linked to the image of the Father, while its composure reflects the strength of Chiron seen as protector and teacher). Yet the horse can never yield to such simplified, narcissistic, primitive and infantile forms of self-projection as can the component parts of the car (reflecting an almost delirious analogy with the dissociated components and functions of the human body). If there is a symbolic dynamic to the horse, it operates precisely because it is impossible to enumerate each of the horse's parts and functions; hence it is equally impossible to exhaust the relationship by way of an auto-erotic 'discourse' focused on isolated elements.

This regressive reduction to component parts implies a particular *modus operandi* or method on the part of the subject, concentrated within the sphere of the part-object. Thus the woman translated into a syntagm of separate erogenous zones is assigned the single function of giving pleasure, to which corresponds the erotic method. This is of course a method that seeks to objectify and to ritualize, so as to camouflage the anxieties of the personal relationship and at the same time establish a valid alibi (gestural and plausible) while the system of perversion runs its phantasmatic course. It can be argued that every mental system is 'indebted' to reality in that it requires some concession, some technical 'ratification' or pretext. Thus the accelerator in the phrase 'I accelerated', the headlamp in the phrase 'my headlamp', or the entire car in the phrase 'my car', represent the material technical underpinning of that whole enterprise of narcissistic recuperation that seeks to ignore materiality. The same holds for the erotic method, deliberately pursued: be it noted that, at this level, we are no longer dealing with the genital order that abuts upon reality and pleasure, but with the anal-regressive order of the serial system, for which erotic activity serves only as a cover.

It is obvious that such a method is far from being consistently 'objective'. It can be objective if it is socialized, or absorbed within a technology, or when it informs new structures. But when it operates within the realm of the everyday, it offers a space ever more conducive to

regressive fantasy, given that the potential for destructuring is always so close at hand. When assembled and fitted together, the components of a technical object embody a coherence. Yet the structure betrays its fragility once confronted by the mind: from the outside it may cohere by virtue of its function, but for the *psyche* it is a form open to manipulation. Although the components of a structure may have been organized as a hierarchy, at any moment they can fall apart and lapse indiscriminately into a paradigmatic system within which the subject can rehearse a private repertory of meanings. The object is *a priori* lacking in cohesion; it is easily deconstructed by thought. All the more so where the object (and especially the technological object) is no longer associated, as in the past, with a human gesture, a human dynamic. If it is true that the car is superior to the horse as an object of narcissistic manipulation, it is largely because the control one exercises over a horse is muscular and rhythmical, and involves physically balancing oneself, whereas one's control of a car is simplified, functional and abstract.

#### REAL MOTIVATION AND SERIAL MOTIVATION

Throughout this analysis, we have worked on the assumption that it is not important what sorts of objects are being collected: we have concentrated on the systematic and ignored the thematic aspect. Even so, it is clear that one does not collect paintings by Old Masters in the same spirit that one collects cigar-bands. It should be stressed that the concept of collecting (from the Latin *colligere*, to select and assemble) is distinct from that of accumulating. The latter – the piling up of old papers, the stockpiling of items of food – is an inferior stage of collecting, and lies midway between oral introjection and anal retention. The next stage is that of the serial accumulation of identical objects. Collecting proper emerges at first with an orientation to the cultural: it aspires to discriminate *between* objects, privileging those which have some exchange value or which are also 'objects' of conservation, of commerce, of social ritual, of display – possibly which are even a source of profit. Such objects are always associated with human projects. While ceaselessly referring to one another, they admit within their orbit the external dimension of social and human intercourse.

On the other hand, even in cases where external motivation remains strong, the collection can never exist without an internal systematic (at the very least it will create a compromise between the two). For although the collection may speak to other people, it is always first and foremost a discourse directed toward oneself. The serial aspect of its motivation is

evident in all cases. Research has shown that customers who invest in publishers' 'collections' (such as the paperback series *10/18* or *Que sais-je?*) get so carried away that they continue to acquire titles which hold no interest for them. A book's distinctive position within the series is sufficient to create a formal interest where no intrinsic interest exists. What motivates the purchase is the pure imperative of association. A similar behaviour pattern would be that of the reader who cannot settle down to read unless he is surrounded by his entire library of books: at which point the specificity of a given text tends to evaporate. There is yet another stage when it becomes clear that it is not the book that matters so much as the moment when it is safely returned to its proper place on the library shelf. Conversely, the customer devoted to a series will find it hard to 'pick up the thread' if he once drops it: he will not even bother to buy titles in which he has a genuine interest. These observations are enough to enable us to distinguish quite categorically between the two types of motivation: each is perfectly distinct, and they coexist only by virtue of a compromise, and with a pronounced tendency, created by inertia, for serial motivation to take precedence over 'real' or dialectical motivation in the identification of preferences.<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding, it can happen that pure collecting intersects with genuine interest. Someone who starts out systematically tracking down all the titles on the *Que sais-je?* list will frequently end up orienting his book collection towards a theme: music, say, or sociology. A certain quantitative threshold in one's accumulation allows one to envisage the possibility of selectivity. But there is no absolute rule. It is possible to collect Old Master paintings or cheese labels with the same regressive fanaticism; on the other hand, stamp collecting among children is invariably associated with swapping and therefore social contact. So that one can never declare absolutely that because a given collection happens to have a marked thematic complexity, then this is proof that it affords authentic access to the real world. At most, such complexity can offer a clue or a presumption.

What makes a collection transcend mere accumulation is not only the fact of its being culturally complex, but the fact of its incompleteness, the fact that it *lacks* something. Lack always means lack of something unequivocally defined: one needs such and such an absent object. And this exigency, modulating into the quest and the impassioned appeal to other people,<sup>18</sup> is enough to interrupt that deadly hypnotic allure of the collection to which the subject otherwise falls prey. A television programme on the topic of collecting illustrated this point rather well: as each collector

presented his collection to the public, he never failed to mention the very specific 'item' he didn't have, as if soliciting his audience to procure it for him. Hence the object is capable of shifting over into a social discourse. Yet at the same time one has to recognize that *this shift is typically engineered through the absence of the object rather than its presence.*

#### A DISCOURSE ORIENTED TOWARD ONESELF

It remains characteristic of the collection that there comes a point when the self-absorption of the system is interrupted and the collection is enrolled within some external project or exigency (whether associated with prestige, culture or commerce makes no odds, only assuming that the object ends up confronting one man with another, thereby constituting itself as message). On the other hand, whatever the orientation of a collection, it will always embody an irreducible element of independence from the world. It is because he feels himself alienated or lost within a social discourse whose rules he cannot fathom that the collector is driven to construct an alternative discourse that is for him entirely amenable, in so far as he is the one who dictates its signifiers – the ultimate signified being, in the final analysis, none other than himself. Yet in this endeavour he is condemned to failure: in imagining he can do without the social discourse, he fails to appreciate the simple fact that he is transposing its open, objective discontinuity into a closed, subjective discontinuity, such that the idiom he invents forfeits all value for others. This is why withdrawal into an all-encompassing object system is synonymous with loneliness: it is impervious to communication from others, and it lacks communicability. Indeed we are bound to ask: can objects ever institute themselves as a viable language? Can they ever be fashioned into a discourse oriented otherwise than toward oneself?

In practice, the collector is unlikely to turn into an irremediable maniac, precisely because he collects objects that, one way or another, prevent him regressing toward total abstraction or psychological delirium. By the same token, the discourse voiced through his collection can never rise above a certain level of indigence and infantilism. The process of collecting is necessarily recurrent and finite; its very constituents – being objects – are too concrete, too discontinuous for it to be capable of articulating itself as a real dialectical structure.<sup>19</sup> If it is true that 'he who collects nothing must be a cretin', he who does collect can never entirely shake off an air of impoverishment and depleted humanity.

*Translated by Roger Cardinal*

## 2

### 'Unless you do these crazy things . . .'

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT OPIE

*John Elsner and Roger Cardinal visited the collector Robert Opie at his home in Ealing, west London, on 3 August 1993. Opie lives in a terraced house surrounded by the fruits of a lifetime's dedication to collecting. Despite the removal of a large proportion of its contents to Gloucester in 1984, where Opie founded the Museum of Advertising and Packaging, the house remains the true locus of his collection, with boxes, tins, bottles, trade signs, books and other objects occupying almost every available inch of living space.*

*Q. We know that your parents, Peter and Iona Opie, studied the lore of schoolchildren. Were they not also collectors?*

*Opie:* Yes, my father built up an outstanding private collection of children's books, and after his death it went to the Bodleian Library, along with his private papers. My father was also interested in the artefacts we live amongst, particularly relating to children . . .

*Toys and games . . . ?*

Toys and games and general ephemera. He did actually save very small amounts of packaging – microscopic amounts compared to what I have now. Literally a couple of boxes of oddments, amongst them an early frozen food-packet.

*With the food inside?*

Without the food inside, thankfully; that's the reason it survived! It was a Findus packet showing the change from their being called fish-sticks to fishfingers. He was aware that these things were transient, so part of that was instilled in my upbringing.