A Visit
The Artist as Collector

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It is nothing out of the ordinary for an artist to have a collection of works by fellow artists. It is unusual, though, for an artist to develop this activity with an almost fetishistic perseverance. I believe that this is the case with Nikos Alexiou. For a long time now, I have been observing the way he multiplies and reorganizes his extraordinary collection of works of modern and contemporary art among his places of residence. From his apartment on Spyrou Mercouri Street to the one on Xenokratous Street, both in Athens, his activity as a collector is revealed as one of dwelling or residence, tying in with the patient obsession with classification characterizing the spaces used by this artist.
In this case, too, *regular* classification (names – recorded in alphabetical order –, dates, etc.) is an effort to make up for the lack of *rules* in this collection, which is "governed by a dialectic tension between the two extremes of disorder and order". Clearly, it is precisely in this area that any sort of order resembles a "suspended situation", pending and imminent.
I always find it difficult to walk through the interior of Alexiou's dark and overly saturated spaces, where he hoards and classifies all manner of materials, microscopic remains of various constructions, print-outs, books, folded bedspreads, handmade items of all kinds, works of art or shreds thereof, covering sides of the walls, the ceiling, the alcoves and part of the floor, as if they were engaged in a conversation with those acquisitions in his collection which he is always proud to present.
A feeling of artistic solidarity is the first notion one is bound to succumb to. But the fascinated visitor will sense that he is being enveloped by an atmosphere of secrecy, or, if you will, a *personalized haze*, which cultivates intricate stratifications and a feeling of Mystery. The architect Dimitris Pikionis insisted that we maintain the "dim light, which, as Rodin liked to say, is what makes all plastic art come alive". "Dim light" is the light capable of making plaster look like human skin and the space surrounding it like a painting, hence sculpted, like a "work of plastic art" in its own right.
Alexiou is well aware of this special principle, which characterizes the entire hand-wrought imagination and fragile atmosphere of his installations. It is difficult to distinguish differences between these fluctuating residential scenes, his personal collection and his own work. In all three cases, the issue is the creation of spiritual activity. Their true theme, though, is that of *patchwork* and *mélange*, or, to use an ancient Greek term, of the *kykeon*, the ancient drink used at the climax of the Eleusinian Mysteries, the mixing ("*kykan*") of which, according to Heraclitus, was what lent it unity and homogeneity. Hence, nothing is meant to remain static, unshaken, immovable. Based on this meaning, his actual *oeuvre* is the interior of his homes, which he refers to as the epitome of the act of collecting: "a way for a person to live in the midst of chaos, and, temporarily, to make sense of it".
In the "innermost soul" of the artist - collector "live ethereal spirits", as Benjamin calls them, imposing themselves in such a way that he believes that "possession is the deepest of all relations one can have to objects: not that they will come alive within him; on the contrary, it is he who resides in them". This is why the artist – collector lives by using classified material rather than construction material, microscopic remains of various constructions, print-outs, books, handmade items or works of art.

Under these circumstances, the clutter and jumble of *surrounding works* by the artist and collector resemble a crypt, with its repositories of pain and content, conch-shaped alcoves.
Sustaining this type of relation to collecting can take a turn for the dangerous only if it becomes petrified, if it begins to close in around the collector, “as if it were a shell which no longer gives off the sound of the sea”. Thus, the collection grows, moves around, changes. Jean Baudrillard links the desire to collect to the desire for death: a collection is only alive as long as it is imperfect and incomplete. The completion of a collection amounts to death.
This “heterogeneous” (but imperfect) character of collecting imbues it with the feeling of a holistic aesthetic atmosphere and of an idiosyncratic theater, literally of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which in turn fosters “empathy” in the observer: in other words, it gives him the opportunity to identify with the situation, the emotional experience and spiritual side of the artist - collector.
Naturally, this constant process of combination leads us away from certain fundamental myths of these modern times, such as cleanliness, autonomy, as well as artwork and medium specificity, thus enhancing the critical stance towards them. When they have been relieved of the surgical nakedness of the standards - established by modernism - which customarily apply to museum exhibits, collections can follow the mood swings of whoever is hosting or observing them. The conventional cubic space of an apartment thus becomes a complex spatial structure where touch and physical experience surpass all else.
The way the works belonging to this collection are presented is in line with this perceptive principle, resulting in a metamorphosis of the residence in question, even the collection itself, into an *archive*. In this case, it is particularly interesting that the archival dimension maintains an echo of ritual. The continual addition of objects, materials, surfaces and pictures enhances the physical experience of the visitor, who enters slowly (*entre lentement*) and treads carefully.
Hence, what is being redefined here is not just the notion of collecting, but above all the *way* the collection is *presented*. This is also why it would be inconceivable to present it in a book by following an alphabetical, or thematic order in search of “elective affinities” between the works and the spaces amid them; in other words, that “iconology of the interval”, according to which even the slightest change or shift leads to a radical rearrangement of the whole.
What is this collection, then? An art lover’s assessment of contemporary art? The amassed paraphernalia of contemporary artists? A type of *espace indicible*, its imagery corresponding to an innermost text or an imaginary narration? An addition, a correction pertaining to the work of the artist - collector? A classification of certain works concerning specific themes, such as the delicacy of the handmade, the “clash with material”, lightness and fugitive traces?
A preference for the *minor* is recognizable in these works, with the help of which anyone can construct or deconstruct their own narrative. I would even say that the more *personal* and *minor* a work, the more *major* the significance of its presence within the collection becomes. The “graphic note”, the folds and traces are the defining elements of this collection, as opposed to all that is brash and hefty. Besides, most of these works are the ones which first introduced us to the artists who created them.
Nonetheless, this description does not detract from the primary feature in this context, i.e. the fact that this is a collection.

Its compilation and its *creation* per se are indivisible: “Surely, of all the ways to acquire books, the most illustrious way to do so is to write them”. Wutz, Jean Paul’s poverty-stricken teacher, “lacked the means to purchase many of the books that interested him – having found the titles in exhibition catalogues – so he wrote them himself”. Alexiou tells a similar story: “Manolis Zacharioudakis and I used to say that we became artists because we weren’t wealthy enough to become collectors”. This hidden interactive connection marks the work of every artist. Thus, it is not unlikely that he would have liked to have created some of the works in his collection himself, or that he identifies with them. Such a concept of collecting, defines a specific cyclical space, that of the Self in relation to the Other. This is the birthplace of all contemporary works of art.

Above all, however, this collection is an allegory par excellence of the aspect of collecting which characterizes Alexiou’s artistic practice. The activity of collecting is a productive mechanism in its own right and the quintessence of his work. *The collection is his oeuvre*. In this sense, we are indeed dealing with an unusual, irregular strategic collector and a silent archivist of recent contemporary art.

Unusual or irregular, an approximate translation of the Greek *idiorhythmos*, in this case means more than simply “what deviates from the usual, what seems strange due to its particular features, what is peculiar, strange or odd” (according to the dictionary), it also refers to those collectors’ objects which have their own *rhythm* or regularity. This rhythm is personal by definition, i.e. it is *idio – rhythmos*, an individual rhythm, and keeps us in contact with the notions of moving, accumulating, rearranging and flowing; if only with an excerpt from a note or a “letter” (“I’ve lost it’). This idio-rhythm, unusualness or irregularity transforms the entire “fantastic idea” of collecting into artistic practice, into a cohesive zone of documentation, knowledge and artistic experience.

Although he never visited Mount Athos and its “*idio-rhythmic*” monasteries (where monks are free to follow their own individual lifestyle), Roland Barthes drew this concept from the monastic tradition of the Fathers of the East, allowing some of its features to intermingle with his work. It is within the hidden core of the *idio-rhythmic* that the silence of mysticism exists. Barthes writes: “There, at the edge of a roof, I see…an opportunity to meet (library)”. The imaginary space which is home to this collection is thus not only an opportunity for recording knowledge, but also for intercourse and cohesion: it is a *Deck Diary*, to use a phrase once coined by Giorgos Seferis, allowing the artist to relate to others.

I cannot find a better definition for this collection than the Greek term *idio-rhythm*. In other words, the possible co-existence of personal artistic rhythms, or of a potential “common space”, inhabited by diverse artistic rhythms, as well as personal – and hence conversing – languages. A supposedly objective and unbiased collection is permeated by the relations and constant dialogue among the works of art it is made up of (i.e. *intertextuality*), the ebb and flow of artistic desire, as well as frequent deviation and evasion. What is important is to create *atmosphere*, *associations* and new *arrangements*, not just the materials, shapes or forms that this applies to. In Benjamin’s words, what we see is one of the many homes of this artist-collector, which he has built with art rather than construction materials. He can withdraw into it and construct narratives when the circumstances are appropriate. We are now called upon to visit this very same space and reconstruct it for ourselves.

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