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'The Art I Live With, The Things I Love' by Ansel Krut

'Possibilities and Pleasures' - exhibition essay by Ken Arnold

'Not so long ago I watched a documentary called *The Collector* (2002). In it, we follow the film-maker's uncle, Mithat Esmer, as he combs Istanbul's streets and specialist shops seeking new treasures. Back home, we find him struggling to cohabit with seven decades of hoarding. It makes for fascinating but claustrophobic viewing: the portrait of a man engulfed, on the verge of becoming his own collection.

Claas Reiss's brightly-lit, minimally installed gallery could not feel further away from Esmer's tottering towers of paper. No overwhelming mass of chess-clocks, voltmeters or microscopes here. Instead, we're in an ample space, able comfortably to encounter Ansel Krut's exquisitely selected exhibits, one at a time. Observational studies have suggested that an average museum visitor spends less than twenty seconds on any single artwork, including the label. In *The Art I Live With, The Things I Love* you could give each of the twenty or so pieces displayed a full minute and half, and still see everything in under a half hour. I thoroughly encourage you to do so.

For Esmer, collecting stuff is a vital – indeed *the dominant* – way to deal with the world around him. For Krut, it's an accident. Discovering that he lived with something resembling a 'collection' came as a surprise prompted by this project. But despite the lack of intention behind the gathering, these loved things that he's hung on to – or the things that have hung on to him – just as eloquently express a fundamental instinct felt by almost all of us: the need to marshal the world's material chaos into some sort of manageable coherence. It's an eagerness to sift through life's clutter in order to find a collection of meaningful things. "An apparatus that helps us collect [and manifest] our thoughts" is how museum director and thinker Nicholas Thomas describes an institutional version of the need. Historian Jennifer González is more concerned with the biographical services that collecting things can offer individuals, and has come up with a new word to help pinpoint the way in which they evoke important relations, past events and emotional ties: autotopography. This is a sort-of object-based version of BBC Radio's much-loved *Desert Island Discs* programme. In this exhibition a selection of precious objects replaces the eight musical choices with which its guests animate their life stories.

One type of autotopography then is evoked by watching Esmer clamber around a home that can barely contain his possessions. Another sparsely different one is presented in Krut's exhibition. Common to both film and show are opportunities to understand aspects of the collector behind the collection. In each, puzzle-pieces of personal insight are revealed through more and less conscious choices and self-fashioning constructions: acts of bricolage soaked in passion. The things gathered through these two dramatically different projects are, we suspect, all somehow loved. And as Sherry Turkle has eloquently put it, we "think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with."

Versions of this ubiquitous habit are, of course, far from unknown in the artworld. The Barbican Gallery's 2015 exhibition *Magnificent Obsessions* provided fascinating insight into artist-collectors from Rembrandt to Picasso, from Warhol to Hirst, as they navigated the frequently choppy waters between taste and something altogether more pathological. While London's National Gallery explored a parallel narrower theme in its show *Painters' Paintings,* looking this time at the art artists collect. Many of these works change hands through a non-commoditised version of the art market, a carefully negotiated custom of exchange in which financial considerations are integrated into a broader calculus that balance friendship with flattery, discernment with sentiment.

This type of between-artist barter provides the back-story to some of the pieces that Krut lives with too. Others have family origins: works that came to him through his family tree, or made by his children and his late wife – the artist Felicity Powell. While still others are tied to him by friendship, by admiration, by negotiation and simply by circumstance. Nested at the conceptual centre of this show's collection are some of Krut's own paintings, suggesting that a context created by 'things he loves' might well illuminate his artist's mind. Or at least that these fragments of his domestic decorative arrangements could hint at some of his artistic inspirations.

Most of the exhibits Krut shares with us have come a long way, have indeed been transformed since he discovered them in a drawer or behind something more immediately visible in his home or studio. They have arrived in Reiss's gallery following agonising choices, with some early front-runners falling by the wayside, either for fear of upsetting more delicate sensibilities, or simply because they've been displaced by more forceful contenders. Delightful connections have been uncovered and emphasised; frames have been bought and transport organised; items have been sorted, arranged and hung. In short, the collection has been turned into an exhibition.

This aspect of Krut's enterprise also places him in good company. Artists of all sorts have, from the mid-20th century on, applied themselves to what has emerged as a new artform: curation. Eduardo Paolozzi's 1985 exhibition *Lost Magic Kingdom and Six Paper Moons* at the Museum of Mankind was an early path-breaking initiative in which the Scottish artist presented an idiosyncratic selection of objects from the British Museum's ethnographic collections alongside some of his own work. By the early 21st century, uber-curators such as Hans Ulrich Obrist and Klaus Biesenbach were much in demand, invited to sprinkle their magic dust at galleries and biennales across the globe. Trends and tastes are shifting again, but what has stuck is the idea that some artists can convene powerful aesthetic experiences working as curators. That at their best, they can add fizz to a fundamental aspect of museum-making: the shaping of thought and manufacture of meaning through the creative selection, investigation, juxtaposition and interpretation of exhibits.

"Don't forget," Krut reminds me as we discuss his show, "art only exists through collecting." He's right of course. Artists live to be noticed and then collected. But also more prosaically, and with a bit of luck, they can gain their livelihoods through purchases

that cumulatively turn into private and public collections. The revelation Krut stumbled on during the curation of this show is that he *too* collects. But to be honest, his is a modest accumulation. And it just as clearly points to an antithesis towards collecting: an inclination not to be dragged down by stuff, to travel light. As the early 20th-century French writer Anatole France had it: "It is good to collect things, but it is better to go on walks."

Turkish collector Esmer might, one suspects, find it rather difficult to up anchor and set off on a voyage. If we are not careful, the stuff that we own can, of course, come to own us. Something verging on a fear of this idea lay behind artist Michael Landy's 2001 project *Break Down*. Helped by a dozen (anti-elf-like) assistants, he spent two weeks in an empty London shop, working meticulously through an inventory of 7,227 things: disassembling, destroying, sending all his worldly goods to landfill. And in obliterating its very possibility, *Break Down* highlighted another intriguing aspect of our relationship to stuff, or at least the bits that last. Things which were owned by others before us, and which are destined to be owned by yet others after we have gone, somehow turn the idea of collecting inside out. For objects that endure go on to collect the lives of their successive 'owners'. Some of Krut's loved things, for example, will almost certainly end up attracting and satisfying the affections of others.

The Art I Live With, The Things I Love throws up intriguingly broad questions about how we relate to things we collect. But the ones Krut has chosen to share are of a specific type. Most of them are framed and all presented in a gallery. It's an obvious point maybe, but this is an *art* show. And at its centre is a particularly suggestive intersection between two lines of thought. Along one, we start with things, unusual ones made by people with aesthetic intentions, which we appreciate as art. Along the other, we start with art and then realise that these 'pieces', semi-overlooked by Krut, often exist as just 'other things'. In a more didactic, more emphatic show, we might have been encouraged to reflect on how far from black and white is the boundary between art and the rest of life. They exist instead, as John Dewey masterfully analysed in his *Art as Experience*, in a fascinatingly grey topography. The experience of art, he explained, can only really be understood through an essential contradiction: that it must simultaneously be both ordinary and exceptional.

Straddling speculations about art, special objects and accidental collections, one more theme lurks here: that of memory and our sense of time. A blessing gifted us by the art that moves us, as well as other things we love, is their power to trigger memories. So doing, they manage to freeze, or at least seemingly stretch, the cruel march of time, suggesting that we might even be able to extend ourselves beyond our natural limits. But there are also blessings in forgetting, ones that we currently run a high risk of obliterating. Over the last half-century we have gobbled up a stream of miraculous digital technologies with ever-expanding databases, convincing ourselves that we simply can't do without the range of choice and easy they offer. But cumulatively, and maybe unexpectedly, they begin to present an imminent and dreadful threat: that we might not ever be able to forget anything again.

Forgetting things is undeniably troubling; and the idea of something being irrevocably lost can tiptoe into the deeply disturbing. But as this project suggests, there is also a gentler and more fruitful middle ground to be explored between holding on forever and letting go entirely. One of this show's many gifts then lies in the enlightened delight it creates around a few things that had, maybe, been somewhat neglected, and that have now been rediscovered. It reminds us of a key role played by institutions that store collections – by museums, galleries, archives and libraries; which is their capacity to keep some of their contents *off display*, where batteries of possible meaning can be recharged. As the lustre of Krut's selection here demonstrates, an object that spends time away from our imagination's spotlight can, there, gain renewed significance, opened up through *re*consideration. "If I were to wish for anything, [mused the Danish philosopher Søren Kirkegaard,] I should not wish for wealth and power, but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. And what wine is so sparkling, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating as possibility?" His pithy conclusion: "Pleasure disappoints, possibility never."'

(Ken Arnold, January 2022)

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