

## Open House: A Portrait of Collecting

*Open House* celebrates the collecting impulse: why we gather, save, organize and showcase objects, and what new narratives emerge when these objects intermingle. The work is displayed in the style of a cabinet of curiosity or *wunderkammer* (wonder cabinet), 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century rooms in private homes filled with objects of wonder, beauty, and strangeness, arranged to educate and influence. The delight of these wonder cabinets was that items were often installed along distinctly unorthodox groupings: a giant, scaly fish might sit alongside a delicate painted vase. Pressings of flowers might accompany carved wooden figurines from some far-flung locale.

While the original intent of the wonder cabinet might have included a desire to impress one's friends, building 'power by accumulation,' has never been the sole motivation for collecting. Collecting offers a way of constructing knowledge of self and others: you come to know the world around you through the contemplation of objects. For example, the Great Depression has been etched in our memories through iconic images by Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. But even *Migrant Mother* raises complex questions: what part of the Great Depression story does it tell? What "truth" does it propose?

You will notice that some of the works are dusty, stained, and cracked. To catalog, conserve, and maintain works of art, books, and other objects takes tremendous resources and commitment. Why preserve the past? What histories get recorded? The ethical issues surrounding collections, though not the focus here, are important to mention.

With the expanse in leisure time and discretionary income, more individuals are acquiring, and saving, objects of all kinds. The self-storage industry has exploded, most so in the United States. A recent *Bloomberg* article noted that the 25 million storage units (filled with stuffed animals, old ski equipment, boxes of books, broken chairs, and old cell phones) generate \$24 billion in revenue. Television shows like "American Pickers" and "Storage Wars" capture a national obsession with stuff and its aftermath. What separates collecting from hoarding? Is our pursuit of objects a particularly burdensome strain of capitalism? Or a longstanding act of honoring our history? We leave these speculations up to you.

Some of the reasons we pursue objects is economic—maybe that painting you found at a yard sale is a Jackson Pollock and you can retire in style... but perhaps more compelling are objects' emotional and social value. Objects can constitute a key part of our personal history and identity: the stories from our childhood become more impactful when materialized in a well-worn blanket, a communion dress, a shoelace. Institutional and national narratives, too, become codified through preserving and displaying objects, as well as erecting buildings, monuments and elaborate gardens.

In the *Significant Objects* project, Rob Walker and Joshua Glenn found that the value of an object increased, as evidenced by eBay sales, when a story was written about the object. In the gallery's version of this project, members of the PEA community were asked to contribute meaningful objects, along with a description about the importance of the object. We hope that this project introduces you to another side of the people you interact with on a daily basis. These "significant objects" are placed throughout the exhibition, in dialogue with the works around them (be sure to visit the display in the Academy Library, where family history is captured in postcards). Perhaps you have an object of your own that you might like to share?

What about collections that do not appear as three-dimensional objects? To tackle that question, *Open House* presents two site-specific works: *temps s(a/e)ns Netz*, an interactive work by Jung Mi Lee and Jon Sakata posits the sensorial as collection, and bodily engagement as an experiential, collecting practice. *(RE)MOVE...BINARY EUGENICS*, created by members of PEA's Democracy of Sound, envisions a collection of sonic intercepts as a way to counteract the limitations of the binary and critique concepts of inheritance. Both works remind us that collecting is a tactile, embodied way of making meaning in the world.

A noticeable characteristic of the collecting impulse is an enjoyment of sharing, and it is this generosity of spirit that underpins the exhibition. Individual collectors, including Melissa and Erick Mischke, Bruce Phillips, Jeff Ward, Cary Einhaus and Jim Mills, Jeff Phillips, and John Sideli have allowed us the great privilege of showing, in a very public way, aspects of their lives that may not be widely known. This enthusiasm is also reflected in the institutional collectors that lent objects, including the American Independence Museum, the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, and our own Academy Library. I am so very grateful to all of the contributors that helped weave this rich tapestry of objects, narratives, and potential dialogues.

*What do you collect?*

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