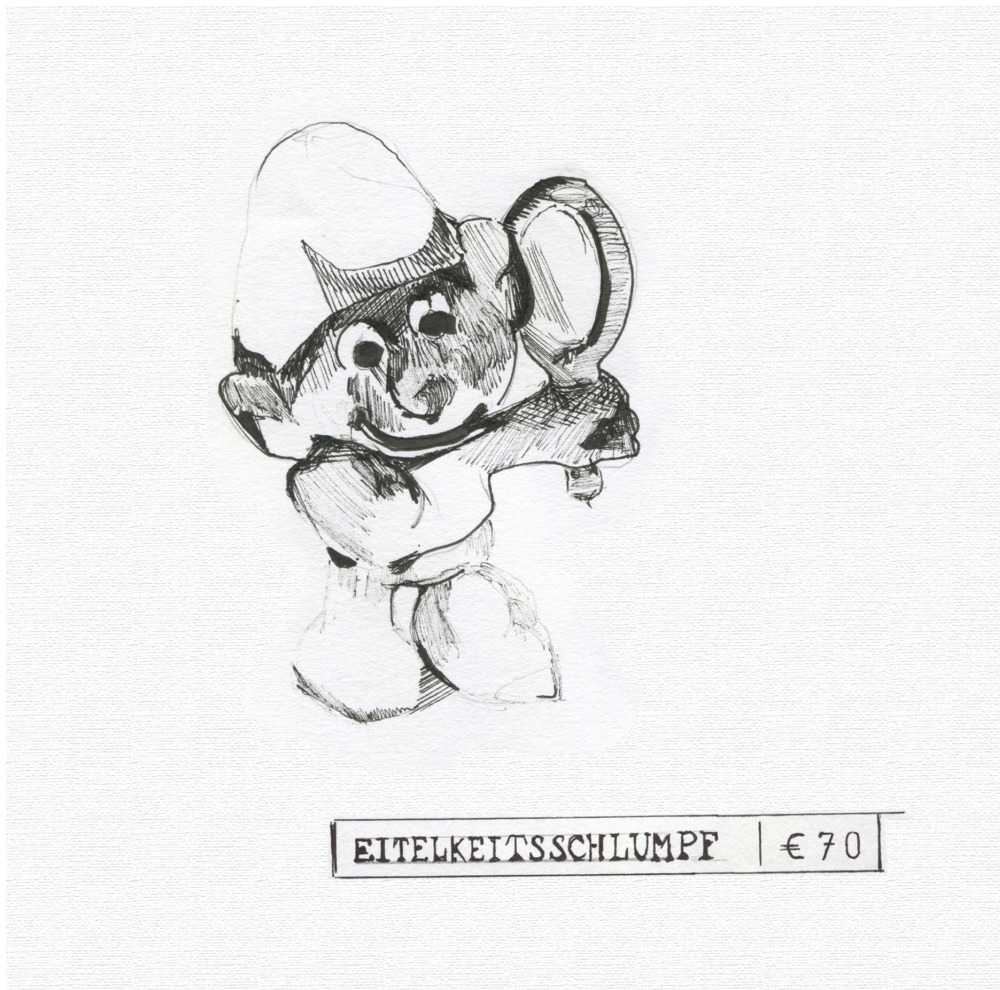


## Joyous Obsessions.

accumulation of objects and their relationship with the past.



Jesper Dobbeling

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## 1. Preface.

In this thesis I want to explore my interest in the phenomenon of collecting and what drives people to collect. Collecting is a broad and layered subject which includes many types of different types of collectors, all having their own motivations and reasons why to collect. While one may collect for the objective value of items and their financial potential the other may be interested in the challenge that lies in the hunt for an object.

My interest lies in the collector who collects objects with a high subjective value. How can objects with low production costs become an appealing collectable for people. And especially, how come the people who collect these items are often adults? While it seems to make sense to me, for a little girl to want to own all the barbies in the world, it fascinates me that there are adults with the same desire. In my thesis I want to find out what the role of the personal past is in collecting and what divides them from other collectors who are simply interested in the aesthetic or objective value of collectible items.

While I am not a collector myself, I can relate to the phenomenon. I think it's interesting to see how meaning or value is created, the differences between perceptions, as one man's trash is another man's treasure. While I can relate to the collector this is only to a certain extent. Can it perhaps be that the collected objects become a representation for earlier, easier time in life? And if this is the case why does a collector need to keep expanding his collection? What's the distinction between a collector and one who just simply enjoys objects. Is there a specific starting point for the collector to collect or does he or she start randomly?

Besides being interested in the phenomenon of collecting, I see a relation between my own artistic practice and the subjective collector. The similarities may lie in the need to archive and gather autobiographical memories. Out of a concern for the perishable states of our memory and the ever changing surroundings we live in.

By looking at the literature written on the subject I will examine the differences between the collectors. By doing this I want to find out more about the motivations of the collectors which I for the moment would describe as the collector of objects of subjective value. What are the perspectives of psychoanalysts? What kind of research is done that can tell us more about the nature and psychology of these types of collectors.

To give more insights into the type of collector I am interested in, I want to describe a part of the documentary by the dutch filmmaker Monique Nolte called "*Een bitterzoete verleiding*" (*A bittersweet temptation*) made in 2007. In this film Monique follows a couple of collectors who collect Kinder Surprise eggs throughout Europe. Among these collectors is a dutch couple who spend most of their free time collecting these items.

## 2. *Een bitterzoete verleiding (A bittersweet temptation)*

In the Documentary: *Een bitterzoete verleiding* (2007), Dutch filmmaker Monique Nolte reveals the bizarre world of Kinder Surprise. Kinder Surprise is candy which has been manufactured since 1974 by the Italian company Kinder. It's a hollow chocolate egg weighing 20 grams and is 8 centimeters high, wrapped in tinfoil. Inside these eggs there is a plastic capsule containing a toy. The product is based on the Italian tradition of putting presents into chocolate eggs during Easter. Less cacao and more milk was the slogan which convinced mothers around the world that the egg was a healthy and responsible snack, its success resulted in selling over 30 billion eggs since 1974.

Although the product was originally created for children, the product and especially the toys inside have become very popular among collecting adults. These days the toy figures are collected, traded and forged by thousands worldwide. There are more than 1.000.000 collectors of which 800.000 are located in Germany. There is an estimated production of 1.2 billion Kinder Surprise toys a year and this is equal to production of 40 eggs/second or a production of about 100 tons a day. Every autumn the toys are changed, and over 150 new toys are released, including character sets. The market value of the rare, old toys can increase up to thousands of euros per piece.

Next to this, the company produced several related collectables such as: leaflets, packages, wrappers and extra editions which are equally important for the collectors. There are a lot of illegal activities undertaken to be the first one to complete the new collection. For instance fanatic collectors make use of secret contacts inside the factory which gives them early access to the latest series of toys inside the Surprise eggs, months before their official launch on the market.

Besides these absurd numbers and facts, the documentary focuses on the collectors themselves, filmmaker Monique Nolte introduces a dutch collectors couple (Elly Heezius and Aad van der Stee). They are one of the many fanatic collectors and Monique follows them in their search for new Kinder Surprise toys.

They drive all the way to Germany because the toy series they are looking for is released there exclusively. Arriving in a store in Germany, they are looking for a specific series of figures which contain magnets. Elly demonstrates a technique she discovered: bringing a compass which she holds against the individual eggs. All the figures containing a magnet will give a reaction on the compass, with this method she is selecting the multiple items which contain magnets hoping to complete the series.

This causes irritation to other people who are interested in the eggs, one of them makes a comment to Aad saying that it's unfair. Elly responds to the situation, laughing and saying to the camera that she understands the reaction of the other customers. She smiles and

says: because of them all of the children are missing this specific figure and are not able to complete their own series.

Back at their home they start unpacking the eggs, with what looks like a professional finger gesture, they crack open all the newly bought eggs exactly on the seam the chocolate eggs are glued together. Elly gets excited and repeatedly says how nice all the new figures are. The table which they both sit behind is filled with empty capsules, wrappers, plastic toys and uneaten pieces of chocolate. Monique asks the question to Aad and Elly if the eggs they have just bought are enough for this year.

It's not enough they say, she explains that it often happens that the first weeks after the release of the series a couple of the items are not available yet, and a month later they are all of sudden everywhere. She continues that she thinks the company anticipates this, making you buy more. She says she doesn't mind, because she has made the choice to collect them, and if you make that choice you have to go along with the strategies of the company.

In their house there are multiple vitrines filled with plastic Surprise toys, there is a lack of space to put any more of them. But if it was up to Elly she would get rid of the cupboard and couch and replace them for vitrines filled with Surprise Eggs. Aad is against it, he replies that there is space needed to live in. If Elly was here to live without Aad she would have arranged the house differently to fit in more toys.

It's obvious that Elly is the most passionate of the two collectors and Monique asks a difficult question to her: what she would do if she needed to choose between Aad and the collection.

The answer is a bit painful, Elly laughs, and asks in english: can this be off the record? After a period of silence thinking about the question, Aad makes a comment about the situation saying that it takes her a long time to come up with an answer. Then Elly responds to the question: Aad and the hobby (collecting) are two very different things. And because of this difference it's very hard to choose, if Aad and collecting looked more alike it would have been easier for her to make a choice. She finally says: So shall I just say Aad then?

The documentary in general makes me a bit sad, the amount of time and money spent on the collections and the fact that the collection will never be finished. Watching the documentary I was confused and fascinated at the same time because these objects are nothing more than massed produced pieces of plastic presented in special made vitrines. I started to wonder about the sentimentality that these objects can hold and how the prices of the more exclusive old Kinder Surprise toys can go up to 4000 euros.

It's the rarity of the toy which makes it so expensive although the toys Aad en Elly just bought are manufactured in the same year and in large numbers. This makes the toys they buy and collect (in my perception) basically worthless.

I wonder about the amount of trash they create with the tin foil wrappers and empty capsules and what will they do with all that chocolate. Although the documentary was made more than 10 years ago, I think about the money that is needed for gas and the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> that is produced just to chase all those plastic toys around. It doesn't seem like something from this time. Yet Elly says that she considers people who don't collect boring.

It also looks to me that without the presence of Aad, Elly would have been something which comes closer to a hoarder as it showed that she would have been fine with moving out the rest of the furniture to make room for the Kinder Surprise toy collection.

The bizarre aspects of the documentary didn't give me the answer of what their direct motivations are for collecting these toys. Yet it is an interesting example of how dedicated the collector can be and illustrates the obsession that consumes them. Besides it shows how the value of the exclusive objects increases because of the demand and scarcity while the majority of these surprise toys are still just mass-produced pieces of plastic.

Objectively seen they don't have much value and the fact that these objects are still highly appreciated by them is appealing to me. I suspect that there is a certain kind of safety or comfort present in these collections for the fact that Aad says that he never has to think about how he will spend his free time.

But what makes Aad and Elly different from any other kind of collector? In order to give answers to these questions I need to find out what defines a collector and I will address this in the next chapter.

(Nolte.m, 2008, *Een bitterzoete verleiding.*)

## 3. Collecting

### 3.1 Definition

In a world full of objects different people will take different things into their hearts. Therefore it can be difficult to form a worthwhile definition of the collector. Besides the extensive variations of different collectors and their different (often unconscious) motivations it might be difficult or even impossible to distinguish the collector of my interest without making any psychoanalytic assumptions. Many attempts have been made, trying to define the collector by gathering this material I expect to create a better and sharpened insight of what defines my collector of interest.

To start this chapter I will briefly mention the role of collecting amongst children by means of a conclusion from a research paper by Stacey Menzel Baker and James W. Gentry called: *Kids As Collectors: a Phenomenological Study of First and Fifth Graders* (1996). In this paper Baker and Gentry presented the results of interviews held with 72 children who had a collection of one kind or another. From these results they concluded:

*“The perceptions of the children reveal that they have multiple motives for building and creating their collections. Children collect because collecting gives them something to do with their free time while showing themselves and others what they are capable of accomplishing. They also seek possessions which interest them and help them grow as a person (e.g., by helping them learn more), thus, enhancing their self-identity. Acquiring objects for which they have a special passion is a common motive. Children also seek items for their collection to show that they are unique; however, they also often collect because of the influence or encouragement of others either to be like those people or to show others that they have "more" than them.”* (Baker and Gentry, 1996, 37)

It seems logical that many of the examples mentioned in this research paper share similarities with the adult collector. I suspect that the degree of obsession that drives the adult-collector derived from the childlike enthusiasm. As it makes sense to me that the child collects, it is a way to expand and widen their perspectives of the world. This is perhaps what makes it interesting to keep collecting. Besides the financial aspect I do suspect that there is a darker side to the psychology behind collecting that is perhaps unknown to the child.

My point of departure in my research was the book: *Collecting: An Unruly Passion* (Meunsterberger, 1994). Muensterberger was Born in Dortmund, Germany in 1914. He was a psychoanalyst, art historian, author and collector of African art. His book provided to be one of the first extensive psychological examinations concerning the subject of collecting , and was of great help in my research.



But before addressing the different psychoanalytic perspectives discussed in his book, I will just focus on his definition. As Muensterberger defined collecting as: “Selecting, Gathering and keeping of objects of subjective value”. (Muensterberger, 1994, 04)

Muensterberger’s definition seems to describe the phenomenon broadly. The collectible items (which can be anything) are selected carefully and are based on a personal (subjective) interest. There is a distinction made between what items fit and don’t fit a certain collection, Muensterberger says that this distinguishes the collector from for instance a hoarder. The gathered objects are kept with care, in displays, frames or special made boxes. Organized in a logical order and systematized in different categories.

As a side note, Muensterberger added:

*“Note that I emphasize the subjective aspect of collecting because the emotion and often the ardor attached to the collected object or objects is not necessarily commensurate with its specialness or commercial value, nor does it relate to any kind of usefulness.”*  
(Muensterberger, 1994, 04)

I acknowledge that it’s important that Muensterberger addresses the lack of “specialness” or commercial value. As the documentary: *Een bitterzoete verleiding*, shows it’s very clear that the objective value (with the exception of the very rare objects) overall is very low.

Although Muensterberger talks about the gathering and keeping of objects, I do think the collector is not necessarily limited to objects. As an opposition to the Kinder Surprise eggs collector I would like to consider that collections can also exist out of experiences (e.g. dining in restaurants, concert experiences, traveling, passport stamps or bucket lists). Most of these experiences leave us with nothing material to collect, as the nature of our memory is something intangible.

I thought about the ‘experience collector’ and how he or she may look at memory as a collection of thoughts. As concluded in the paper “*Kids As Collectors*” by Baker and Gentry, collecting seems to be a way to build up self-identity. Considering that a big part of your identity is stored in your memory, you could say that living is a collection of memories. Wouldn’t this make us all collectors? It made me think of the pictures we collect and keep in family photo albums. Although this seems unrelated I do think the motives of a toy collector aren’t all that much different. I recognise that the phenomenon of collecting also plays a role in my own work. I will elaborate on this later in the thesis

A paper written by Ruth Formanek titled *Why They Collect: Collectors Reveal Their Motivations* (Formanek, 1994) Formanek examined data from 112 questionnaires and 55 letters from collectors (aged 9–55+ years) who were asked to speculate on their motivation to collect.

Formanek concluded from the results that the motivations can be interpreted in 5 different meanings (1) in relation to the self; (2) in relation to other people; (3) as preservation, restoration, history, and a sense of continuity; (4) as a financial investment; and (5) as an addiction. Traditional psychoanalytic ideas on the motivations of collectors are reviewed, as well as more contemporary psychoanalytic approaches focusing on the development and stability of the self. To continue now, I will elaborate on all the different categorizations mentioned by Formanek (1994).

### Collecting in relation to the self.

Before determining which way to go in the field of psychoanalysis I will shortly mention Formanek's perspective of collecting in relation to self. She split this categorization into 3 groups (a) those who collect as a defence against feeling low, (b) those for whom collecting appears to be a challenge, a wish for expertise, knowledge or mastery, and (c) those for whom collecting has a narcissistic function, that is, is essential for the maintenance of their self esteem.

*“As for (a) those who collect as a defence against feeling low, Formanek added: ‘One would expect some collectors to refer to their being motivated by a need to counteract a sense of loss, low spirits or depressed states, and by a need for elation. As for the second categorization for (b) those for whom collecting appears to be a challenge she cited an answer from the questionnaire: an antiques collector: ‘Collecting serves as an extension of the collector and his creativity; and brings a sense of excitement and purpose to one’s life. (c) The term ‘narcissism’ refers to the search for the maintenance of self-esteem. Mental activity is narcissistic to the degree that it functions to maintain the self as cohesive, stable and with positive affect (Stolorow and Lachmann 1980). This activity is frequently directed towards others—human beings and things—that become the source of supply for self esteem. It is characteristic of some narcissists that the supplies only temporarily aid in maintaining their self-esteem, and that new sources of supplies must be found’.* (Formanek, 1991, 332)

Looking at the distinctions (b) and (c) made by Formanek, I notice some similarities between the adult collector and the children that were mentioned in the paper by Baker and Gentry *“Kids As Collectors”*. Both adult and child collectors enjoy the challenge of collecting, and the learning process that is attached to it. It's about showing themselves (but also others) what they are capable of accomplishing. As for narcissism both child and adult collector are experiencing pleasure in owning something others don't have.

An antique collector from Formanek's questionnaire answered with *“ I'm thrilled when I buy a new item, It gets special attention from me for a while. I show it to my friends before it*

goes in with the others. Then I slowly lose interest and look for new items". (Formanek. 1991. 332)

I suspect that most of these characteristics are part of my collector of interest. Although it is of course only an assumption to say that Aad and Elly's motivation to collect descends from a depressed state or an urge to feel up a certain void. I do think the categories have similarities with the toy-collector. As described in the collector in relation to the self there is a narcissistic aspect to the phenomenon of collecting, as an opposite to narcissistic characteristics of collecting, I will now examine collecting in relation to other people.

Collecting has meanings in relation to other people.

While many collectors go their own separate ways, with no concern of role models and interest of what's in fashion, many collectors tend to follow current trends and find the opinion of fellow collectors important. As mentioned before many collectors are often proud of their collections, and part of the satisfaction that comes from collecting is sharing it with other people. As specified in the documentary: *Een bitterzoete verleiding*, the amount of collectors is enormous, with more than a million Surprise Eggs fanatics in Europe. The film shows how the collectors come together in big halls where they organize gatherings to trade and buy figures and talk about their shared passion. The documentary suggests that collecting is a great way to connect with other people.

Someone who knows more about this subject is D. Krawczyk, he is a professor in Behavioral and Brain Sciences at The University of Texas. His research is focused on understanding reasoning through a multi-disciplinary approach that combines neuroimaging, cognitive psychology, and human neuropsychology. D. Krawczyk discussed why we collect and what happens in our brains while we collect, in a presentation video on Youtube called: *Our brains are wired to collect things*.

He said: "*our brains are very social, we have social rewards, we experience the reward of being around other people. A hormone called oxytocin is one of the most important drives in our brain which causes this, oxytocin elevates when we are around like-minded individuals.*" (Krawczyk, 2016)

D. Krawczyk then gives the example of Comic-Con, an American film festival based in San Diego where people dress up as their favorite comic book character, for instance Wolverine or Wonder Woman. They go to Comic-Con to meet other adults who are dressed the same. Although this is not particularly related to collecting it seems to hold the same characteristics which are present in the Kinder Surprise collecting community. Some kind of shared nostalgia or sentimentality, it allows people to appreciate, trade and celebrate the objects of interest or in this case comic book characters.

## Collecting as preservation, restoration, history and a sense of continuity.

As for this distinction in the categorization I will start with an answer that was given by a collector from the questionnaire, she collects postcards, pictures and letters all cut out from newspapers, she said that her scrapbooks make the past live again. *“These treasures hold everything there for you at a moment’s notice, and it’s special because you chose to cut it out and save it. They all offer solace—a quiet world—you own what you’ve cut out, planned and ordered. I have pictures of movie stars that I cut out at age six—these pictures represent me.”* (Formanek. 1991. p.333)

It caught my attention when I read that the collector said that the pictures represented herself, it’s like the objects become part of her identity. Or the objects have always been part of her, but by collecting them she builds an archive of things that may someday be forgotten. With further contemplation on the words preservation, restoration and history I have to think about museum collections with their primary function to protect and preserve objects with historical value.

Although my research doesn’t concern the activities of caring for collections assembled by someone else. This doesn’t mean there is no connection to the collectors motivations to collect out of a need to preserve and restore objects. Often museums and galleries are initiated from private collections. In the questionnaire the motivation is given of someone who collects antique phonographs: *“The passion to preserve items for other people to enjoy. Getting an item back to pristine condition and working.”* (Why they collect: Collectors reveal their motivations. 1991. 333) It’s mandatory for my research to exclude the collector from someone who owns a collection which is assembled by someone else. I assume these “collectors” are rather more interested in the financial or historical aspects of an object.

## Collecting as financial investment.

Financial interest can be one of the primary reasons for people to start collecting, art collectors, antique collectors or basically any collector of highly valued objects. Certainly this doesn't mean that people who collect objects with a high objective value are interested in their financial characteristics, one can collect antiques for their aesthetic qualities. Or the passion to preserve items for other people to enjoy as mentioned in the questionnaire. Despite the fact that these kinds of collectors are collecting objects from the past, they are irrelevant for my research as they only collect items with objective value instead of collecting subjectively.

## Collecting as an addiction.

As for the Kinder Surprise eggs collector I do think addiction plays a big role. Elly from the documentary *Een bitterzoete verleiding* for instance is totally aware of the strategies of the company, She depends on the different geographical locations the company releases the toys, and the fact that it's impossible to complete the series in one period of time, this affects the addicted collector as he or she needs to buy more.

This may be an extreme example of collecting although it demonstrates the obsessive drive which can consume the collector. The definition of an addiction may be interpreted as the continuous search and dependency for the next object, the restlessness and dissatisfaction when there is nothing to collect. You may call this addiction, passion, obsession or perhaps a need to hold, possess or to accumulate. The ongoing search is a core element of their personality. I consider that exactly these kinds of characteristics divide the collector from someone who just keeps likeable objects around.

Although we think of collecting as something of innocence, it is possible for the habit to advance in something more dangerous. As the obsession which drives the collector can be close in line to something which is defined as: hoarding disorder. In my attempt to describe the collector of my interest and for the sake of clarity, I will specify the difference between the two.

## Hoarding disorder.

In 2013, hoarding disorder was split off into its own entry under "obsessive-compulsive and related disorders" in the DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). This is an American handbook that serves as a standard in psychiatric diagnosis in most countries. A hoarding disorder is defined as a persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions, regardless of the value others may attribute to these possessions. People diagnosed with this mental disorder can pack their homes full with so much stuff that it can become impossible to live in them. It can cause hazardous situations such as health problems, fire hazards or economical burdens.

The most significant difference between hoarding and collecting is that the examples that are part of the collection of a collector are organized and categorized. Often displayed in a neat and ordered way. A collector has a clear vision of where all the objects are located. A hoarder on the other hand often loses track of the items he or she owns. Stacking them in many layers, often forgetting what's beneath the surface. Holding on to random objects, finding value in basically everything, thinking it will be useful to them in a later time. This makes it impossible to discard the things other people would normally see as trash.



Hartmann, E. (2012). *Office number 1*.

As an illustration for the hoarder I have selected an image from the project: *Here lives my home*, from the Dutch photographer Eddo Hartmann. “After more than 20 years, photographer Eddo Hartmann returns to his parent's house, a luxurious canal side house he left at a young age to escape from domestic violence and isolation. Once there, he finds the place to be in the exact same state as the day he left it: the same furniture, the same wallpaper. Even his toys are untouched. Only the gigantic pile of rubbish on the floor proves his father has been living there during all this time.” (*Here lives my home*. 2012. book/exhibition)

In contradiction to the hoarder, collectors tend to put a lot more thought into the organization and the selection of their objects, the collector is capable of making a distinction between the value of the collectables and is fine with letting go of items that do not fit in their collection. This is the subjectivity which is more dominant than the simple urge to collect.

After describing the different categorizations there are a few things which came to mind. My collector of interest is attentive to objects of which they have a high subjective value. The objects have some kind of relationship to his or her past and a meaningful (sentimental) quality. For example: objects which are meant for children but are collected by adults. What took my interest is that Aad and Elly are collecting toys which are not necessarily made in the same period of time of their youth, while I do assume that they do resemble the connection to childhood. Although the dedicated collector is not interested in the financial aspects of the items their interest in the objects can be shared by many people. Hereby the objects can obtain a higher objective value.

The fact that people keep objects of sentimental meaning seems logical to me as it is something I do as well, they function as a kind of support for your memory. Therefore, I don't think collectors are all that much different from me, Perhaps there is some kind of collector in all of us. But what is this obsession that keeps the collector engaged in his search. For the next chapter I will put my focus on what different psychoanalytic perspectives on the motivations of collectors suggest.

## 4. Psychoanalysis

### 4.1 First possessions

To continue my research in the adult toy collector, and start this chapter I will discuss some different psychoanalytic perspectives on collecting. Although some of the motives mentioned in the previous chapter may describe certain aspects of my collector of interest, every collector's motive is unique and to fully understand the drive behind a collector, one must be aware of the underlying factors and the complexities of the collector's total personal experience. First I will put my focus on the role of the objects, when the toys are still toys instead of collectible items. Muensterberger has researched the underlying roots of the collector with great dedication. His ambition was to shine a light upon the habits of collectors.

Muensterberger claims that the psychological basis of the collector is located in the child's use of transitional objects. His analysis is based on Donald W. Winnicott's essay *Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena*. Winnicott was an English psychoanalyst and child psychiatrist. He was specialized in showing and exposing the inner world of people and in particular children. His work was most influential in the field of object relations theory and developmental psychology. Besides he was among the first ones to write seriously about the subject that he described as "transitional objects" or "transitional phenomena".

In his "transitional object theory", Winnicott describes how young children (infants up to 12 months of age) are not capable of understanding the differences between their own body and the objects that belong to the external world. He puts the attention on the baby's needs of companionship, specifically that of his mothers. He gives the example of a mother who puts her baby to bed. As it's easy for the baby to become upset about the absence of his caretaker. The baby is given a doll, blanket or teddy bear to support him in his experience of solitude. Like thumb sucking becomes a substitute for the comfort of breastfeeding, the teddy bear (transitional object) becomes a temporary substitute for the mother.

Muensterberger accentuates the relief of anxiety the transitional objects provide for the child. He says: *'The essence of this support is illusory because it depends on what the baby creates out of the object. The importance lies in the experience of an object or, rather, the subjective relationship to the object, transitional or temporary as it may be, because it is meant to undo the trauma of aloneness when the infant discovers mother's absence. This is the causative factor for the baby's reaching out and, by having and holding the object, denying the fact of separation'* (Muensterberger, 1994, ix).

Muensterberger calls the separation between mother and infant a traumatic experience, he argues that collecting among other things is basically a form of displaced childhood. As he suggests that there is a connection between the drive of the obsessional collector and a traumatic experience. This drive can be traced down to an uncertain feeling of having lost



something and a feeling of vulnerability, which results in a subsequent longing for substitution. For these cases he sees the practice of collecting as an exercise in self-soothing and a way to cope with these childhood anxieties or traumas.



The British actor Peter Bull posing with a part of his teddy bear collection. (1970)

Beside his successful acting career, many will remember Peter Bull for his collection of teddy bears. He made collecting stuffed bears acceptable and inspired many people internationally to do so. He wrote two books concerning the subject: *The teddy bear book* and *Bear with me*, in which he illustrates the history of the teddy bear and the many roles it has played. Although Bull didn't consider himself a significant collector, as he merely owned 300 teddy bears.

## 4.2 Paul and Micky

In Addition to the “transitional object theory” by Winnicott, I would like to cite a story from the book *Collecting: An unruly passion* by Muensterberger. The story concerns a case of a little boy named Paul who Muensterberger met somewhere in the 1980’s when the boy was around four and a half years old. Muensterberger was addressed by the boys mother. She told him about her son's recent difficulties at home and with his friends and asked to talk to him.

*“When I met Paul, he was a grumpy young fellow, rather small for his age, and stubbornly taciturn. His parents were quite concerned about him, as they had been unable to change his mood and attitude. Paul seemed depressed to me, but at the same time willful and tightly controlled. He was determined not to talk to me nor to respond to my questions. According to both parents, there had been a conspicuous change in his entire behavior. What had been responsible for this change? Ever since he had come home from an extended visit with his grandparents, Paul had refused to go back to kindergarten. He stayed home, sitting in his room and playing with a new toy, a stuffed dog which had become his favorite the moment it had been given to him. He carried the dog around all day, brought it to the dining room table during meals, and even took it to bed with him. All of this did not seem appropriate for the boy’s age. According to his parents, the difficulties had started roughly six months earlier. He had spent the summer with his grandparents in a comfortable house in the country. He liked the place. He could play with his grandparents’ dog, or wander around in a large garden, and he knew some of the other children in the neighborhood. Meanwhile, Paul’s parents had gone abroad, accompanied by the boy’s older brother. This was the longest separation yet from both parents and his brother for Paul. Nobody had paid much attention to this, nor had anyone expected Paul’s distress. Paul himself had voiced no objection. Moreover, he was fond of his grandparents and an old housekeeper who used to tell him stories at bedtime. Then During The second or third week of his visit, the grandfather had a stroke and has been hospitalized. During those anxious days he had seen little of his grandmother, but the old housekeeper had looked after him. One day she presented him with a toy dog, which he gave the name, Micky. Paul and Micky quickly became inseparable, but a week or so later the boy asked for and received another toy dog. At that point, we could reconstruct, he became withdrawn. The parents told me that, because of the grandfather’s illness, the grandmother might have been less attentive to Paul than he might have expected. When his parents and brother returned from their holiday, they too might have shown more concern for the grandfather than for the little boy. They did bring him several gifts, which he put on a shelf in his room but then absolutely ignored. In the meantime, he had asked for another toy dog, although Micky remained his favorite.*

*Many weeks after I had met him, Paul confessed that he and Micky conversed in a secret language. Paul had stumbled on an effective device to help fortify himself against repeated hurt because of being alone and feeling excluded. With his fetishes, he could suspend his anxiety. Micky together with the other toy dogs would never leave him behind. Their presence helped guarantee him support and not-aloneness. In his self established collection*

*of toy dogs he had discovered a source of comfort and a specific presence in everybody's absence, at first incomprehensible to his parents. It was a technique I have observed among many collectors. Their involvement keeps them seemingly active, even adventurous and enterprise however, in a deep sense, this is only to ward off undercurrents of doubt and a dread of emptiness, even depression. It seems that only his toy dog could bring relief to little Paul.*

*But, then, what else are collectible but toys grown-ups take seriously? They are signposts in the struggle to overcome the reappearance of the notion of old feelings of abandonment, of separation anxiety, as the example of Paul demonstrates. There is evidence of these traits in all dedicated collectors". (Muensterberger, 1994, p. 29 - 31)*

The story of Muensterberger and the little boy Paul has changed my perspective remarkably, although there has been no confirmation in the story whether Paul continued his collection of toy dogs. It gives a great example of where the drive of a collector can come from. In contrast to his grandfather, Paul was not in any real danger, as he was under the care of the housekeeper. Nevertheless, the boy felt forgotten and alienated, caused by the sudden swift of attention due to the illness of his grandfather. The only one who could comfort the boy's despair was his little stuffed dog which resulted in the start of his collection.

It shows the importance of these toys, objects such as stuffed animals function for protective purposes, children can grow deeply attached to these objects. Particularly when these objects are treated as if they are alive. The objects are then detached from reality allowing the child to address him or herself in a tone of maturity and attain a state of wellbeing. The most important aspect of this lies in the fact that a doll or stuffed animal always has time for the child, it's there to satisfy their demand instantly.

Yet these objects are inconsistent, in the end they substitute for people, The touch of these toys seem to get rid of feelings of fear and frustration. It becomes a fantasy which provides the object with a power, expressing itself in an illusion that the fears of being alone and forgotten are dealt with. It's a made up companionship between child and toy which makes it possible for the child to put aside his troubles.

The differences between the child's playthings and the adult's collectibles aren't that huge. While adults may experience the same stressful situations which are comparable to that of Paul, for example, a job where the adult is obliged to follow certain rules continuously. The adult might spend his leisure time collecting things. Just like the child with his toys, the collector is able to create a self-created private world. A Collection can provide a sense of power, he or she is in control, a small world systematized and organized by its owner.

Muensterberger suggests that the drive to collect derives from traumatic experiences. Serving as a kind of medical care or drug, transforming feelings of loss and anxiety into a source of activity and distraction. My research in the writings of Muensterberger didn't confirm my first assumption, which was that the motivation of the collector (of toys/Kinder Surprise) might lie in a form of sentimentality.

Although it did confirm that the past and collecting are intertwined. Gathering and keeping objects of a subjective value is among other things a way to preserve the past or on the other hand a way to deal with it. It's a way to express identity and therefore I believe that I don't differ all that much from the obsessed collector.

## 5. Collecting In relation to my own artistic practice (conclusion)

I chose the subject of collecting because to a certain degree I can relate to the collector, I suspect to an extent that there is a connection between my work and the collector. Therefore it seemed relevant to explore the phenomenon, aspiring to clarify not only for myself but as well to others the concept and meaning of my artistic practice.

In my personal work, my interest essentially lies in the process of remembering. My work often (not always) starts with an object or place from my childhood. What intrigues me in this approach of working is the unreliable nature of memory. Unpredictable things happen in the translation of thoughts (memories) into material, something new emerges. In addition, new associations are evoked during the creative process (often during sketching). It is mainly these unconscious, lost memories that intrigue and affect me.

Here lies the connection with the collector. While working I occasionally experience something which is perhaps best described as collecting unconscious associations. Although this comparison is somewhat simplistic, it has stimulated a genuine interest in me to research and delve into the collector's world. My interest in the subject of 'collecting' often relates to certain places (or experiences) from childhood which changed over time. It's the lack of personal documentation of these places which intrigues me, how this makes me speculate how objects and spaces looked like and how I interacted with them.

When I think about documentation and memory and their connection with collecting in a general sense, I have to think about photography. As we all take pictures which functions as a support for our memory, while looking back at a picture you'll see exactly what a certain situation looked like, which objects and people surrounded you and all the details you tend to forget are there.

While I am grateful for the photo album I own assembled by my mother. The subjects depicted in this album mostly consist of family gatherings, vacations, school photos and some spontaneous moments. It seems that these moments are perhaps also the most important ones to document, the kind of photos you would expect in a photo album. Yet looking at these pictures now they evoke a curiosity in that which is outside of the frame. All the (forgotten) objects/things which occupied my surrounding areas including: playgrounds, schools, trees I climbed etc. Sculpture and drawing are a way for me to explore the things that were never recorded or were ever seen as important.

While an average suburb in the Netherlands built in the late 1970's may not be interesting to everyone, it has a great value to me as it has become part of my identity. This is where I detect another link to the documentary: *Een bitterzoete verleiding*, while the Surprise egg figures seem to have little objective value they contain a great sentimental quality. Perhaps this is the same sentimentality combined with curiosity which drives me to make work.

The places or objects no one really paid much attention too, are to such a degree identical to the Kinder Surprise toys. While I personally don't look at the Kinder Surprise toy figures as something valuable neither do I have any sentimental connection with them. On the other hand I do consider them as something which stands parallel to how we value art.

In addition to the Kinder Surprise collectors, art connoisseurs are also interested in the figures. Prof. Dr. V. Fischer, curator of the design department of the Museum für Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt, even counts the Kinder Surprise figures as 'real art. As he dedicated an exhibition to the toys. He compares the figures with paintings from Salvador Dali and the Dada movement.

He says: *"Besides it's something fun for kids to play with. It has something Dadaist. A Dadaist kind of humor or fantasy that also functions with adults, by that I mean, it has levels of alienation. Levels in the fantasy that consist of certain realities. They sometimes look a bit like a Salvador Dali painting"*.

While I do follow Fischer's reference to the surrealist painter (Salvador Dali) and the Dada movement in their appearance aesthetically, I don't agree to consider them as "real art", the enormous scale in which the Kinder Surprise Eggs are manufactured disqualifies them as art for me. Due to Fischer's claim that the Dada esque quality present in the toys is the reason for the Surprise eggs to be such a success with adults, made me look back at the research papers by Baker and Gentry (1996) and Formanek (1991).

Comparing the two researches it seemed that the motivations of adult and child collectors don't differ that much. Children and Adults collect with a shared impuls to show themselves as well as to others what they are capable of. Gathering objects of interest helps to learn about that certain topic which enhances self-identity and just like a family photo album it shows that they are unique.

The most interesting and most difficult aspect of the documentary *Een bitterzoete verleiding* is the fact that adults collect objects which are originally made for children. It's hard to take Aad and Elly seriously with the silly/funny music which has been edited in their interviews but what seems important to me is to mention that we all share some of these collector's characteristics. Especially for someone who creates "artworks", it seems that an artwork can be the materialisation of a collection of thoughts. Besides the narcissistic aspect mentioned by Formanek (1996) I would like to consider that you can learn throughout making. Just how my thoughts during making stimulated the interest in the motivations of the collector.

That's why I would like to mention my contemplation on the meaning of my own work in relation to the viewer and what Fischer said about the different kinds of layers he discovered inside of the Kinder Surprise figures. This is something I wish to accomplish by making works myself. Taking something which is subjectively valuable to me like objects (or certain memories of places) which are part of my childhood and translating them into material.

This is where memory plays an important role. Because memories are unreliable and biased they automatically add “abstract” layers to the work which are free for interpretation. By making work this way I try to accomplish the same layered quality in my work that Fischer described in the Kinder Surprise egg.

As ceramics has been my choice of medium for the last 2 years, I have contemplated on the meaning of clay in relation to my concepts. As I lacked experience with clay before coming to the department I was confronted with the unreliability of the material. The transformative aspects of clay while drying and firing seems to have a relation to the nature of memory. As clay is something that can change shape easily like our memories. In contradiction, after clay has dried and has been fired the shape is fixed. I find this an interesting metaphor for the behavior and motivations that collectors have. As they collect something to preserve and hold on to.

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