MISTAKING ARTIFICE FOR REALITY

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MISTAKING ARTIFICE FOR REALITY

Presented by Jenny Kistner Dowd a candidate for the degree of MFA

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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‘Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them.’
By Walter Benjamin (Layne 2001, 77).
Since childhood I have been interested in various collections. For a while it was bottle caps, then stamps, later thimbles; I even collected the objects I had accumulated within my pocket by the end of the day. The most important collection from my childhood was of paper napkins. My parents and I saw this as an inexpensive and unique way to record our travels. After picking up a decorated napkin from a restaurant, I would write the year on the back and store it in a box. As the rest of my family found out about my collection they began to send me napkins, usually accompanied with a note that described where it had been found. As my collection grew I periodically reorganized it until from memory I could recite who gave me each napkin, where it was from and any interesting information about the napkin. When I reorganized the collection, I often separated the napkins according to those I had collected personally or those given to me by friends or relatives. Although I was interested in those given to me by others, the pure collection was comprised only of napkins I had collected.

While I no longer collect napkins, I have renewed a collection that began as a childhood entomology project. Today this is an ill-suited activity since I find it difficult to kill these creatures for the sake of adding them to a display. Rather than kill these insects I often go out of my way to find them already dead or stalk them, waiting until they die naturally. Regardless of how the insects come to my
collection, my act of harvesting turns them into beautiful objects now in my 
control. I am free to study the insect closely without it crawling away or stinging 
me.

I cannot help but get excited when I have an insect on the spreading 
board. By moving the wings, legs, antennae, then pinning them into position to 
dry, each insect is permanently presentable and ready for closer examination. At 
this point the insect is an object, or specimen, and I do not think of it as a living 
creature. Through this act I have gained control over my dislike or fear of creepy 
crawly insects with 6 legs, and my curiosity has taken over to the point of 
dominance.

It is this dichotomy of control and dominance that has fueled my 
fascination with collections. For example I recently met some people who 
maintain a very different philosophy within their collection of monarch butterfly 
cocoons. They place these cocoons in small butterfly tents and tend them until 
they hatch. It is at this point that they set the butterfly free in a place that they 
believe to be safe from predators. So great is their devotion that they take these 
cocoons with them to work, on vacation, even out to eat, all so that they will not 
miss the hatching and the chance to set free the object of their love. When I met 
this couple, they had traveled over 1,200 miles with at least 6 monarch cocoons. 
They set the hatched butterflies free in a new environment, one that they knew 
nothing about, assuming only that any consequences of their actions would be 
positive.
Even though I feel guilty for killing insects, my collection is sincere in that I am motivated solely by the desire to study and observe certain insects. The people who gather monarch cocoons, do so in a dogmatic attempt to play a beneficial role in the propagation of an endangered species. They hold the hope of counteracting the habitat destruction of the monarch already created by human infringement on environment. Meanwhile they are doing this by disrupting the habitat of each monarch that they move, seemingly unaware of the contradictions in their behavior. I am not condemning preservation, instead I am questioning the validity of this type of collection/behavior. I am also wondering at what point is it that collectors must confront the choice between life and death.

While collections are usually seen as innocent pastimes, they can also develop into an obsessive activity. Napkins were a way to remember special events from my childhood. Originally the entomology collection taught me about anatomy and classification, now I look at it as an interesting way to stop and take a closer look at the things that I may not notice or may take for granted.

The behavior that highlights the point at which obsessions and collections merge to become devices of control is exemplified through the collection and disbursement of monarch butterfly cocoons. While these actions each fall under the category of a collection, they have varying levels of honesty towards outcome and help to define the complexity of the relationship between collector and collection.
Chapter 1
The Role of Collector

Collections have somber implications. The context imposed onto objects that have been elevated and isolated to the status of a collection is a manufactured one. Commonplace, temporal or captivating objects are relegated to the sterile status of specimens when they are collected for the sake of preservation and study. For me this obsessive act of collecting is disconcerting, yet at the same time strangely satisfying.

In my body of work, *Mistaking Artifice for Reality*, it is precisely this tension between satisfaction, study and obsession that serves as my focus. In this installation the created object has been transformed in a disturbing manner by being isolated, duplicated, measured, organized, studied, broken, preserved and catalogued. (Image 1) An insidious undertone of control saturates the environment in which this study takes place, seeking to cause a shift in the perception of the viewer. The arena and method of study is meant to be unsettling. This installation highlights the obsessive qualities of human nature and the consequences of a devotion that stem from the human penchant for obsessive collection, dominance, study and control. Once we take objects into our possession and elevate them to the status of being special or prized, the object is transformed into something artificial.

The institution that specializes in the collection and control of objects and artifacts is of course the museum; it is within their collections that museums
present objects to be studied through display. These objects, whether in a natural history museum or science museum, have been removed from their familiar environments. Through their isolation and subsequent insertion into an artificial setting, each object is transformed into a specimen with the purpose of being studied and preserved. In 1727 C.F. Neikelius stated that, “man can only acquire knowledge of the physical world through libraries and curiosity collections. Museums are to help man understand himself and his world . . .” (Pearce 1992, 99). This is an important, if not daunting, task. Museums are not just tourist attractions or places to learn about history or objects that we would never see unless we spent most of our lives traveling around the world. Museums are also storage centers with the capabilities to preserve objects for future generations. Without these centers, tangible artifacts would be lost and would be remembered only through verbal descriptions; however there is a point at which the museum, or any collector, makes the decision to save an object and gains control over the life or death of the legacy of that item. The decision of ownership and subsequent control is the point at which I am highlighting through my own process of studying an object that has become a specimen.

For a few years I worked as the Registrar’s Assistant in a museum, inscribing the accession numbers onto the three dimensional objects in the collection. I was excited but also saddened by the addition of each number, which depending on the material of the object is a permanent process. At the same time that a piece of history was being gained the museum was also adding,
or inflicting, a history onto the object. When an item is passed from one museum to another, the old accession number, or coding system, is left intact to display the history of ownership. I felt as though there was a change in the identity of an object at the point of accession; especially as most were doomed to sit in a dark room, preserved but lifeless.

Collections occur in many different contexts, not only within the formal constraints of the museum. Personal collections begin when someone realizes that she has been drawn to a particular type of object and through this realization she is led to deliberate collecting. Collections can also be competitive since, “. . .prestige is. . a major collecting motive here, especially where the collection can serve to give public legitimacy to fortunes amassed in trade and commerce” ( Pearce 1992, 51). Similarly, with the hope of a collection being discovered, “. . many modern collectors . . cherish the hope that their collections will eventually achieve this kind of honour . . .” ( Pearce 1992, 51). This financial motivation may be a large factor in any collection of value. Rare coins, stamps or art are just a few items that may be collected for their worth. Often families pass objects of worth down through generations to continue the prestige of their name. These valuable collections can become synonymous with the name of the family who maintain the objects, which offer a relationship of duality. The collector cares for the objects that in turn offer prestige to the family or collector.

Possibly the most common motive for collecting is nostalgia. Two of the reasons for nostalgic collections are: an interest in preserving the past through
historical artifacts and the documentation of personal memories. My childhood collection of paper napkins belongs in this category. The napkins were an interesting way for me to hold on to memories and events that I had enjoyed. It is obvious that humans collect objects they are interested in or that are a reminder of something enjoyable. As we add to our collections and memories, the objects that we surround ourselves with become an extension of identity.

Additionally, “. . . collections are objects of love, but they are also objects of dominance and control” (Pearce 1992, 51). By taking ownership of objects the collector is in control of their treatment. The people that I met who collect and redistribute monarch butterfly cocoons have taken ownership of this process. They have also taken control of the environment in which this happens. The owner is allowed to touch, move, play with and care for her collection and at the same time is the only one who can grant this privilege to a visitor. As objects take on this surrogate identity they can prove to be easier to control than other aspects of our lives. Preserved in a nostalgic moment that the collector is more interested than in her own time, the objects defy time by outliving the collector. In the end these objects bestow immortality upon the person who maintained the collection. Therefore, these objects can cause a shift in the perception of the collector: as she sees herself preserved in the artificial stasis of living through a beloved object. It is in this way that the collector not only mistakes artifice for reality, but also transforms the artifice into her own reality.
Chapter 2
Cabinets of Curiosities

The earliest recorded collections, the cabinet of curiosities, have been documented throughout the Baroque period of Europe. Around 1600 in Naples, Italy the cabinet that belonged to Ferrante Imperato included, “Books, botanical and zoological specimens and jars are crowded together in carefully arranged profusion. Shells and marine creatures, including an enormous stuffed crocodile, are suspended from the ceiling” (Mauries 2002, 10). In the cabinet of curiosities space was dedicated to learning about the inhabitants of the world whether animal, vegetable or mineral. The inquisitive desire for discovery through exploration fueled these early museums and drew in visitors to view the marvels of the world. Just as the curiosity collection was the prime place to learn about these wonders, it was also a key to understanding life:

…it is like a shadow cast by the ‘unknown,’ an unknown that dissolves into a shower of objects. It offers an inexhaustible supply of fragments and relics painstakingly slotted and fitted into the elected space, heavy with meaning of a secret room (Mauries 2002, 12).

Within these spaces the collector/scientist/naturalist created a system to document and catalogue each item; shelves, drawers and hanging devices packed the walls. Each item had a place; a drawer would be opened to neatly organized insects, shells or plant fragments. The specimens were coded and studied by the collector who placed meaning onto and drew hypotheses from the items. Through these collections, order could potentially be made from or imposed upon the world, by “. . appropriating to itself the chaos of the world
and imposing upon it systems—however arbitrary—of symmetries and
hierarchies” (Mauries 2002, 12). By taking the chaos of the world and organizing
it, the world could be neatly packaged, possibly even understood. Within these
collections natural objects could be held in the hand, placed under a magnifying
glass, or controlled in ways of a particularly human construction.

My exhibition, Mistaking Artifice for Reality, is similar to a cabinet of
curiosities whose,

...intention was not merely to define, discover and possess
the rare and unique, but also, and at the same time, to inscribe them
within a special setting which would instill in them layers of
meaning. Display panels, cabinets, cases and drawers were a
response not only to a desire to preserve, or to conceal from view,
but also to a parallel impulse to slot each item into its place in a
vast network of meanings and correspondences...the cabinet
would become a place of inspection (Mauries 2002, 25).

The similarities between this and my own intentions dissipate after our
shared motivations to collect based on initial curiosity. Unlike the
conglomeration of the cabinet of curiosities, I have set up an intense study of one
subject, a re-created Golden Rain Tree seedpod. (Image 2) This is a porcelain
and wire representation that is now made from my memory of the object. I am
drawn to seedpods because I want to see inside of them, to the small space that
houses such a great potential for life. I also want to pick them up, hold them,
while I enjoy their portability. This particular pod fascinates me because of its
shape and papery yet strong structure. Instead of using a mold I have replicated the pods by hand in order to make each one unique. They are cut from aluminum screen wire, stitched together, coated in porcelain, and fired. The use of clay adds fragility to the pod, while the metal gives it form, makes it strange, and enhances the fragility.

In *Mistaking Artifice for Reality*, the pods begin in boxes and are organized by the approximate date that they were made. (Image 4 and 5) These boxes are efficient, practical, and yet elegant enough so as not to draw attention from the more important areas of the pod study. The pods are then balanced side-by-side on a 4 foot tall, 2 inch wide, 40 foot long steel stand and are arranged from largest to smallest. (Image 3) When I stand in front of the pods, they are just below my nose. I do not need to sit or bend down to view them; they are ready for me to study. Numbers, which refer to the length and circumference of each pod, have been permanently inscribed onto each pod. Similar to artifacts catalogued in a museum or any scientific study, these numbers define the parameters of the study. By arranging the pods by size these numbers allow me to make sense or order of my collection.

A tall stand with wheels is positioned near the pods. (Image 6) It is about nine inches square and has a flexible arm with a small magnifying glass. A small stool, just large enough for my feet, flips down from the side and when I stand on it I am 6 inches above the structure that holds the pods. This puts me at the ideal height to study the pods through the magnifying glass with little or no
adjustment. Since there are hundreds of pods it is only logical that I create the apparatus that is used in the study to be efficient and comfortable for me.

After leaving the stands, the pods are enclosed in transparent silk bags, crushed and pinned to the wall. (Image 7) They are still in order according to size and a typewritten tag is stitched inside of each bag, corresponding to the number on the broken pod. Once on the wall, the pods have been put into a final catalogued collection. By crushing the objects created and accumulated, I am ending one phase of the collection; the pod could only be returned to its previous state by painstaking repair. In a sense I have killed the object or studied it to death. However, each scrap of broken pod is saved because my control over this object does not allow me to dispose of anything. By preserving each pod another collection from the original collection is being made.

As in the cabinet of curiosities, there is no precedent for the study of this object; hence I have invented a method that makes sense to me. When I want to learn about something that does not make sense the first thing I do is go to a library. Because of this a research library has been placed in this space to support the study of the pods. The library is a collection unto itself. (Image 8) This space is defined by a 7-foot square frame, which visually outlines the library and is the distance I can reach when sitting in the middle of the enclosure. It is just over my height of 5 feet. In the center is a small stool and table where one can sit to conduct studies. Surrounding this furniture are shelves and nooks that
contain porcelain books. These representations of books are collections of information, the surfaces can only hint at their subjects since the books do not open. (Image 9 and 10)

The porcelain books are made up of thick slabs of clay some of which have been cut into, leaving openings in which objects have been permanently imbedded with wax or clay. These objects cannot be removed without destroying the surface or object; the information is present, hinted at but inaccessible to the viewer. Some books contain pods and give the impression of being about the study that is going on around this library. Others reflect different collections and subjects; teeth, paper packets, hair, other seedpods. The books cannot physically be opened and only offer a small amount of information regarding a seemingly fruitless project of research.

The layered surfaces give the impression of being built up and worn down over time. Smudges, fingerprints and striations similar to sedimentary rock make these books seem old with markings that refer to the accumulation of time. Smudges of text and other information are difficult to discern, much like...when (Ann) Hamilton offers a book open to a printed page whose type is effaced, or the recorded sounds of a voice that is muffled...We listen, search for, move into the moments when the marks or the utterances become part of a fabric that is readable, audible, sensorially knowable. This process for Hamilton’s audience in these situations is both conscious and not, conceptual and visceral, a function of time and motion (Simon 2002, 21).
The fragments of text draw the viewer into the surface but also cause her to strain because of the fragmentation. These are traces of something larger and allude to the remains left after a time worn study. There is a feeling of loss contained in the hint of information that once was. The books create tension because the information they contain is inaccessible.

The surfaces are layered with tea stains, charcoal, graphite, gesso and cloth. (Image 11) Within some of these layers are fragmented text and fingerprints. The surface is similar to a faded memory, subtle but rich with information. Some books have a coating of wax that act as a skin, preserving the information of the surface. These materials highlight the imperfections, such as: cracks in the terra sigillata, gouges, nicks and scratches all of which are the evidence of use. The surface is a recorder of time, contact and experience.

The books act to conceal information with weight and permanence acting as a facade, yet once the book has worn away there remains the hope that the object it is protecting will emerge and understanding will be gained. In essence, once a book is read, the meaning within becomes distilled and discernable to the reader. I have taken objects that I wish to learn more about, isolated them, and enclosed them in clay. By removing the context of the object and layering a surface onto the enclosure, I am asserting my own method of control onto these objects and forcing a context upon them. I have created the collection, information, method of object study and books in which these studies are contained.
Chapter 3
The Tension Within a Collection

Tension is an important element in this work, formally as well as psychologically. The stands holding the pods are tall and spindly, seeming as though they would easily topple over while negative space within the stands makes them feel light, but also provokes unease. The small space between each pod is just enough to make the floor visible through the structure. The precarious nature of these stands infuses the entire space and makes the room difficult to approach. Within the gallery the 40-foot long stand stretches down the center; forcing the viewer to confront the pods and the tension they create. The library is also in the center of the space, and must be walked around or through. The control of the environment and displacement of the object creates an uncomfortable feeling of voyeurism associated with the discovery of something private.

The repetition of pods strongly emphasizes the obsession of this collection and by extension the act of collecting itself. The obsessive, seemingly compulsive act has caused the loss of individually in the seedpods. It seems as though they have been collected for the sake of numbers or that a potential goal has been overshadowed by the addiction of the obsession. Every single pod has been treated in the same way- measured, numbered, lined up, bagged, numbered, crushed and pinned to the wall. In this work the process itself informs the viewer about the preoccupation. Everything in this space has been fabricated.
The elements are site, size, collector and collection specific. No other object could be studied in this space.

As the viewer is invited into my “cabinet of curiosities” it becomes apparent that this is a private space. As collector I am never seen working here, but the viewer/visitor is allowed to walk around in this space and see part of my process while gleaning clues and fulfilling the role of voyeur. The viewer becomes aware of her voyeuristic role through the examination of the study without a guide. She perceives the feeling of a human presence, and realizes the extent to which a collection has the full attention of the collector/researcher. This study does not appear to be going anywhere, it is endlessly and pointlessly cyclical. It seems instead as though it is happening out of habit or the need to control an object.

As viewers travel through the “laboratory,” they gather clues about the nature of the study as they see the objects as specimens. Unlike objects in the cabinet of curiosities, each pod I have manufactured must travel through the same process of study before it is preserved. This process traps the seedpod into the framework of the specimen, created and collected for the sake of observation and possession. It is within this framework that the viewer is led from one detail to the next: from the inscribed numbers on the pods, to the numbers typewritten and stitched inside the bags, to the number on the broken pod corresponding to the tag. (Image 12) During exploration the viewer should imagine what it would
be like to be devoted to the control of one object, and at the same time reflect on the human need to dominate through the ownership of collections.

In this installation the viewer comes into a controlled space and is engulfed by the study. Joan Simon described the installations of Ann Hamilton in a way that relates to this work.

The term *installation* implies a theatrical arena, indoors or out, in which the audience is invited to be actively present...and that may be sensual, social, political...It may employ sound, text, light, air, painting, found objects...conversely, it may be a space emptied of everything but its own presence- and, crucially, a viewer’s to witness it (Simon 2002, 12).

Like Hamilton the space entered by the viewer is controlled; a tangible mood has been created in the room. In an exhibition of Jannis Kounellis’s work the pieces were arranged to create “...a distinct feeling of dead space in the center of the room” (Gambrell 1988, 122). The odd and disquieting mood created in my installation should make viewers feel as though they have wandered into a laboratory with a collection/study foreign to them. The intent of this exhibition is to make the objects within the collection both disturbing and alluring. It is this dichotomy that has seduced me into the need to create and destroy.

Collections of objects can easily be related or linked to “...box sculpture... (which)...alters our consciousness, changing priorities from the external to interior world...” (Kuspit 1991, 31). My work is a type of box sculpture, as by separating my collection from the outside world I am granting it space and imbuing the objects with an intimacy. The installation has a feeling of waiting for the next step. Viewers must approach this work, just as they must look more
intently at a box sculpture or cabinet of curiosities. Kuspit mentions this invitation, “. . .the box sculpture does not so much present itself as to invite us into itself” (Kuspit 1991, 31). I want the viewer to have the urge to explore the piece, and to wonder about the process. The viewer should have the urge to touch, manipulate or crush the pods being studied, become involved in the piece, and through this become implicated in the action.

This collection is comprised of objects that I have systematically created, destroyed, and preserved with the utmost care and attention at each phase. The cyclical nature of this process is one that is rewarding yet painfully controlling, as it has become a reflection of my own obsessive behavior. My need for dominance over the objects I find fascinating has manifested itself into my collection, which now has more control over me than I over it. In the creation of this collection I have fallen into routines and habits, with the creation of each new pod beginning the subsequent cycle of cutting, forming and stitching the pod, coating it daily with layers of slip, firing, measuring, numbering, enclosing it and crushing it. This has become an honest and deliberate action, something that gives me pause, draining and fulfilling me as I pay homage to my collection.

It is through this homage that I begin to live through the pod and through my act of creation/collection. This study has taken over my life just as the pursuit of knowledge lured naturalists to add to their cabinets of curiosities. I have followed a similar pursuit rooted in obsession. Much like Ann Hamilton, who employs every inch of space in her installations, I have taken care that each
formal detail of this installation echoes the tension through repetition that is paramount to the precarious nature of the control and dominance found between collector and collection. Much like the box sculpture and the cabinets of curiosities, I am attempting to draw the viewer into this space in order to offer a glimpse into my obsession and my personal relationship to my collection.
Conclusion
Collected Process

The act of collecting objects is a human manufactured device of control. By elevating and isolating an object for its beauty, rarity, unusualness or interest the object is distilled into nothing more than a specimen, meant to be looked at, cared for, dusted, stored and worshiped. As objects become an extension of the collector’s identity they can substitute for reality by blurring the lines of ownership, control and dominance. By distilling my own obsessive act of creating, collecting and observing my remade version of the golden rain tree seedpod into a laboratory and library, I am asking the viewer to stop and observe how it is that humans collect, care for objects and subsequently mistake artifice for reality. It is in this act that an artifice is actually transformed into a truth that has been created by the collector through her obsessive act of creation, collection and dominance.

As I have traveled through my own cycle of creation, order, destruction, and preservation; I have come to terms with my need for this bizarre obsessive activity to provide myself with order and rhythm. I feel restless and unsure without this process and have begun to wonder what process I will next find or create to put myself at ease yet simultaneously offer this disquiet that I find so satisfying.
Bibliography


Vita

Jenny Kistner grew up in Derby, Kansas with parents who nurtured her interest in art from a young age. She attended Kansas State University, and in 2002 received a B.F.A. in ceramics. That summer she married Sam Dowd, a ceramic artist and sculptor, and moved to Columbia, Missouri to pursue an M.F.A in ceramics and fibers. Jenny has shown work regionally, nationally, and internationally, and recently has had a piece accepted into the permanent collection of the Jingdezhen Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute Museum in Jingdezhen, China.