

And in fact memory is a sort of anti-museum: it is not localizable. Fragments of it come out in legends. Objects and words have hollow places in which a past sleeps, as in the everyday acts of walking, eating, going to bed, in which ancient revolutions slumber.

—Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*

In the spring of 1997 I was invited by John Fleming to teach an undergraduate class at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, on artists' approaches to critical museum practices. After considering the intense layers of experiences that a group of young people could have with the cultural and sociological effects of museums, I decided to organize the class as a practical experiment in which we would collaboratively produce a series of exhibitions. Although I have been teaching for many years, this was a unique situation for me because many of the ideas that I had

Doug Ashford

The Exhibition as an Artistic Medium

applied to my artwork as a member of Group Material were to be used for the first time in the classroom, extending the possibility of critique and collaboration to a pedagogical situation. Coming at a time when Group Material had decided to no longer take on new projects or proposals—dissolving its

identity as an active organization—the Antioch project inevitably became an inflection of and a departure from my art practice.

Group Material was a collaboration of artists that, from 1979 to 1996, produced museum installations and artworks designed for advertising spaces. Attempting to confront directly the false neutrality of dominant museum practices, we adopted the uniforms of curatorial practice and publicity direction to engage new ideas of what art could be and whom it might be for. By including merchandising artifacts and marginalia, and by representing the politically disenfranchised and the historically isolated, Group Material created new models for the potential role of the museum. My involvement, which began in 1982, has let me understand the radical possibilities that artists present when they actively reorganize institutional traditions.

The classroom had always existed as a complement to my aspirations for the exhibitions and public projects developed by Group Material. But in teaching my tendency had been to downplay if not hide my artistic practice from students so as to avoid the traditional master/apprentice relationship and its attendant ideology of authority. I also expected school to be a sanctuary from the stresses of practical labor, a place where theoretical concerns could be allowed to gain a foothold. Thankfully, the students at Antioch, who were exhausted from the many legitimated inadequacies of academia, imparted a clear demand for rigorous critical thinking and its manifestation in effective forms. It is to them that I send the most concentrated thanks. For without Jesse Dew, Jonathan Dudley, Diana Heimbigner, Ben Leon, Jyl

Sutherland, Ethan Swan, and Clare Wildhack-Nolan, this project would never have happened.

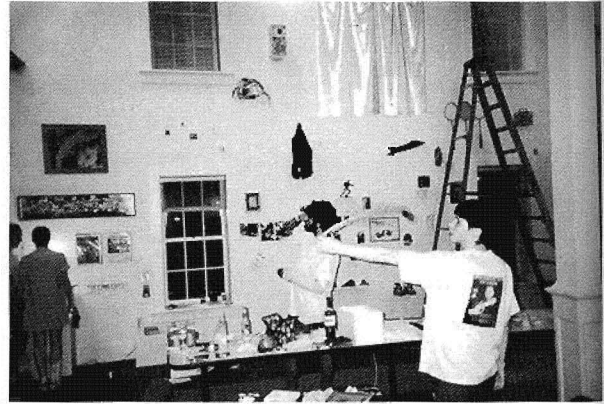
What follows are fragmentary documents of my month-long collaboration with these students, acknowledging the complex set of events that came together last summer in Yellow Springs. Traditional representations of education, whether proposals or records of effects, remain disappointing at best. In bringing together various pieces from our process in Antioch, I want to provide a truer representation of my efforts with the students than a straightforward theoretical or descriptive essay could. I hope this narrative composed of speculations, transcripts, quotations, and snapshots conveys the improvisational character of teaching. Running below the textual and visual fragments is the class syllabus. Not all of it was completed in the short time that the students and I had together—but most elements were tried.

In a four-week period, we produced five separate but related installations. The first mimicked the natural history museum but reassigned specimens found in nature to absurd and fictional classifications. After that I had the students photograph their own possessions so they would see themselves as authors of identities already consolidated through consumerism. A major field trip to the largest mall in the county followed this exercise. There, we researched the difference between collecting and accumulating as driving forces in the formation of our national character. We then toured Antiochiana, the college's historical archive, to see how institutions represent specific constituencies. From this experience we decided to make our own collective representation of Yellow Springs and its inhabitants. We asked many townspeople to lend us objects that they would normally not imagine belonging in a gallery or museum exhibition. Finally, I asked the students to produce an object that proposed a translation of the sentiment and longing that motivate most personal collections.

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Syllabus

The true crisis in art cultural theory is between the view of art as object and the alternative view of art as practice. The function and habits of the contemporary museum are today under great critical and social pressure. No longer accepted as pristine containers, their galleries and catalogues are increasingly understood as repositories for ideological and emotional directives. This course will examine the role artists and audiences have had in shifting definitions of the art exhibition through the students' actual production of an exhibition or a series of exhibitions. Students will be introduced to nontraditional exhibition practices from Dada to the alternative arts movement. The questions of audience participation, the creation of critical narratives within institutions, and the destabilization of stereotypes and identities will be examined. Together we will seek to redefine the accepted notions of our public and private lives.



1. Collections exist as cultural directives, urging us toward convenient fictions of individuality, discretion, and completeness. Through them we simultaneously acknowledge and disavow the potential for many forms of activity in relation to other people. Attending the conscious and unconscious notions of social selves, the class looked for collections in the department store, the magazine, the street, and, most important in the context of the class, the museum. We tried to place the idea of the collection into a permanent state of reconstruction, as something that continuously (re)describes human and social relations through objects.

2. Students impressed on me the fact that audience participation always requires interpretation of museum contexts. In response, I encouraged direct interpretive placements through the radical juxtaposition of cultural forms. For example, a copy of *Mein Kampf* from the archives could be exhibited next to a packet of Zoloft left over from a medicated junior. This kind of juxtaposition engenders the students' interpretive reception of collections. Similar to montage in cinema, such an approach creates new meaning through the simultaneous alignment and disjuncture of multiple realities.

day 1 Discuss drawing of a room from memory without disclosure. Discuss reading from André Breton, *Mad Love*. Collect twenty objects on a walk that we take together from the campus to the nature preserve. Make an 8½-by-11-inch drawing of each object that you feel discloses something about it. Try to make drawings that could serve as a way to categorize them according to form, function, or concept. You may concentrate on the whole or on fragments of these objects. Continue these drawings at home.

Read Paul Valéry, *Man and a Seashell*.

day 2 Organize and critique drawings: discuss Valéry in conjunction with this work. View and discuss slides of nature guides and other diagrams of natural orders. Discuss first three chapters of Gustave Flaubert, *Brouvard and Pécuchet*. Read chaps. 4–6. Continue to collect objects from nature.



3. Early on, I wanted the students to understand a politicized idea of the artistic model as having two distinct characters. On the one hand is the model as archetype, a conceptual or formal example to be emulated or reproduced in other fields. On the other is the more active conception of "modeling," a process of representing an unknown future. It is through such anticipation that the inconsistencies, failures, and melancholia of democracy can be communicated and felt at a cultural level. Acts of visual associative construction that are never complete, always in process, can also mirror positions of radical subjectivity that democracy requires. After all, it is a particular subject's arrangement of the detritus and effluvia of our time that makes the wall of the museum, consolidating authority into a coherent representation. Rarely do museums produce actual discursive interchange with the ongoing and shifting concerns of audiences.

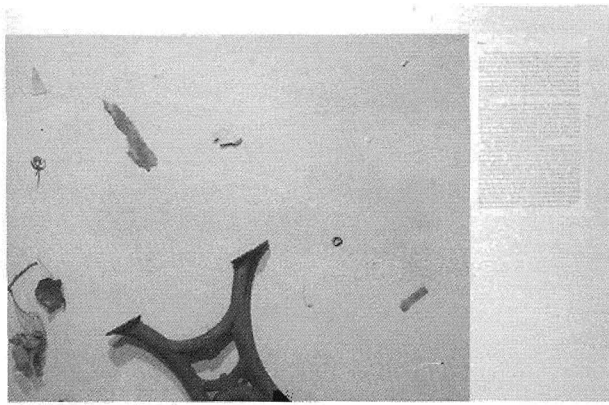


4. We began by collecting objects on a walk through the natural surroundings of the immediate campus, using hobby nature guides as an organizational form against which to react. The challenge for the students was to fabricate their own system of categorization, to make associations between their collected objects that would rename and reorganize their experience. After inventing many absurdist homologies, we created a fictional classification system following the nature guides' organization of flowering plants based on the color of their petals. It was not enough to know that our own organization of natural history revealed conventional structures; we had to be able to demonstrate this to other people in the form of a museum display. We later wrote didactic texts for their museum presentation that embraced the random association of objects by concocting an invented provenance.

day 3 Collaboratively invent a categorizing or listing system for the objects collected on our walk. This guide can be obtained from visual characteristics such as size, color, texture, and shape, or from invented categories that may not be visual. Name each object (and your drawing of it) and decide on its identity in relation to other things you know or could imagine about nature and culture. This can be a fictional identification system, but it must make some sense to a viewer or reader (in other words, it must be legible).

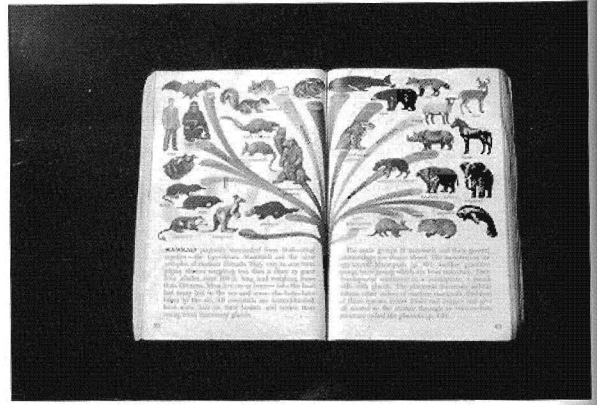
Discuss Valéry, *Man and a Seashell*.

day 4 Compare and discuss our experiments and apply them to a critical tour of the Antioch archives. Short slide talk on *Market*, an exhibition by Group Material. Read Russel Belk, *The Rise of Consumer Society*. It is our guide to shopping tomorrow, so make sure you look at it. Remember to check out archives on your own if you can.



5. "This collection represents the most exciting finds from a series of digs conducted in the land basin which housed our ancient civilization. Through a sorting process, it became obvious that the objects were remnants of our ancient civilization's domesticated life. Two examples of the scamper worm, whose nose is harvested, and the paint brush, whose leaves and needles found use in these ancient households, fell into such a classification without any debate. However, as this collection's relations became more vague, differences of opinion have developed. Perhaps the most reliable theme is the morbid fascination with death (especially slow death) and life after death that these objects suggest. One cannot help but marvel at the brutal honesty shown by these men and women who chose to confront the everyday reality of death, without taboo, rather than relegate it to the unspeakable as today's norms dictate. We must, however, prevent ourselves from thinking that these ancient men and women were constantly dark-faced in a sober, candid manner, and it is in light of the absurd connotation to a very large salmon that we must remind ourselves that repetitive action does not define a generation."

—Ethan Swan, for an automatic-writing assignment to create labels in the natural-history section of our installation



6. Nature is told to us as a specific system of associations and categories, but it is not necessarily experienced that way. Asked to make associations between an assortment of objects in terms of color, shape, or form, most of us would rarely group them into a coherent body recognizable through a traditional taxonomy. Nature guides produced for children or hobbyists are significant because of the way that they train us at an early age to accept an image of an ordered natural sphere. Here, the natural world has been contained to reflect the ideal of a defended, nonchaotic, fearless self. I wanted the students to understand the ideological foundations and effects of natural history as represented in the "simple" diagrams in nature guides.

day 5 Collect twenty objects on a walk we take together through a mall. Each of us should be prepared to spend some money on things that fascinate us. Discuss archives. Discuss Flaubert. Begin to read Flaubert chaps. 7–9. Over the weekend: Take ten photographs of things in your home that we can make into an exhibition, decide how each photograph relates to the whole, and be prepared to arrange them in real time. Get them developed at the one-hour place on Monday. Continue to collect objects from nature and culture.

day 6 Make an arrangement of your photos. Look at each other's collections and formulate questions. Collaboratively perform an interview for someone else in the class on their collection of photographs; take notes to find new interview techniques. Try to discover the different relationships this person has with his or her set of objects. How does photography mediate these objects? Conceive of ways to gather valued objects from other members of the Antioch community through a written survey or organization of interviews. Discuss Belk and the relationship of sumptuary codes to our experiences while shopping. Read Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library." Continue to collect objects from culture and nature. Fabricate an object, either from art-making materials or from manipulating a found object that could be described from the narrative I pass out in class about the opera fan.



7. If objects condition subject formation, then the class had to ask itself how the accumulation and display of objects mediate associations between subjects. In other words, we had to imagine how our collection could describe social relations. We speculated on the possibility of representing transformative notions of public life configured from an already existing visual culture. Our process would not be about inventing new forms per se but would involve rearranging, reorganizing, and thus redefining the ways in which culture shapes social and political reality. By reconfiguring visual culture in a new collection, in a different context, through unexpected juxtapositions, we wanted to make a picture of the way things *could* be. Such a level of idealism was difficult to communicate to the students who thought of the museum only as the repository of the culture's worst nightmares.



8. If the class could understand the natural history museum as a constructed narrative, we could also fictionalize ourselves. I gave each student a camera and asked them to photograph things in their homes that they most treasured. We talked about how our possessions build identity by objectifying our ongoing invention of memories. By presenting the photos to each other, the students exposed their constructed selves and experienced a transcendent notion of identity that is prepared to live beyond its material life. This was understood literally as our possessions survive our passing, and figuratively, as the formation of a description that will always precede us. In other words, objects both outlive and describe the subject. The students also wanted to figure out why possession seems so fragmented and partial to the owner. They found out that the things that they buy, find, or make constitute their individuality. Through their collecting, photographing, and writing about things, I was hoping that the students would recognize the critical value of creating fictions about themselves and how such self-invention is always operative in the making of "pictures."

day 7 Trade lists, objects, and photographs and make an arrangement from another person's collection. Use interviews in class to help you write an annotation to this collection. Discuss and critique in class with help from interviews.

Develop a survey that we can announce at the community meeting this afternoon. Read Belk, "Individual Collectors." At home begin to search through print and electronic media for advertisements or other forms of publicity culture you find repulsive or attractive. Write a one-page description of the photographs of objects you have been given as if they were part of a larger narrative.

day 8 Critique objects fabricated from story distributed on day 6. Decide on an interview format for collecting more Antiochiana. Discuss the sitelessness of the collection. Is there a theme for an exhibition yet? Is it our wondercabinet? How can we make a conceptual and visual web that will connect the various parts of the cabinet that we have produced so far? Produce a flyer requesting objects and announcing exhibition. Look through art books on collections that have been put on reserve.



9. No course on the museum is complete without an investigation of the mall. A devious way that we have been taught to understand objects is through their commodification, which calls on us to embrace them as extensions of ourselves. The deferral of subjectivity and its repetitive re-creation through accumulation was something I wanted the students to experience. So I took them to the mall, gave them each twenty dollars, and asked them to spend it on an object they felt represented the relationship between the logic of the department store and their own identities. While at J. C. Penney's, I found a purple tank top designed for teenage girls that was emblazoned with the logo EVERLAST. As a readymade, this item seemed to parody collecting on both an individual and an institutional level. As the class came to understand, collections create histories that outlast the experiences of those who live them. The idea of lasting forever, as expressed through a fashion statement for a teenage girl, I still find particularly moving.



10. "With my new appreciation for aesthetics, my favorite object is my new pair of Calvin Klein boxer shorts. I now honestly see a type of beauty in the style and expense of Calvin Klein underwear. One of the amazing things about CK underwear is that it comes with a statement about who you are and who you want to be. It forces a reality check on your ability to live up to CK standards and it always encourages you to try harder. To understand the beauty of my CK underwear, all you have to do is find a CK ad. With men in underwear, there's no confusion, no frustration, no need to question the beauty of the product when it's on the right man."
—Ben Leon, from a class assignment on describing a valued object from the home

day 9 Brainstorm on how to contextualize the objects we have so far. What other objects can we combine with them to create new and different meanings from this collection? Is there a common denominator for these collections as a collaboratively made exhibition? Visit gallery and meet curators. Install what we have so far. Discuss design in context of a slide show of other installations. At home, look through print and electronic media for cultural objects in the form of advertisements. Bring in any that you have strong feelings for, either of pleasure or disgust. Read Jean Baudrillard, "The System of Collecting."

day 10 Discuss our advertisements in class (remember that others are mediating this collection, as a phantom presence). Make an arrangement of these images. Discuss Belk and Baudrillard. Experiment with various labeling and presentation systems of display and didactics in the gallery. Discuss Flaubert, chaps. 7–9. Read Flaubert, *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. Over the weekend: Write a description of a fictional collector. First decide on an arena of collecting and then try to think of how a collector would treat that arena. What does he or she collect? What is his or her particular relation-

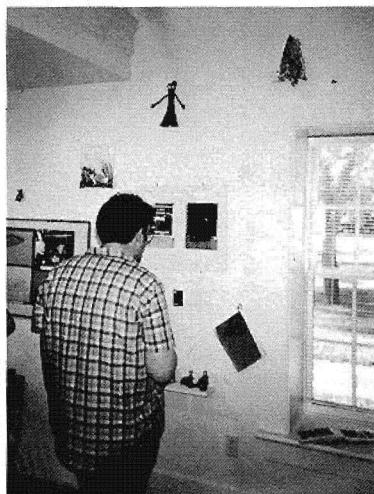


11. Antiochiana, the college's official archive, was our introduction to the immortalized residue of historical intellectual labor. Here under the guidance of archivist Scott Sanders, the students experienced firsthand the ideological consequences of institutional collecting, observing how an organization they were attending was constructing a history around them. Rightly, they perceived this organization as projecting each of them personally into the membership of a predefined "community." We discussed archives in relationship to the "sampling," the selective reediting of culture, that each of us performs in our lives. The management of our own records and books, for example, shows how we delegate personal cultural attention according to the terms set by historical archives. It was important to me to have the students compare the legislative nature of official history to the potentially discursive character of their own personal consumption. In these days of the symbolic perpetuation of democracy through consumption, autonomy is constantly confused with the mythical act of individualized choice as usually defined by shopping. The institutionalized collection of an archive gives us another model of culture as a discursive and appropriative set of collaborative acts. The students rightly understood such a model as something that demands active participation and struggle.

ship with the objects collected? Consider drawing the collector. Optional: Write a conversational exchange between two people who love this collector at the opening of his or her display of this collection. Read Judith Barry, "Casual Imagination." Visit five people and request an object from each. Use the survey as a base for this activity.

day 11 Make a list of publicity slogans from our advertisements and the collection of magazines in our room. Put them into computers to make them more visual. Try to organize your list according to a specific theme or idea. Do not let us know what that theme is; let the list determine its own subject. Apply this listing to the objects of nature and culture we have collected and more specifically to the items in the archives.

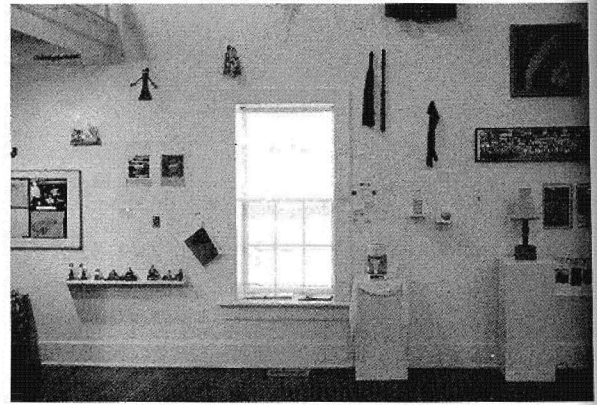
day 12 Continue this at home. Maybe these are our museum directional signs?



12. An alternative collection is one that legibly disassembles and reorganizes authoritative museum practices. We tried to create a collection that would represent not only the residents of Antioch and Yellow Springs but that would describe the class to itself through the valued objects of others. We actively solicited objects from other people by visiting their homes and workplaces and distributing flyers that requested the following: "Bring us something from your home which you value and you feel that represents you and your life. We are interested in borrowing your favorite item or product for an art show that we are producing. This can be something that you have recently made or the most beautiful or the ugliest thing that you own. This most certainly can be an object that may not appear to belong in a museum. It can simply be something that represents you or what occupies you. But it can also be a thing that betrays you, something that is forbidden."



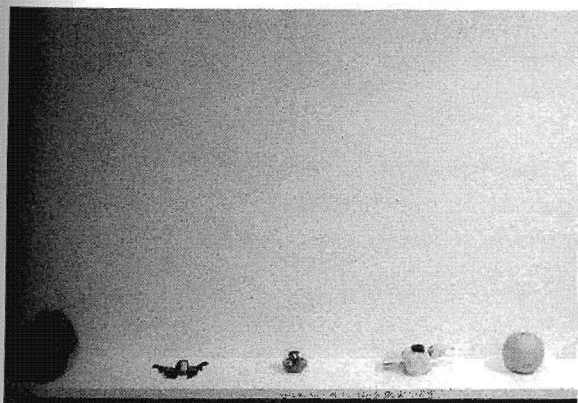
13. People brought us all kinds of things, and the students were put in the difficult position of fulfilling the role of the curator. They became selectors in an archival sense, trying to construct a living history of their experiences as members of a social group defined by location. This responsibility weighed very heavily on them, and many of our class discussions focused on how artistic autonomy can operate in the guise of institutional authority. Wisely, many of the students realized that a large proportion of the audience would identify our artistic practice as emanating from the traditional legitimacy of the museum. We tried to develop a form of autoethnography by exposing the process of selection in the way objects were contextualized and arranged. I pressured the students to see the museum in a more complex manner, as more than a representation of scholarship's interests and desires. The students themselves, in physically handling what other people loved, became de-centered from the idea of objectivity and acted against their own previously outlined conceptions of representing a "community" accurately. The tangible effect of other people's values forced the students temporarily to adopt different subjectivities. They repeatedly asked: Why would someone bring such a thing to us?



14. To find out the character of the relationship between an object and its donor, it was crucial for the students to have direct conversations. Descriptive texts that resulted from these conversations were written on the walls to function as museum labels. This gesture maintained the public's discernment of originality and authenticity. But for some of the students, our accumulation and the very act of gathering and re-presenting the town's diverse voices had its own value. The coherence of the museum was lost to them, replaced by a participatory process of inclusion and interpretation that could go on forever. Meaning was no longer localized to the intention of the collector, no longer sited in its "origin." The production of meaning became available to the students as agents independent of the object.

day 13 Gather collection together and plan for labeling and other display problems. Discuss and plan to purchase or make display systems. Are there other ways we can contextualize this material? Read Douglas Crimp, "On the Museum's Ruins."

day 14 Continue work on exhibition. Produce publicity. Discuss Crimp.



15. Although the students produced four exhibitions of the artifacts we collected, I also wanted them to make an installation from objects they would produce with their own hands. One question missing from the class was why people feel the need to make rather than contextualize a thing. So with apologies to Wayne Koestenbaum, I stole a story from his book *The Queen's Throat* and told them to construct an object that would fit into it:

"There once was a man who had a kind of personality that kept him away from most of the rest of society. The reasons for this were partly a secret even to himself. He had a menial job that never really excited him. He stayed in his apartment every night and listened to music. He had very few friends. He never had a lover except the opera. He started going to the opera when he was fifteen. There was much he loved about it, but he was obsessed with sopranos especially a very significant singer named Madeline. He never missed her performances and only traveled when he knew she would be singing somewhere. Eventually, the ushers and backstage people at the opera house became familiar with him. He was able to travel freely about the house and even slip backstage. Sometime in his 20s he began to leave Madeline a _____ at her dressing room door after every performance, always the same object, always the same thing. Sometimes she

would catch him standing about or walking away, but in deference to his character, she never approached him. She never confronted him. He was, after all, a fan. He never knew in turn what she thought of the repeated gift. They never spoke. After very many years it was announced that this opera star was going to retire and her final performance would be *Madama Butterfly*. At the last curtain call there were many, many roses being thrown on the stage. There were many people screaming and crying. And for those of you who have been to opera you know that this is not uncommon. In the midst of the applause Madeline reached inside her kimono and pulled out a _____ exactly like that which he had been giving her all these years and carefully stepped down off the stage and put the _____ in his hands."

I asked the students to fill in the blank with an object they would make, and these objects were displayed on a small shelf at the end of all the other exhibits. It was moving to see how the theoretical proposals and institutional criticism were often confounded by such small gestures.

day 15 Continue work on exhibition. Opening and party.