

CONSCIOUSNESS OF COLLECTING



Left-hand figurine new addition to the German Shephard dog collection of 2021 artist-in-residence Chuan-Lun Wu. Found at a London flea market, pictured on a window sill at Delfina Foundation. Photo courtesy the artist

**A CONVERSATION
WITH SALMA TUQAN
DELFINA FOUNDATION**

Today's art world is a well established and formalised ecosystem with its main protagonists of artists, curators and gallerists that largely dominate a public perception of the contemporary art scene. But what about collectors?

A key component, the collector oscillates between a strong voice and a secret player. The first attribute that comes to mind when thinking of the collector, is having the means to do it - financially and spatially. But taking a closer look, draws a complexity full of questions and opportunities. From concepts of the custodian, philanthropist, space maker or incubator - the collector comes with many trades and varied reasons to collect.

While holding immense power, collecting has become not only a matter of taste and desire, investment and prestige but also performs an important role in archiving and circulating artworks. Understanding collecting as a practice - is a chance of worldmaking (Nelson Goodman 1978) and shaping through establishing visual archives that are fueled by a political, social and cultural consciousness. A process that takes time and commitment and more often than ever before seems to lead into public engagements through exhibitions, private institutions or museums that can potentially fill gaps where formalised structures are scarce and offer more diverse voices in what we understand as art.

On account of the many positions the collector holds, I talk to Salma Tuqan, curator and deputy director of Delfina Foundation in London, about the Collecting as Practice and Collector in Residence programmes. Tuqan shares ideas and thoughts carved out in conjunction with curators, artists and institutions towards a better understanding of the collector's role. The non-profit institution was founded in 2007 with an initial central interest in the Middle East and North Africa. Over the years it grew into a global conduit for the arts with an embedded emphasis on the Global South.

Nisha Merit is an independent curator based between Johannesburg and Berlin.

Nisha Merit

Before joining Delfina Foundation three years ago, what has shaped your path leading up to the collecting practices programme?

Salma Tuqan

I think part of this path was an attempt to try to understand my own identity and place in the world. I studied Art History at Cambridge, a programme which at that time was extremely Western focused. At the same time, I was travelling more across the Middle East, particularly to Palestine to try and understand where the kind of fault lines lay and potential opportunities lay and what type of contribution I might be able to make. My first role in the arts was at Art Dubai (at the time called the Gulf Art Fair). There was a boom and focus on the UAE but fairs were a relatively new phenomenon and certainly, doing something of this scale in Dubai was new. I was always interested to first try to understand, soak in and listen.

I joined the V&A in 2011 as the Contemporary Middle East curator, responsible for Arab art and design. The museum has a huge collection of Islamic art which started in the 1850s. But like many museums, there's been a gap in terms of collection building, certainly in the 20th century. It was a very interesting challenge to think about how the Middle East was defined and understood within the institution, and how to reconcile working with an Islamic historic collection. At the V&A, the collections are divided via media - fashion, furniture, textiles department etc. The only exception to this is the Asia department of which the Middle East section is a part of. When we think about collecting practices and the fraught questions that often come attached or imposed to within colonial institutions such as Why should they sit in the Middle Eastern department as opposed to the fashion department? What makes this work Middle Eastern? Part of the challenge or thinking process was attempting to understand and reconcile the internal perceptions of the Arab world as much as the external view of this - both which are constantly in flux. I think within collections, storage is a huge issue. The conversations we are having within our

current Collecting as Practice programme looks also at the potential of violence within storage practices. Even on a very practical note, the fact that only an iota of the collection is actually on display, and the sort of insistence on possession and ownership is really interesting to consider.

NM

Speaking of Collecting as Practice and the adjacent Collectors in Residency programme... we are familiar with artist's or curator's residencies all over the world, but offering a similar structure for collectors is rare. What is the aim and what are some of the current discussions in these programmes?

ST

The way we function as an organisation is very organic, in a way, it's the pulling together and convening of people to create this kind of incubator of thought that ends up morphing into public programming, projects of artists, as well as offshoot ideas or new strands. The Collecting as Practice programme's overarching focus is the politics, philosophy, and psychology of collecting. This gave birth to the idea that in trying to nurture an ecosystem, one critical aspect of that is artists, curators, researchers, writers - various different thinkers. But part of that are also patrons, and philanthropists, who are in many ways decision makers but who are often separated from the wider cultural players for example in forums like art fairs, are often separated from artists or gallerists. And of course, the focus of funding is hugely important in this conversation - over the last ten years we have seen a lot more conversations around the ethics and transparency of funding, which has a huge bearing on what's shown within an institution. If you're talking about an exhibition or a biennial, it's hugely significant to understand who is behind that, and for the artists to understand who's funding and supporting that work. So from our perspective, having Collectors in Residence is a way of embedding them into the institution, embedding them into these conversations around collections, the impulse behind collecting, around philanthropy, and actually bringing all that into

dialogue, all the different components and protagonists that make up the art world.

NM

The position of the collector is a rather difficult one in the sense of its informal character based on a very personal relationship to what and why one collects. Because of this, what has been your experience like through the interaction with collectors and artists? Do collectors see themselves as part of the system? Is there a sense of responsibility in a way, what they collect and how they collect?

ST

It's an interesting question and I would say that even though the title we use is Collector in Residence, there are a lot of individuals who have been part of the program who feel hugely uncomfortable with that term. The perception of being a collector means something different to each, but there is a connotation which is perhaps an abundance of wealth and power and the accumulation of objects. We've had a lot of collectors in residence who do not see their primary role in collecting objects or who don't feel 100% comfortable with that sort of terminology so our understanding of this is expansive and inclusive. Our most recent collector in residence, the US American Colleen Ritzau Leth, comes from a museum background, she was an Egyptologist, and then worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and various other institutions within the strategy realm. The primary purpose of her residency was centred around rethinking her family's philanthropic foundation, which was set up by her and her mother. Her mother's passion being cultural heritage and her's being the arts. The focus of the week was to rethink the impact of grant giving, how one might move as a foundation from private to being a more public facing entity, how to build a community, an alumni base and also becoming a content producer. But equally, we've had an Argentinian collector resident, Benedicta Badia de Nordenstahl whose collecting practice has been concerned with emerging and midsize galleries, and how to best support them. The residency

that we had carved out for her was not focused around collections as such, but around how to support this demographic and this vital part of the art ecosystem, and how you can think beyond some of the traditional models of fairs. Looking at models like Condo or focusing at other types of strategies that exist outside of the industry itself which might inform how to better sustain these organisations in the long term.

So the programme varies each time and is tailored to each resident (much like our other residencies) but all of the individuals who have taken part are very aware of their position, and the potential to be able to contribute in a meaningful way. The Collectors in Residence programmes that we have are much shorter, it's a very intense period, rather than the other residencies which vary anywhere from three weeks to six months. This is one week and often builds the starting point for a longer relationship and support that we try and give.

NM

It sounds like what you do is individual knowledge-making and a way for the collector to understand their own role, their own ambition, but also to understand a bigger potential for a collection or a more active role in the arts ecosystem?

ST

For each collector in the programme, the aim is different and collectors are in completely different stages. Emirati Sultan Sooud Al Qassemi who had already formed Barjeel Art Foundation, which in the Middle East has been quite critical in terms of building up a very interesting collection of modern contemporary Middle Eastern art. Making it accessible to the public and subsequently thinking about how to tour some of these exhibitions to parts of the world where the interaction with the Middle East is perhaps less developed including forging new relationships, and increasingly using the collection as a starting point to embed it into academic institutions.

Or the Lebanese collector in residence Elie Khouri who was at the starting point of imagining the foundation that he is now in the process of launching. Part of his residency was trying to clarify his vision, motivations and having an open discussion around legacy planning - what does it mean when one sets up an institution in their own name? Questioning the importance of physical space and challenging the idea that impact has to go hand in hand with scale. Thinking about how to define audiences, but equally, insisting on looking at the existing landscape in those cities where the foundation was envisioned - Beirut or Dubai. This was an encouragement on our end to map out the landscape of those cities to understand what important work has already been done, and how best to complement it and contribute to it. We've all seen the rise of private institutions - Georgina Adams has just published a book [The Rise and Rise of the Private Art Museum, 2022] on the topic that's been exponential over the last fifteen years. But where we also see an opportunity is the role of private institutions, actually complementing and amplifying the kind of landscapes in those regions.

NM

The periphery becomes really interesting here. Public institutions are often not interested in the periphery, because they need the numbers to come through the door as a measurement for their relevance. They need the big stage, where maybe there is an opportunity for private collectors because they don't necessarily need that, they don't have to legitimize themselves in that way.

ST

It's interesting that you say that, this question of not being accountable, obviously there's a positive and negative association with that. And the positive is not necessarily being accountable, like you might be as a national portfolio organisation, there are possibilities to fill gaps, which are really important. And how to support practices that have a less tangible aspect, thinking of processes

and practices that are focused on research, and also rethinking systems that are not project driven, rather than supporting an output. The fact that one is not reliant on public funding or deliverables, and the lack of accountability enables the support in a very crucial direction, and to be able to fill a very crucial gap.

NM

The Collecting as Practice reads as "the programme is grounded in current and urgent debates around representation, restitution and contentious heritage", what does this mean in the current debates and developments? France is giving back works to Benin, institutions revisit their collections and cultural positions are becoming more female and more diverse. Many pavilions at the upcoming Venice Biennale are represented by artists of colour (UK with Sonia Boyce), young collectors and private museums are on the rise...

ST

This is where the programme emerged from, the many conversations around restitution, return, representation. As an example, there has been a lot of conversations within the residency about the fact that conservation within a museum setting is often thought of as a very caring act. However, in some cases, it actually negates the intention of the object and the intention of the community of which the object belongs to. One resident, [Columbian] Gala Porras-Kim has done a lot of thinking around this. One of the projects looked at objects that were dredged from the Cenote at Chichen Itza. The objects were retained in very good condition because they were submerged in water and so what does that mean when you bring those objects and you actually store them in the absolute opposite climatic conditions, in the driest possible conditions? And equally thinking about the spiritual rights of these objects, what does it mean to encase objects whose function is ongoing?

The act of conservation can in some ways actually be a violent act. Likewise looking at classification systems and what the kind of resonance of that act actually is.

We have an [Indonesian] artist, Khairani (Okka) Barokka whose practice focuses on disability justice as anti-colonial praxis. There's a lot of interesting more nuanced conversations, including deaccessioning policies that might be unconventional - natural decay being a form of deaccessioning.

We recently had an event that involved Porras-Kim, and [South African] Nolan Oswald Dennis, where a question raised was at which point human remains moved from being human remains to becoming and being treated as an object. We're trying to ground these conversations by including legal scholars, conservators, and trying to explore the nuances and by including voices of community members whose objects we're talking about rather than speaking on their behalf.

Everything is a work in progress, even us as an institution, our role within that should be reflective, to have space and time and not to be so attached to our own existence. To be completely honest, there's always a need to question - are we relevant? Do we need to exist? That's also a question of humility and ego whether it's a private or a public institution, to constantly be open and think of itself as a work in progress. The hope with Collecting as Practice and with every theme that we have is to build on them and to contextualise it within current societal conversations and to bring in all these thinkers - it's really an act of convening.



Geumhyung Jeong, Private Collection Unperformed Objects, 2017. Exhibition at Delfina Foundation, installation view. Part of Collecting as Practice. Photo Dan Weill. Courtesy Delfina Foundation



Delfina Foundation Collecting as Practice residents trip to West Dean Collection, 2021. Courtesy Delfina Foundation