

“Certain Kinds of Books”

Andrew Campbell

The collection spreads throughout the house - a space buzzing with the energy of a young family - my books get no pride of place. Many of them live on scavenged shelves in the basement, more important books are hidden in the bedroom closet, and the *jewels* are kept in two separate places: a pair of wide, flat drawers (in an Ethan Allen dresser in my parents' house and a sturdy, cardboard cognac box next to my computer.) These books represent a lot to me. Simultaneously, they are what I am and have been and what I hope to be and have hoped to be.

As a passionate collector, my books have a secret and personal orbit. I sometimes feel they have meanings known only to me. Oddly, the meanings of some of my favorite books, the difficult and challenging ones, remain opaque to me - interesting not because of the knowledge I've gleaned from them, but from the anticipation of what I might come to know - if I could truly *connect* with them.

To hear someone praise any of *my* books is like a *secret handshake* - knowing looks are exchanged, hidden community revealed. A long time ago, Walter Benjamin observed that "the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories."¹² He continued, and wondered if his own library essentially represented "a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?"³ Such apparent order can be quite lonely. Perhaps not surprisingly, my *best* collecting was pre-family and pre-marriage, done at a time with fewer demands on my time, income, and attentions, a time when selfishness was permissible and loneliness had a peculiar charm.

The collection I've submitted includes: outsider, avant-garde, brut, underground, punk, and mystic art; and, writings trying hard to explain the certain contemporary conditions, and trying even harder to explain artworks documenting and interpreting certain contemporary conditions. The collection's gravity draws toward it sensitive and uncomfortable individuals made that way by a culture pulled in too many directions at once. The collection hopes to display the imaginative options available to real people living in such circumstances. At times it is a incomplete worldview, at others, a catalog of a certain strain of *unpopular* culture.

Collecting books is a way of connecting directly with ideas outside my physical surroundings. The art-object and self-published books I possess connect most directly in this way. The artist and critic Anthony Elms⁴ has commented on this *immediate* aspect of artist books, observing that "immediacy of presence is the artist's book's most democratic feature. . . . an artist's book does not have [a] once removed effect. The art in an artist's book does not refer to a presence outside of the covers."⁵ I agree - such books are universes to themselves. I love looking at my books, showing them to others who might appreciate them, and knowing that I can look at them any time I want - because I have *collected* them.

¹Benjamin, Walter. *Unpacking My Library* from *Illuminations*, p. 60. New York: Schocken Books, 1968.

²Supposedly, the Chinese pictogram representing "personality" can be read as "what remains when that which was attached by chance is stripped away." Books that are kept and treasured reveal this kind of permanency.

³Id.

⁴And MSU alumni

⁵Elms, Anthony. *Reshelved*, essay from *New Art Examiner*.