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*Do you like stuff?*

Swiss Institute New York September 13 to October 22

The 18th century polymath Charles Wilson Peale has been credited with putting together the first American museum of cultural and natural history in Philadelphia. During his lifetime he was a repairer of bells, watches and saddles, a sculptor, a miniature and portrait painter, a revolutionary soldier, a propagandist, a civic official, a mezzotint engraver, a zoologist and a botanist. He also invented the portable steam bath, a fan chair, a velocipede, a physiognotrace for making silhouettes, a polygraph for making multiple copies of documents, a windmill, a stove, a bridge and false teeth. Peale displayed the stuff in his museum using a principle known as the Linnaen System, a system which laid out detailed and precise terms for how objects should be organized in a collection. The idea behind the system was that the material world could be understood through empirical and reasoned science. What is fascinating about Peale and his museum is the way it articulates his anxiety towards death and loss. Not just loss of life but loss of knowledge. At every stage that Peale experienced a death in the family, his museological project extended and accelerated. It's as if Peale was trying to fight back at nature's caprices with taxonomy.

Curated by Gabrielle Giattino, 'Do You Like Stuff?' rather naturally brings together nine artists who deal with repositories of things. Whether they use the all-access information hubs such as the internet or the memory capacity of an iPod, what all of the artists demonstrate is how a very human backbone emerges out of what might be considered the cold, analytical process of cataloguing and archiving.

Daniel Lefcourt goes as far as to include the tools of his practice (Stanley knife, Sharpie, the empty shell of a paper ream, a piece of graph paper) in his horizontal grid of mainly found images. Lifting most of the images off the internet, *Inexorable Imperative*, 2005, is a snapshot of a system that Lefcourt has developed where he creates stacked grids of images organized according to what seems to be an arbitrary visual language all of his own making. Barb Choit has also plundered the dense universe of online images with her work in progress *Ebay.com Photographic Archive Circa 2005* (January 1 – September 13), 2005. Ebay.com is made up of several hundred Polaroid sized pictures of products for sale on e-bay, which have been organized by auction expiration date. What Choit finds interesting is the quality of the images – people at home hoping to show off their wares by making amateur attempts at professional photography. Trawling through the archive I find pictures of items for sale such as a handmade axe, Dale Earnhardt flannel fabric, a 38DD nursing bra, a marijuana drug test strip, and a picture of a girl's face with the text: 'Advertising space – tattoo the back of my neck'. As an archive, it also acts to preserve documents with built-in expiry dates.

Located in the library of the Swiss Institute, Beth Howe presented some handsomely bound books that are a journalistic account of her time spent flâneuring through the cavities of books contained in the Toronto Reference Library – described by Howe as 'a blandly institutional brick exterior with a surprising interior, hollowed out like a pumpkin'. Titled *A Library Derive*, 2003-05, Howe borrows a strategy from the Situationists which is a way to experience a city through a 'focused wandering but with no agenda'. It's a kind of travelogue through the dizzying collection of a place packed to the gills with human experience and knowledge.

Graham Parker's research into email spamming becomes material for his newspaper Broadsheet #4, 2005, which was stacked in a neat pile on the gallery floor. Parker maintains that spammers get past email filters by hiding an invisible layer of HTML text in the body of the email. Parker has found that fragments from books such as *The Master Key*, 1901, by L. Frank Baum (author of *The Wizard of Oz*) keep cropping up as invisible layers of text in spam content. Whether there is any rhyme or reason to this, or if it just leads to blind alleys, is open-ended. David Adamo chose the night of the opening to inform someone simply known as MacGregor that he had been stalking him for the past eight months, putting together files, paintings, and most impressive, bacteria cultures grown from such things as fingernails. One of the paintings, MC01.18.05B, 2005, depicted a used napkin stained with soy sauce that Adamo received from one of the many spies he had enlisted – most of whom were close to MacGregor. MacGregor Card, 2005, is less a form of surveillance and more an evaluation of detritus, physical traces that we leave behind as we move through the world. Mike Bouchet's bare-bones installation *The Peter Jennings Hollywood Film Series*, 2005, is 104 DVDs lining a shelf in generic-looking black and yellow cases. A broad selection of movie titles, Bouchet's movies were reduced down to nothing more than the text so that the viewer could read the movie as it scrolled down a monitor as if reading news from a teleprompter. For this show Frank Olive, who usually mans the reception at the Swiss Institute, laid out 100 carefully chosen products that the public were invited to take. Ranging from light bulbs to sweets to toilet paper, Olive mentioned to me that it was a natural extension of his role as receptionist. *Generous and thoughtful, Useful Things*, 2005, continues discussion about objects, use value, and their relationship to art. Throughout the course of the show I was vaguely aware of a repeated melody that sounded as if it was coming from a pianola. Eventually I noticed it was coming from an old fashioned Braun 510 radio that had been placed discretely against a column. *Digital Vexations*, 2005, by Mark Orange is an audio piece that was being broadcast from an iPod tucked out of sight. Taking composer Erik Satie's simple piano piece, *Vexations*, 1893, a piece that Satie jokingly stated must be played 840 times, Orange fiddled with it digitally until it sounded like a wind-up music box. Setting it on a loop to play 840 times and lasting 19.5 hours, *Digital Vexations* fills up the capacity of the iPod's 10GB memory. Also, as Orange pointed out to me, there is the relationship between Dieter Rams, designer of the Braun 510 and Jonathan Ive, designer of the iPod: apparently Ive has cited Rams as a major influence in designing the iPod.

*Do You Like Stuff?* does a charming job of demonstrating how there is every possibility for humour or even something like poetry to bubble out of the unglamorous, grunt work of engaging with data both physical and experiential.

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