

The Brooklyn Rail, October, 2005

Swiss Institute
Do You Like Stuff?
Through October 22, 2005

People like stuff. Big-box stores such as Wal-Mart and Costco offer hundreds of consumer goods in enormous quantities, and the Internet presents an endless array of news, entertainment, and communication options. At home, tchotchkes and knickknacks fill mantles and display cases, and books, records, and movies stuff shelves. Nerdy collections of stamps, baseball cards, and coins occupy the minds and time of countless obsessive individuals. Families amass thousands, if not tens of thousands, of snapshots and arrange them in photo albums or digitally on their computers. People like stuff, and lots of it.

Organized by Gabrielle Giattino, associate curator of the Swiss Institute, Do You Like Stuff? exhibits the work of ten artists interested in cataloging, understanding, and controlling the glut of objects, images, and ideas from our contemporary world. Not every work gives insight into value of collecting or how maintaining order over masses of "stuff" can be useful or malevolent. Overall, though, the artists approach the curatorial theme in useful ways, pointing out the fanatical desire to collect and categorize and demonstrating the irrationality of endless supplies and variations.

The Internet has become a collector's paradise, and websites like Craigslist and eBay allow unprecedented, equalized access to those wishing to stockpile more stuff or, conversely, to let their stuff go. Naturally, anything is available on these electronic jumble sales, and Barb Choit documents scores of expiring eBay auction lots in her ongoing daily project, "Ebay.com Photographic Archive Circa 2005 (January 1–September 13)." Here, the artist attempts, absurdly, to catalogue the range of items for sale—among them a defibrillator, a forklift, and a book called Cameraman Movie Cinematographers Handbook in Braille —with low-resolution jpegs and brief description of the lot, housed in card files on tabletop. These cards document not just amateur photography, but amateur product photography: it's fascinating to see how people represent their stuff and try to pass off their items as valuable or "vintage" (the most popular term used by sellers). It's equally interesting how Choit saves these fleeting images before they disappear from the public sphere entirely.

Graham Parker's "Broadsheet #4," dated September 13, 2005, looks at the excess of information we encounter everyday, publishing a chaotic, fragmented mix of texts—mostly e-mail spam but also sections of government and business documents, works of fiction, and even the exhibition press release—in an eight-page, six-column newspaper. Despite the familiar, factual presentation, Parker's broadsheet does not offer coherent, orderly communication but rather mirrors our world of unfiltered textual absorption.

By applying the Situationist concept of the urban *dérive*, or "focused drifting," to the library card catalog, Beth Howe writes amusing, informative narratives of her research, flowing from one topic to the next in a logical yet subjective manner. For example, the writing in one book from her series of "Library Dérives" wanders from a study of island dystopias to a book on the legendary island of "Brazil" to a compendium of ocean maps to a biography of Henry Hudson.



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From credit reports to background checks to demographic surveys, collecting personal data has become common practice. A part-scientific, part-detective investigation, David Adamo's "Macgregor Card" documents the artist's shadowing of the friend of a friend. He fills hanging files with that person's leftover stuff—used napkins, bits of foil wine-bottle packaging, and nose hairs—and places a microscope and magnifying glass on a desk to scrutinize the collection. This work, however, ends up being an ineffective inquiry into stealth activity in light of, for example, how the Patriot Act gives our government unprecedented power to conduct its own intrusive stalking.

In his perplexingly titled "The Peter Jennings Hollywood Film Series" (2005), a collection of 104 DVDs and a viewing monitor, Mike Bouchet replaces the images from each movie with text captured from the close-captioning feature of the commercial DVD release. (Austin Powers was playing during my visit.) Though reading a movie negates visual pleasure, activates memory, and takes more time to get through—especially since the scrolling text moved slower than my reading pace—this collection's structural presentation doesn't quite explicate what movie collecting and watching is.

Visitors to the exhibition are free to take an object from Frank Olive's "Useful Things," a countertop holding one hundred everyday items, including nail clippers, a sheet of paper, a box of tissues, and candy. (The gallery assistant quickly replaces the chosen object by another identical one.) Compared to the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres or David Hammons—or even the men downstairs on sidewalks of Broadway hawking used tools, shoes, and bootleg DVDs to the well-heeled shoppers of SoHo—Olive's well-meaning gesture becomes trivial and inconsequential.

With the exception of Choit, the artists don't approach vernacular forms of collecting and presenting as described earlier, nor do they address art patronage by individuals, corporations, or museums—something one might expect from artists who create ephemeral projects, installations, and readymades. Nevertheless, the curatorial premise of *Do You Like Stuff?* is an important one that certainly deserves consideration here as well as further exploration, perhaps with more critically engaging work and with more room—the Swiss Institute's project space is much too small for the exhibition's expansive nature. —Christopher Howard