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Collections as abstract artifacts

Abstract
Collecting is one of the most widespread cultural practices in the world; which, similar to art – already the subject of a long tradition of philosophical studies – has given rise to the most various creations over the centuries. This refers not only to the countless types of objects that have been the focus of collections but, above all, to the object that constitutes their most defining production: the collection itself, collectively understood as an unparalleled artifact. But from a metaphysical point of view, what is a collection? Starting from the peculiar relationship between a collection and the objects that compose it, in this article we will investigate the essence that distinguishes a collection from any other type of set or gathering of objects. The answer to the question "what is a collection?" will thus culminate in the outline of a specific theory, the abstract artifactualism of collections.

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1. *What is a collection?*

From the ancient treasure rooms to the late Renaissance *Wunderkammern*; from small amateur collections to large modern public collections; passing through notable analogs even in cultures far removed from Western civilization, collecting has established itself as a cultural practice as ubiquitous as it is protean[1]. "The origin of collecting is as ancient and mysterious as that of art" (Cabanne 1961: 58; my translation). But if art and its works are the subjects of a long and faceted tradition of philosophical studies, the same cannot certainly be said of collecting and collections[2]. What kind of object is a collection? And what relationship exists between it and the objects that constitute it? These are decidedly little-explored problems.

It seems evident that a collection does not coincide, extensionally, with the set of objects that compose it (the collected objects – hereinafter referred to as *collected*). These can indeed vary, increase or decrease, be replaced by better or more interesting specimens, or given away for various reasons: yet we would continue to understand such a set always as the same collection as before; even in the case – akin to the famous paradox of the ship of Theseus – of a total transformation. Furthermore, it can happen that a collection is moved from one place to another, displayed differently, partially (which frequently happens for museum collections), or not displayed at all (kept safe or forgotten; even lost). Or that its ownership passes from one collector to another. In all these cases, which imply different variations in the enjoyment of the set, or a change of ownership with obvious repercussions on its continuation, we would still consider such a collection as always the same. And in the case where a collection was entirely dismantled, or integrated into another, we might

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[1] For insights into the history of collecting, cf. Pearce 1995, which offers the most comprehensive overview of classic studies on the topic, from a useful multidisciplinary perspective; and Hooper-Greenhill 1992, particularly on the history of *Wunderkammern* and museum collections. For discussions on the analogy with art, cf. Grazioli 2012.

[2] In philosophy, collecting has been addressed by Walter Benjamin (1931, 1937, 1983) and Jean Baudrillard (1968), albeit from perspectives quite distant from the one adopted here. For this reason, their analyses will not be discussed.

think that something with its own and irreducible identity has been "destroyed"[3]. This even though the individual (former) collected of that collection continue to exist, either on their own or as part of another collection.

Ideally, we can distinguish between an *atomistic* (reductionist) approach and a *holistic* one. In the first case, the collection is understood as a mere set, if you will, "sum", of its collected; in the second, it is recognized to have a *quid*, a specific identity that transcends the set of collected. In the first case, the possibility of eliminativism looms (there is no "collection": only the set – or, even more disparagingly, the "heap" – of collected); in the second, the option to consider the collection as a *sui generis* artifact opens up. This latter option is the one I will consider and seek to develop in this article.

In favor of the specificity of the collection entity, there are several important clues. First, there's the *intentionality* of the founding collector or possibly of similar figures who will take care of it over time (additional successor collectors, exhibition curators, museum conservators). And there is a *historical and causal continuity* in the development of the collection from its birth onwards to its eventual end: such as to make it experienceable as a sort of *immersive narrative* potentially perpetually *in progress* around the theme on which it is focused. For example, regarding a collection of radios, we might be tempted to assert its reducibility to a selection – thus still a mere set, a "sum" – of "occurrences" of radios. I think that would be wrong: a collection of radios is the illustration of a story, of an evolution of that particular type of radio (identified according to certain criteria: model, period, electronics, style, etc.); such that the collected radios interest under a certain interpretation that isolates certain of their attributes rather than others – therefore not framing it as a mere "sum of" radios. Instead, the occasional set of books found on a certain desk, that of clothes owned by a certain person, or that of stones found in a certain garden are all examples of sets for which this reduction to a mere sum of individuals appears entirely permissible.

Using a distinction from the theory of concepts (see, for example, Lalumera 2009 and Murphy 2002), if that of radios appears a "classic"

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[3] Consider, as a prime example, the magnificent collection of André Breton (Tinchebray 1896 - Paris 1966), the "Pope of Surrealism", sold at auction in 2003, of which today only the Wall displayed at the Musée National d'Art Moderne Georges Pompidou in Paris remains. The event caused a real uproar in the intellectual circles of the time, albeit in vain. Cf. https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2003/02/11/il-surrealismo-in-vendita.html (con. 27/06/2023).

collection, *closed* such that the incorporation of the collected follows the fulfillment of certain individually necessary and jointly sufficient properties to be part of it, there are perhaps also *open* collections in a Wittgensteinian sense where the collection develops more freely around a thematic core: what constitutes the fundamental *family resemblance* (Wittgenstein 1953: 47) of the collected that are part of it. For example, imagine a collection related to the English singer-songwriter David Bowie (1947-2016). Various objects within it gain value by being associated with David Bowie *in different ways*. For example, a certain guitar preserved in that collection because it was owned by Bowie and played by him at a certain famous concert. *Memorabilia* are particular objects that derive their importance from being linked to people or events considered relevant. Of course, a collection about Bowie would not necessarily contain only direct memorabilia. For example, it would likely include his records on various media and formats, and possibly in various editions; the official and unofficial (television recordings, *bootlegs*) recordings of his concerts; the films in which he appeared (Bowie was also an actor); copies and/or catalogs of his paintings (Bowie was also a painter); the scores of his songs; posters and photos of the singer-songwriter; and so on. The possibilities are truly enormous, contained by the articulation that has been given to this collection specifically. However, they all remain objects that represent (to a certain degree) David Bowie, but each according to different aspects from the others.

Well, the reference that the collection *as a whole* maintains with Bowie is different from that maintained instead by each of the individual collected with the English singer-songwriter. The guitar is "belonged to" Bowie while the records are "works of" Bowie; the films in which he acted and the paintings he made as well, but in very different senses; posters, photos, and similar "depict" Bowie according to different aspects and modes, and so on. Instead, the collection is *about* Bowie; it *represents* him, *describes* him, and *tells* about him in a decidedly broader, articulated, and exhaustive way. The pinnacle of open collecting is possibly occupied by the already mentioned *Wunderkammern* of the late Renaissance, eclectic collections indefinitely suspended between art and naturalism that intended to represent the complexity and continuity of the world itself (Hooper, Greenhill 1992). However, the distinction between closed and open collections does not seem to constitute a clear dichotomy, outlining rather a space of possibilities between two ideal extremes. Not only because, as has already been mentioned, even though

typically starting from a generic theme, an open collection will still require some articulation, more or less rigorous; which, similarly to the case of a closed collection, will lead to selecting the collected based on the fulfillment of certain and (in their own way) stringent properties to avoid the risk of dispersion if not of actual compulsive hoarding[4]. Indeed, it is from that generic theme that we deal with a property ("being related to Bowie") not at all dissimilar to those founding a closed collection ("being related to radios"). In this sense, whether initially more or less free, any collection to be effective requires a plan, or a mental scheme[5] that outlines its development based on the properties of its collected. Furthermore, it should be noted that on the "opposite" side of closed collections, the possibility of a coherent completion, besides often being illusory, does not exclude at all further expansions in new directions relative to the initial project[6].

Thus, based on the common aspect in collecting of working on *properties*, and thereby referring more to the classical theory of concepts, I have attempted to define the *quid* that makes *any type* of collection such a special entity: that is, a set of things characterized, however, by its own unity and identity, irreducible to its individual components. I have hypothesized, therefore, this *quid* as a particular *abstract artifact*, emerging from the selected properties in the collected, and also constituting the authentic focus of every collection: its *structuring essence*, in a sense that I will clarify later. In recent metaphysics, the term "abstract artifact", introduced by Amie L. Thomasson (1999), denotes an object that combines characteristics of the two most general categories of traditional ontologies: on one hand, it is an *artifact*, coming into existence through the creative acts of its authors, and can even be destroyed, as typically happens in the case of concrete artificial objects; on the other hand, it is *abstract*, as it is *not characterized by physical existence* and thus *not locatable in space*. Unlike the paradigm of abstract objects, i.e., Platonic ideas, an abstract artifact is thus neither eternal nor mind-independent.

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[4] Compulsive hoarding or disposophobia is a pathological condition where the individual is severely dominated by their tendency to acquire objects, with significant consequences for the quality of their life and that of their loved ones. Cf. Frost, Steketee 2010.

[5] Originally. However, it could also be formulated in writing, for example, in a museum collection project.

[6] These considerations could, therefore, form the basis for a case study aimed at rethinking the Wittgensteinian notion of *family resemblance* itself.

Developed in the context of fictional characters or *ficta* (Kroon, Voltolini 2018), the notion of the abstract artifact has then been applied by different authors to various types of entities (Preston 2002: par. 2.4), mostly related to the realm of artworks or, more broadly, to that of social objects. Considering collections as undoubtedly social objects, as well as entities ontologically close – as I mentioned at the beginning – to artworks, and in certain cases even fully coinciding with them[7], I have sketched an *abstract artifactualism of collections*, at whose center I have placed an abstract artifact that I have named *collectus*.

2. *The role of properties in collecting*

What kinds of properties are involved in the development of a collection? Generally, a distinction is made between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* properties of an object (Marshall, Weatherson 2018). Following David Lewis, a statement that attributes intrinsic properties to something is *entirely* about that thing; while an attribution of extrinsic properties to something is *not entirely* about that thing, although it may be about something else that includes that thing as its part. Thus, something has its intrinsic properties by virtue of the way it, and nothing else, is; whereas this is not the case for extrinsic properties, as much as something may have them by virtue of the way it is part of some larger whole. It follows that if something has an intrinsic property, every perfect duplicate of it will have that property; while duplicates located in different places will differ in their extrinsic properties (Lewis 1983).

In the light of numerous theoretical positions in the vast debate on properties (Orilia, Paolini Paoletti 2020), the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic properties inevitably admits uncertain boundaries and borderline cases. In reference to collections, maintaining such a (pseudo) dichotomy in a consciously simplified manner[8], instead of "extrinsic properties", I would rather speak of *relational properties* (MacBride 2020), a good example of which is given by memorabilia such as David Bowie's guitar.

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[7] Cf. Grazioli 2012. Citing some examples, works such as the assemblages of Joseph Cornell, Claes Oldenburg's *Mouse museum*, Andy Warhol's *Time capsules*, and Marcel Broodthaers' *Museum of modern art. Department of eagles*, are effectively artworks that are also collections.
[8] The classification of properties in collecting is influenced by the collector's perspective, consistent with the mind-dependent nature of the abstract artifact *collectus*. For

Therefore, I will adopt the following notion, very weak and broad, of "intrinsic property": a property F of x is intrinsic iff F is spatiotemporally identifiable (through the senses or by means of instruments) in x. Along the same lines, I propose the following definition of "relational property": a property F of an object x, which has the status of collected in a collection C, is relational iff F is determined by the relationship that x maintains with at least one object y not part of C, and F is not spatiotemporally identifiable (through the senses or by means of instruments[9]) in x.

This topic will only be briefly mentioned here, but the relationship between these two types of properties may play a role in determining the variety of collection types in the closed/open spectrum, with a likely prevalence of relational ones in the latter. There is another level of distinction among properties that will immediately serve us in our analysis. It is evident that every collected, in its individuality, is characterized by an indefinite number of properties: some are relevant, "used" in the construction of the collection (the object x is part of the collection C because it presents properties required by the project applied to C); others, however, are properties completely irrelevant to the collection, which in such context are mostly ignored – even though they are still properties characterizing that particular object there. Some properties are typically ignored regardless: for example, in an art collection, the weight of the collected works is usually of no importance. But in other cases, the distinction is much more refined and significant.

Let's consider Bowie's guitar again, which is in our imaginary collection dedicated to the English songwriter. It could fit well in other types of collections too, for example, one dedicated to guitars. In both cases, however, the properties based on which the object is selected to be part of the collection would change: being a Bowie memorabilia in the first case, being a musical instrument of a certain type in the second (the owner's identity would be highlighted, but it would not be the reason it is in that collection). Therefore, we call active those properties, characterizing a certain collected, that justify its status in fact. In other words, activation

example, with certain exceptions, the collector does not consider it important to evaluate color as the product of the interaction between light, the object's surface, and their visual system. This property is thus simplified as a mere intrinsic property of the object.

[9] The specification in parentheses is intuitive: for example, the measurements of a collected, in general, can be estimated by sight; but rigorous cataloguing will require precise measurements with appropriate tools.

is the attribute of those properties that, required by the conditions of the project in the collected of any collection *C*, actually contribute to the creation of *C*'s *collectus*. Thus, the possession of such properties is also the necessary prerequisite for any *candidate* to *C* (an object that possesses the potential requirements to be part of *C*, and is currently under evaluation by *C*'s collector to actually become part of it), to acquire the status of collected of *C*.

Of course, even among the active properties, hierarchical relationships often exist: not all are "activated" with the same intensity. On the other hand, in a collection, there are collected that, by number and/or level of active properties, are considered more relevant than other collected of the same collection. Therefore, the number of active properties itself varies from one collected to another. The acquisition of any collected in a certain collection *C* is thus a process that can be divided into two phases:

1) The identification of the candidate object, based on the conditions expressed by the project;

2) The possible admission of the same into the collection, with the consequent acquisition of the status of collected. Moreover, if it is the first application of the project to one or more collected, we will also have the *baptism* (or *birth*) of collection C^{10}, and the simultaneous emergence of its peculiar *collectus*.

For example, suppose we decide to collect a specimen for each member of the complete series of *x* (where *x* is some type of artifact produced in a limited series of models), characterized by properties that meet conditions *P*, *Q*, *R*. In this way, the project is developed, which is in a latent phase since there is not yet any collection: the project, that is, currently identifies only *the set of eligible objects*, or the set of all existing objects in the world that, potentially, would have the properties to be part of C^{11}.

At a certain point, we move to the next phase by applying the project to a specific collection *C*. But how does this happen? First, by identifying

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[10] "Collected" and "collection" are thus statuses that are conferred, respectively, on an individual object and a set, following certain acts by the collecting subject. For the notion of status, cf. Searle 1995, 2010.

[11] Eligible objects are all those existing that meet the characteristics required by the *C* project. Thus, their collective includes the (actual) candidates I have already mentioned in the text, namely the objects that at a certain moment t are actually evaluated by *C*'s collector for acquisition in *C*; as well as the collected that are part of it at that same moment. It's a simple relationship between a "theoretical" set and its two subsets.

a set of n objects of type x (where $n \geq 1$[12]) that meet the conditions P, Q, R dictated by the project. The now-applied project "confirms" that such objects are suitable to constitute C's first set of collected. These objects have properties that fully meet the conditions P, Q, R required by the project. Here, the discretion of the aspiring collector comes into play: we are free to accept or reject all or some of those objects to create our collection. This can happen for multiple reasons: for example, some of those objects appear to be of poor quality, and thus we reject them; or among those objects, there are duplicates, so we select our specimen(s) excluding others, etc. However, we can also simply reconsider and abandon our intentions, forgetting about C forever. This constitutes a significant difference between a collection and a social object, such as a signed contract: typically, there is no obligation towards third parties, nor can the project itself determine any. Therefore, in this sense, the act of collecting is inherently autonomous, voluntary, and arbitrary[13].

Let's assume, without any particular surprises, that we accept such objects as members of our (imminent) collection. Consequently, these objects, our actual candidates, each acquire the new status of collected. This marks the transition to phase (2). And collection C? I believe it is correct to say that, in the application of the project, the activation of the properties of the first set of n actual candidates *instantly* results in the acquisition of the collected status for each of the n objects individually considered, and the acquisition of the collection status for their set. C, and so any other collection, arises with the birth of its first collected. Unlike subsequent acquisitions of collected, the attribution of collection status is a unique event for each collection.

Therefore, at its first occurrence, the application of the project plays the crucial role of determining nothing less than the *baptism* of a collection. This event marks the beginning of the story, or the *historical-causal*

[12] This opens up, at least theoretically, to an interesting hypothesis: the possible realization of a *one object collection*, a collection constituted by a single object, not necessarily only in a provisional manner. For example, what would happen if the conditions of a certain project captured only one object in the world?
[13] We can imagine scenarios where the collector somehow commits to collecting with someone, but these would be borderline cases. Collecting does not necessarily involve commitments. This is different, for example, from the case of a museum conservator, who deals with a collection as part of their job and in a typically public dimension.

chain specific to that collection C^{14}. By virtue of which collection *C will always remain itself*, regardless of the transformations it undergoes, in compliance with the project guidelines[15]. In this sense, the collection is definable as a variable set bound by the application of the project.

It may be somewhat improper to stretch to identifying the application of the project itself as baptism. The baptism of the collection is rather the outcome (thus a fact that comes at the end of the process) of a success-fully applied project. However, since the application of the project is typ-ically successful, culminating in the baptism, I believe it is perfectly ac-ceptable to maintain the synonymy between "application of the project" and "baptism" of a collection.

3. *The* collectus, *the collection's essence*

Summarizing, the application of the project to a first set of candidates leads the collector to "invest" them with the collected status, effectively baptizing their collection – which is an additional status, this time at-tributed to a set potentially in perpetual becoming. The baptism marks the beginning of the collection's history (life). But there's more.

There exists a certain asymmetry between the conditions expressed by the project and the properties actually captured in the objects. Both are effectively properties, but each set of properties coincides variably with other (sub)sets of properties, meaning more specific and detailed proper-ties. For instance, let's revisit our schematic example where we decide to collect a specimen for each member of the complete series of artifacts *x*, characterized by properties that meet conditions *P*, *Q*, *R*. This time, we assign an identity to these variables: we collect Hot Wheels cars (*x*) that

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[14] So that we will have two distinct collections even in the case of two sets that, con-sidered at a certain moment *t*, consist exactly of interchangeable selections of speci-mens (note that this already constitutes a difference) of the same objects. The distinc-tion between the two collections rests on the *collectus* and its history, and is not of a perceptual order.

[15] Considered in its current version at that particular moment in the history of collec-tion *C*. Due to the mutual influence of the collection with its project, it's questionable whether and how much a collection can deviate from its project. This issue would be problematic at its base, presenting itself as slippery normative. It's somewhat like try-ing to determine objective criteria of artistic correctness within the context of an art definition.

are exclusively sports models (*P*) produced in the 1970s (*Q*) and in 1:64 scale (R). Applying the project to certain candidates will undoubtedly raise various problems, such as defining the concept of "sports", which may include or exclude certain models. Or the fact that "being produced in the 1970s" opens up distinctions between more specific (sub)properties; or even more precisely determining the production date of various models. Even a *definiendum* like "in 1:64 scale", seemingly clear, can spark debate: although one might refer to the original packaging data indicating the scale, due to their nature as toys and not accurate models[16], Hot Wheels cars in a certain scale might include cars less precisely proportioned than others, leading us to exclude certain models from our imaginary collection. Moreover, the very term "Hot Wheels cars" is ambiguous and subject to further articulation: not all Hot Wheels "models" represent cars; there are even borderline cases like the Amphicar, a famous car capable of traveling both on road and water (essentially a hybrid between a car and a motorboat). If there were a Hot Wheels version of the Amphicar produced in the 1970s, would it qualify as a car? Theoretically, we could more precisely define our set of properties, including or excluding such a model.

This passage delves into the complex relationship between a collection, its items, and the abstract concept of *collectus* that binds them. It explores how the application of a project to a group of items leads to an evolving narrative, where the collection gains a unique and unified identity despite being composed of distinct individual objects. This identity, or *collectus*, emerges as a dynamic core of properties, enhancing the collection's narrative and making it more than the sum of its parts. The *collectus* serves as the collection's structuring essence, enabling organization and presentation possibilities that transcend simple categorization, reflecting the collector's conceptual vision and the inherent, mind-dependent nature of abstract artifacts. This interplay between properties and the *collectus* illustrates how collecting is a form of sculpting with properties, creating complex narratives that lie between tangible actions and abstract

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[16] Even the boundary between an "ordinary" toy and a "collectible" model is, upon closer inspection, vague and problematic.

cataloguing, akin to Joseph Cornell's assemblages or sticker albums[17], highlighting the nuanced boundaries within which collections exist.

I've previously called the *collectus* a "structuring essence" because, on one hand, it constitutes the authentic entity that the collector shapes, even though initially only the collected and their aggregate are visible. On the other hand, it contains at least *in nuce* the collection's exhibition possibilities. By elaborating on properties, from a conceptualist perspective[18] aligned with the mind-dependent characterization typical of an abstract artifact, the *collectus* implies the organizational possibilities available to the collection once it is appropriately placed. Organizational criteria related to chronology or the separation between specific models, for example, stem from the development of properties related to temporal placement or intellectual properties.

Yet, the *collectus* does not seem to behave differently from the other elements at play (the project, the collected, the collection), constantly changing over time. Indeed, the *collectus* also varies in a potentially perpetual manner from the baptism, which effectively generates it simultaneously with the collection onwards. However, between the two entities (collection and *collectus*), there is no simple parallelism. To grasp this point, let's distinguish between a specific *collectus* (let's call it C^a), intended in relation to its overall history, and the same *collectus* considered at a specific time t (which I will therefore call C^a_t). Presented this way, the situation seems perfectly parallel to that of the collection, which we might consider by referring to its complete history (calling it C), or at a specific time t (thus we have C_t). We would then have two entities intertwined in an equal covariant symbiosis; therefore, defining one as the essence of the other seems incorrect. Instead, I believe the element of change over

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[17] Modern and extremely popular sticker collections are a notable example of closed collections, developed to be integrated into unified concrete artifacts (the completed album).

[18] In general, regarding properties, three approaches are distinguished: the realist approach, which sees properties as mind-independent universals: either as transcendent entities that exist even if not instantiated (*ante rem* in scholastic terminology), descending from the Platonic notion of idea, or as immanent entities (*in rebus*, rooted in space-time and thus incapable of existence if not instantiated), in a sense that descends from the Aristotelian notion of category; the nominalist approach, which denies any real existence to properties as understood above, considering them merely as linguistic signs; finally, the conceptualist approach, which relates properties to concepts, understood as mind-dependent entities. For metaphysics of properties cf. Orilia, Paolini Paoletti 2020. On the conceptualist approach in particular cf. Cocchiarella 2007.

time is specifically of C^a, that is, the *collectus* in its global historical dimension. It is primarily with C^a that, through passing through the various stages C^a_t, the metamorphosis of C is determined, consequently determining the various stages C_t, describable as determined by any change in the composition of C (entry, cession, or replacement of at least one collected in C).

Indeed – and this is the central point of abstract artifactuality in collections – while the *collectus* is an abstract artifact, that is, an object characterized by genuine unity and linear transformation over time, the collection is *actually* just a mere set of objects, characterized by what is essentially a pseudo-transformation, merely related to modifications (acquisitions, replacements, disposals) of its components[19]. The collection, in short, is characterized by unity and identity only because its core is that structuring essence which is the abstract artifact *collectus* – characterized instead by authentic unity. The collector develops, whether consciously or not, always an overall vision beyond the mere series of objects. And it is this vision that shapes a *sui generis* entity such as the *collectus*.

4. *Life and death of a collection*

"For its owner, a collection becomes a living being" (Cabanne 1961: 60; my translation). And, regarding living beings, a significant aspect is undoubtedly variety: there exist myriad species, vastly different, "sculpted" by countless variables of adaptation, and classified into complex and sophisticated taxonomies. "Descending a level", different criteria lead us to distinguish even among conspecifics. Among humans, for example, we differentiate lives that are more or less long; or, leaving biology for history, more or less significant or influential. Lives more or less (differently) lived, then.

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[19] Certainly, over time, changes can occur that specifically affect the collected, here simplified as typically concrete objects; for example, consider the aging of materials. In certain types of collections, these changes can also influence the active properties, and thus the *collectus*. However, often the role of the collected in the context of their collection is mostly "symbolic"; they are understood, rather, as tokens of a certain type.

Similarly, the most minor of collections remains a collection[20]: no matter how vast the gap between an occasional collection of knick-knacks and a significant case like the Louvre's collection may seem. Moreover, as I mentioned in paragraph 1, a collection may never reach a conclusion, thus not even a "completeness" of any kind. A collection can potentially be varied perpetually, through continuous exchanges of ceding and acquiring objects – to which correspond equal attributions and dismissals of the "collected" status of that particular collection. This is because, although a collector typically acts with some form of "completion" of their collection in mind, we neither possess nor can determine a "maximum term" within which such completion must be achieved. It is undefined, and ultimately unnecessary.

In this sense, the analogy between a collection and a living being, if the latter is understood as a member of any animal species, is not very apt. After all, an animal, barring severe illness or accidents, has a life marked by fairly regular development: it is born, grows, ages, dies according to the life possibilities of its species. Therefore, I would say that rather than an animal, *a collection resembles a perennial plant*: a vegetal being that could be cut back multiple times and sprout anew, each growth structured differently than before. Nonetheless, the collection, just like the perennial plant, is always one and the same as before. All this, it is important to reiterate, in a theoretical sense: typically, the aim is to conclude in some way, to "complete" each collection in some sense. However, even in these cases, it is an arbitrary act: one that merely establishes, once and for all, a solution among many possibilities.

"Perennial" does not mean immortal. And, complete or not, a collection will eventually cease to exist. I've previously mentioned the possibility of *dismantling* a collection: the dispersion of the objects that comprise it. According to the approach presented here, this condition is not in itself sufficient, nor altogether necessary, to assert that the collection no longer exists. A collection can be dismantled for various reasons (reordering, moving, work in the exhibition venue, etc.), and this does not necessarily imply its end. To further validate this, we can imagine the following case: Tizio owns a collection *C* currently composed of *n* objects; and since Tizio owns *n* houses, he places a collected of *C* in each house. Could we

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[20] A reflection, developed through a purely evaluative perspective, once again reveals a deep analogy with art. A painting, whether it's the modest attempt of a Sunday beginner or the Mona Lisa by the supreme Leonardo, remains a painting nonetheless.

say that Tizio has destroyed his collection? I would say no: more correctly, he has made it not immediately experiential as a collection by separating it. Borrowing Aristotelian terminology this situation, analogous to closing a collection in a chest (as in the emblematic case of Benjamin's library [1931]), corresponds to a simple transition from actuality to potentiality for *C*.

According to the artifactualist approach, the end of a collection coincides with the end of the mind-dependent abstract artifact that supports it, namely the *collectus*: the essence that makes the collection more than a mere assembly of objects, giving it unity, identity, and its own articulation. The termination of a collection *C* thus requires the opposite of the project's application, which is the project's dismissal. Whoever has authority over *C*, whether an individual, a group of individuals, or an institution, decides, or possibly declares in a more or less formal manner (for example, a public collection is disbanded through actual bureaucratic acts), that *C* is no longer a collection. This essentially means that *C* no longer expresses the specific *collectus* that previously characterized it as a collection. As such, *C* reverts to being a generic, unstructured set of objects (which in turn lose their collected status). Being finally intended, as in our case, in a totally different way: a mere exposition for the ex collected.

As an abstract artifact, the *collectus* is a particular case of a social object. Dismissal is the act by which the existence of a collection is terminated, analogous, for example, to the dissolution of a company, resulting in the closure of the facilities where it was materially productive.

The *dismissal of the project*, unlike its application*, is characterized by necessity rather than sufficiency*. According to Thomasson, the existence of an abstract artifact does not strictly depend on the simple will of its author: the abstract artifact has a mere *rigid historical dependence* on its creator, which determines its creation but without any influence on its subsequent persistence in existence[21]. Therefore, as long as the collection

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[21] In Thomasson's theory of *ficta*, the creative act (by the author) of a fictional character is characterized as a case of rigid historical dependence, whereas the existence of at least one work in which the character appears (a necessary condition for the character's continued existence) is considered a case of generic constant dependence. Briefly, a dependence is *constant* in the sense that the existence of *α* is constantly dependent on the existence of *β*, which can be paraphrased as "necessarily, when *α* exists, *β* exists" (the fictional character *X* exists only as long as the works in which it appears exist); on the other hand, a dependence is *historical* if *α* requires *β* only to initially come into existence, after which *α* can continue to exist independently from *β*

remains "in its place", it is possible to go back and restore the *collectus* by resuming the application of the project. The "coup de grâce" to the collection is delivered by transferring the ownership of the former collected to third parties; in principle, all of them, until there are none left (i.e., until the number *n* of collected that make up the collection definitively becomes zero). It's possible to retain ownership of some of them, now permanently considered as individuals (depriving them of their status as collected): however, in this case, the "door" of mere suspension is always left open; that is, it is like having temporarily suspended the collection, even drastically reducing it, but later resuming to rebuild it – possibly, even improving it. This might be the case for a collector who, facing economic difficulties, ceases his hobby and begins to sell his collected; at some point, having resolved these difficulties and still in possession of several former collected, he could decide to retrace his steps, resuming the collection. Nothing precludes that, in the near future, our repentant former collector might find new and even better specimens of the objects sold, managing to reintegrate them and not only: to improve the level of his collection compared to how it was originally.

It might be argued that in the project's dismissal, the possibility of "going back" as long as one remains the legitimate owner of the (former) collected makes the collection a rather peculiar entity, whose existence can be extinguished or ignited on a whim. However, this isn't the case: the point is that the collection, by virtue of its dependence on an essence, the *collectus*, an abstract and mind-dependent artifact, is primarily nullified through the end of the latter. But this "nullification", due to its abstract artifact nature, doesn't definitively affect the *collectus* – as would the material destruction of a concrete artifact; rather, it corresponds (as we've seen) to a kind of *suspension*: the first step towards the possible end of a collection, what we technically define as a *necessary condition*. As long as the concrete apparatus dependent on the *collectus*, namely the collection itself, the material product of the entire collecting operation, remains entirely or partially intact, it's undoubtedly possible to revert simply by reaffirming what has been developed up to that point –

(Sherlock Holmes needed Arthur Conan Doyle to "be born", but afterward existed independently from him – in fact, continues to exist many decades after his author's death). Moreover, a dependence is *rigid* if it is fixed on particular individuals (that author – or those authors – and no one else), otherwise, it is *generic* (some works; it doesn't matter which). Cf. Thomasson (1999: 29-34).

reactivating the project's application, and thus the *collectus* itself. In a sense, it can be stated that the *collectus*, due to its abstract nature, isn't characterized by destruction, by a "death" in the material sense: rather – as said – it can be suspended and subsequently, if the goal is to terminate its existence, *conditions must be created to make it effectively non-re-startable*. And, in this sense, transferring the ownership of all collected truly puts an end to the collection's story, primarily voiding any reactivation of the *collectus*. In this case, the foundation of the collection itself would be missing: so – trivially – an application of the project to another set of eligible objects would necessarily equate to the creation of a new collection – and thus a new *collectus*. No one could claim that what preexisted is being reactivated.

Since typically the transfer of ownership accompanies the dismantling, as a consequence of the material cessation of the former collected, we might again be tempted to equate the end and dismantling of the collection. However, that would be a mistake. For example, if some people were to buy objects from my hypothetical former collection, asking me to physically keep them where they are (at my house, in that particular room) and I agreed, I would no longer be the owner of a collection: I would simply be keeping various objects on behalf of others. It's observed that physical possession is distinct from legal ownership: if I am the one "using" those objects (displaying them in my house), in a sense I continue to possess them. But in a context where ownership is defined by law, transferring it to others implies transferring the decisions regarding any changes to it (even if it's just the permission to act deliberately in such a manner).

And if the collection were transferred in its entirety, as such? In this case, as a mere conservator of the collection, I would no longer be considered an authentic collector. Conservators and curators in museums and foundations are specialized experts who advise the real owner-collector: the public or private company to which the collection rightfully belongs. Figures like the conservator and curator can at most be considered *de facto* collectors, as they realize the collection *on commission*, working on it based on instructions from the legitimate owner. While the latter *remains the authentic collector*, if by this term we mean the one who manages the collection through their decision-making will, having the legal ownership right (the "power") to do so. Indeed, beyond dismantling the collection, the owning collector can also dismiss the *de facto* collectors – that is, fire the current one to hire another. Technically, although

roles like that of the conservator or curator are intellectually and culturally significant, they typically perform an instrumental function relative to the legitimate owning collector.

Returning to the main topic and summarizing: if the ownership of all the collected (considered separately, as individual goods) of a certain collection were transferred? Whether this happens progressively or simultaneously (for example, all the objects currently making up a certain collection are sold on the same day), this case constitutes the only possibility of a condition in itself sufficient to bring about the end of a collection. Indeed, from our definition of "collection", such a set of objects cannot be empty. Therefore, the moment the collected drop to zero, the existence of both the collection and the *collectus* definitively ceases – with a sort of retroactive dismissal of the project, as it is, in fact, no longer applied to anything.

In this context, I mentioned the possibility that a collection C could be merged into another, let's call it C_1. If this is the owner's intention, it's assumed that even by acquiring C in its entirety, implicitly the *collectus* of C is "deactivated", treating the former collected of C as new collected of C_1. Another common scenario where collected change hands simultaneously, resulting in the end of the collection, occurs when a collector leaves their "creation" to heirs uninterested in their passion. Accidentally, the collector's death and the collection's end effectively coincide.

The second scenario differs: it involves an entire collection changing ownership but still being regarded as that specific collection. The original collector has a unique role as the creator of the collection, the "founder". This fact is often recognized in public conservation, where a collection (or the fund corresponding to that collection) is named after its former owner. However, a collection continues to exist independently from the creative act (the application of the project), through the work of different collectors. The project's dismissal has no special connection to the project's implementer and can be executed by any of its potential successors.

The cessation of a collection's existence, that is, of its *collectus*, represents a particularly thorny and complex issue within the presented theory, necessitating further, rigorous investigation. However, it reflects the inherent complexity of abstract artifacts or ontologically similar objects. The historical example of book burnings illustrates that the systematic destruction of a novel's copies is not always enough to ensure the destruction of the work's *type*. Ray Bradbury's creation of "book people" in *Fahrenheit*

451 (1953) effectively demonstrates how a single copy, even merely mental (orally instantiated), can fully maintain a literary narrative's existence. Thus, the "resilience" attributed to the abstract artifact *collectus* is even more pronounced in entities like Thomasson's *ficta*, literary works, or allographic artworks (Goodman 1968: 102) in general, whose existences can be conveyed through different work copies, expressed in the most diverse media. In this sense, such artifacts appear even more "indestructible" than a *collectus*.

There are likely many collections of which we have lost memory. In such cases, with appropriate sources at our disposal, what we can reconstruct is solely a plausible representation of them. This has often been the case, for example, with the *Wunderkammern* mentioned at the beginning.

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