Rise of the Clutterologists

By JAMES DELBOURGO

Collectors are insane. The point has been made many times, many ways. Movies in the 60s did so in style. In The Collector (1965), based on John Fowles’s debut novel, a deranged butterfly collector played by Terence Stamp kidnapa a female art student and tries to make her part of his collection. “All collectors are anal-erotic,” the British psychoanalyst Ernest Jones stated in 1918. For Freudians, like Jones, collecting was to be understood by reference to the anal-retentive phase of childhood development. For the poststructuralist theorist Jean Baudrillard, collecting was an activity appropriate to childhood but suspect in adults, symptomatic of a “depleted humanity” unable to move from the love of things to a love of people.

Modern views of collecting as pathological or perverted have often emphasized this theme of twisted love: Things are treated as people and people as things. Thus in Eric Rohmer’s film La Collectionneur (1967), the character played by Haydée Politoff collects lovers as though they were mere objects, leaving a trail of existentially disquieted paramours in her wake. Scott Herring’s book The Hoarders tackles the contemporary medicalization of “hoarding” as a psychiatric disorder. Taking aim at the reification of hoarding disorder by doctors and professional organizers, this is a book less for psychiatrists than for those interested in the idea of hoarding in American culture. Herring’s argument could be glossed as follows: There is no such thing as hoarding — and this is a book about it.

An associate professor of English at Indiana University at Bloomington, Herring largely ignores hoarding’s deeper historical relationship to cherished objects in centuries past — as in the hoarding of treasure — and the practice of money hoarding. And he eschews framing his account by reference to consumer culture. One might easily observe that while the poor hoard, the rich collect, but perhaps Herring was wary of slipping into economic reductivism. Instead he interprets the pathologization of hoarding as a form of social conformism that seeks to impose “normalcy” on a “deviant lifestyle,” language he links rhetorically to sources such as the Christian Right.

Herring cites the American Psychiatric Association’s listing of hoarding disorder as a relative of obsessive and compulsive disorders in the 5th edition (2013) of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), and the TV show Hoarders, which sensationalizes the plight of people threatened by the contents of their own homes, though he does not dwell on either one. Dismissing scans that point to “different patterns of glucose metabolism in the brain” and speculations that “something at chromosome 14 may be associated” with hoarding, he takes aim at the self-serving “clutterbuddys” at “Messies Anonymous,” and the auction of Andy Warhol’s collections at Sotheby’s. “When you first came in here, you thought, ‘What a weird thing,’” commented the estate lawyer on entering Warhol’s apartment. What was weird was the miscellany and the seeming equality of all its contents. Nothing seemed to have been sorted according to hierarchies of value, leaving the collector’s true intentions, and very identity, in question.

Not for nothing did Sotheby’s sort Warhol’s miscellany into clear categories for its six-volume auction catalog. “Is it just a bunch of stuff, or is it invested with a higher meaning?” asked one journalist at the time. “A lot of what we do is like biology,” quipped the collector and antiques guru Terry Kovel in a 1980 interview, “devising categories and subcategories for things that have never been categorized before.” Herring’s suggestion is that these bland but ultimately sinister puffs of kitsch enabled, in turn, the rise of the clutterologists to save the hyperaccumulative from their own stuff.

Herring also excavates a key scene in the annals of collecting: the production of a certain Gothic horror when private collections are opened to public audiences. Herring presents three examples: the huge crowds that appear outside the Collery’s mansion after their deaths; the Maysles’ filming inside Grey Gardens; and the auction of Andy Warhol’s collections at Sotheby’s. “When you first came in here, you thought, ‘What a weird thing,’” commented the estate lawyer on entering Warhol’s apartment. What was weird was the miscellany and the seeming equality of all its contents. Nothing seemed to have been sorted according to hierarchies of value, leaving the collector’s true intentions, and very identity, in question.

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Along the way, Herring sketches in some key phases of the transformation of collecting into a mass pastime for consumer society in postwar America. He describes the boom in the collectibles industry, propelled by such seemingly innocuous titles as James Michael Ullman’s How to Hold A Garage Sale (1973), written for “people with collecting instincts but more modest budgets,” as well as numerous specialist guides and price lists to facilitate the accumulation of items as varied as ashtrays and piggy banks. “A lot of what we do is like biology,” quipped the collectibles guru Terry Kovel in a 1980 interview, “devising categories and subcategories for things that have never been categorized before.” Herring’s suggestion is that these bland but ultimately sinister puffs of kitsch enabled, in turn, the rise of the clutterologists to save the hyperaccumulative from their own stuff.

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