

# Narrative portrait photography and South African collector culture

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This research involves an investigation into narrative portrait photography as an engagement with South African collector culture. Increasingly, contemporary photography projects concentrating on the documenting of the human subject and society actively include the participation of the subjects. The subject participates in their representation, allowing a more subject-sensitive photographic narrative. The emphasis is placed on the personal experience rather than a collective or outsider's view. The methodological approach followed in this article reflects on the broader intrinsic understanding of the collector culture, as well as the collaborative process between photographer and subject. This is done in order to provide a point of departure for the discussion of the photo-narrative portraits of Hannah Minkley. Minkley reflects on the quirky, obsessive tendencies of middle class, Eastern Cape collectors as an indicator of the personal story of the individual and their relationship with their collected objects, within the broader context of the collector culture. Her narrative portraits comment on the acquisitive and possessive tendencies displayed by individual collectors in middle class South African society. The paper provides possible insights into a process where the photographer explores the subject's opinion through the use of text and photographs, as well as, importantly, in relation to people's personal collections.

**Key words:** narrative portrait photography, collector culture, subject participation

### Portretfotografie as vertellings en die Suid Afrikaanse versamelkultuur.

Hierdie navorsing behels 'n relaas in portret fotografie as skakeling met die Suid Afrikaanse versamelkultuur. Al hoe meer kontemporêre fotografiese projekte wat fokus op die dokumentasie van die menslike figuur as onderwerp asook die gemeenskap, sluit die aktiewe deelname van die onderwerp in. Die onderwerp wat bestudeer word is betrokke by hulle eie uitbeelding in die foto wat n onderwerp sensitiewe weergawe tot gevolg het en dra by tot die visuele kwaliteit van die verhaal wat uitgebeeld word. Klem word geplaas op die persoonlike ervaring in plaas van 'n buitestaander of kollektiewe perspektief. Die metodiese benadering wat in hierdie artikel gevolg word, bepeins 'n breër wesenlike begrip van die versamelkultuur sowel as die medewerking tussen fotograaf en onderwerp. Hierdie benadering dien ook as vertrekpunt in die bespreking van die fotografiese verhaal portrette van Hannah Minkley. Minkley se werk reflekteer die eienaardige en obsessiewe neigings van die middelklas Oos Kaapse versamelaar. Haar doel is om die lewensverhaal van die individu en sy verhouding met sy versamelde items weer te gee, gesien in die konteks van die breër versamelkultuur. Haar verhaal portrette lewer kommentaar oor die hebsug en besitlike neigings van versamelaars in n middelklas Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing. Hierdie artikel dra by tot insig in die proses waardeur die fotograaf met betrekking tot die individu se persoonlike versamelings en sy siening, ondersoek word deur middel van foto's en teks.

**Slutel woorde:** verhaalportret, versamelkultuur, aktiewe deelname van die onderwerp

**P**ersonal collecting, or the “systematic selection, acquisition and saving of objects, constitutes one of the deepest and most committed forms of object attachment” (Kremer 1992: 1). This paper uses Kremer's<sup>1</sup> basic understanding of the nature of the collector as a point of departure to engage with South African collector culture in particular the Eastern Cape middle class collector. This engagement is predominantly achieved by the use of narrative portraiture photography and collaboration between the collector (as subject) and the photographer (as narrator). The subject participates in his or her representation, allowing a more subject-sensitive photographic narrative. The emphasis is placed on the personal experience rather than a group reflection or outsider's view.

The paper therefore initially reflects on the broader intrinsic understanding of the collector culture, provides an overview of the concept of narrative portraiture photography as well as reviews the collaborative process between photographer and subject. The initial investigation provides a point of departure for the discussion of the photo-narrative portraits of Hannah Minkley. Minkley's work reflects on the collector tendencies of individual Eastern Cape collectors as an indicator of the personal story of the individual and their relationship with the collected objects. Her narrative portraits comment on the acquisitive and possessive tendencies displayed by collectors in middle class South African society.

The analysis of the narrative portrait will therefore focus primarily on collectors within the context of person - object relationship, particularly in the area of object attachment, and therefore aims to contribute to the understanding of the common lived relationships between individual collectors and the objects of their collections, as well as to reflect on how those relationships are shaped by the collecting process.

### **Broader intrinsic understanding of collector culture**

It is speculated that collecting may have begun at approximately the same time in human history as art based on a collection of unusual pebbles found in the 80,000 year old Cro-Magnon caves in France (Neal 1980: 24). When reflecting on the riches found in Tutankhamen's tomb it is evident that he collected amongst others whips, staves, walking sticks, mineral specimens and toys (Rigby and Rigby 1944: 98). It is argued that early collectors benefitted from both royal and divine rights:

The ancient temples, like the churches and monasteries of our own middle ages were repositories for great accumulations of wealth of art and literature; and the temple treasuries were the forerunners of our banks, our libraries, our museums. Even these divine collectors began, as nearly as we can judge, with the collection of food and wealth, graduating soon to the collecting of books and records, of art objects and antiques, of curiosities and relics (Rigby and Rigby 1944: 96).

Phillip Blom (2004: 15) argues that the spirit of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance inquiry was "driven by scholars and amateurs, not priests or ancient philosophers" and for the first time the ordinary was regarded as worthy of study with the result that collecting became a recognised pursuit of the scholar and high class society:

The cabinets of the richest collectors boasted the horns of unicorns, dried dragons with outlandish and fearsome shapes, skulls of strange birds and jaws of gigantic fish, stuffed birds of the most extraordinary colors, and parts of other, as yet unidentified, creatures that seem to hover between reality and myth (Blom 2004: 15).

Blom (2004: 21) furthers links collectors to commerce stating that "in order to take objects out of circulation or to devote oneself to finding useless things, one has to afford the time and resources to do so" and "collections flourished wherever commerce did".

Belk<sup>2</sup> *et.al.* (1991: 200) postulate that a "several hundred year trend toward the democratisation of collecting has accelerated in the twentieth century, with more and more people collecting". According to Kremer (1992: 1) "collectors are the greatest single influence on the nature and existence of museums, they indelibly affect what is in our museums, which in turn affects our cultural representations". Personal attachment, affection, passion and sentiment toward objects are the primary differentiating factors between institutional collecting and that of the private individual collector (Kremer 1992: 2).

Based on questionnaire responses for the research entitled *Why they Collect: Collectors Reveal their Motivations*, sociologist Ruth Formanek (1994: 334) finds collecting to be the result of multiple motivations including: “(1) in relation to the self, (2) in relation to other people, (3) as preservation, restoration, history and a sense of continuity, (4) as financial investment and (5) as addiction”. Belk’s analysis of popular collecting literature, reflecting on the number of times that key terms occur, reveals the most common behavioral traits of collectors as: instincts; mania; competition; prestige; legitimisation; motives; hoarding; knowledge; possession; nostalgia; classification; security; disposition; and inheritance (Kremer 1992: 58).

Belk (1995: 67) defines the process of collecting, as “actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from ordinary use and perceived as part of a set of non-identical objects or experiences” as an “acquisitive, possessive, and materialistic pursuit.” The collector is therefore committed to a “continuing quest for inessential consumer goods that are removed from any functional capacity they may once have had” (Belk 1995: 479). Collecting is defined by behavior of acquisition and possession that in general is viewed by society as “more valued and less selfish” than other forms of luxury consumption. Belk (1995: 486) further expresses the irony in the assumption that collecting is “less selfish” given that in his opinion collecting is:

The quintessence of selfish acquisitiveness and possessiveness, for many collectors collecting is experienced as a self-transcendent passion in which the collected objects become more important than their health, wealth, or inner being. Collecting, in other words, becomes a religion for such collectors, and they envision themselves playing the role of savior of society by preserving all that is noble and good for future generations (Belk 1995: 486).

In Storr’s<sup>3</sup> opinion collecting can be likened to the “thrill of the hunt” with the anticipation that a “converted acquisition” may come to light in unexpected places. Storr takes the analogy of hunter further by expressing the opinion that “success in competition with others may provide prestige and status within the world of collecting” (Storr 1983: 36). Pearce<sup>4</sup> (2007: 7) suggests individuals “...tend to collect things from the past which has some relevance to them. They may collect things from their own past, or from another person’s past that they believe has personal significance. Structuring one’s past is a very importance part of structuring identity”. Belk elaborates on the collections’ connection to self, stating: “the collections may literally make us larger people through an extended sense of self” (Belk 1988: 150). And as Walter Benjamin (1968) commented when reflecting on his book collection, “collected objects may be cues that recall past collecting activities and contribute to our identities through this sense of past”.

Collected objects are often “anthropomorphized, fetishized, and personified until they define and occupy the little world of an intimate family in which the collector reigns as an absolute sovereign” (Belk *et. al.* 1991: 178). Sigmund Freud, commonly regarded as the father of psychoanalysis, was a physiologist, medical doctor, psychologist and influential thinker of the early twentieth century. He is however less well known for his collecting habits. Freud’s collection, of over two thousand three hundred Assyrian, Roman, Chinese and Egyptian figurines, “crowded his desk and cabinets in the two rooms where he wrote and consulted with patients” (Belk *et. al.* 1991: 178). The hundreds of statuettes in this collection are of animal and human figures that Freud arranged facing him at his desk (Gamwell 1989: 28), “in close-packed ranks like soldiers on parade” (Gay 1976: 17). The collection started two months after the death of his father in 1896 and “friends and family noted that the fortunate transfer of Freud’s collection from wartime Vienna made his adjustment to England far easier, as he was surrounded by familiar loved objects” (Belk *et. al.* 1991: 178). While Freud did not write extensively on the habits of collectors it should be noted that “Freud’s collecting activity and his comments on collecting

both support the observation that a key feature of collecting consists of elevating possessions in the collection to an extraordinary status not bestowed upon the vast majority of objects in the collector's life" (Belk *et. al.* 1991: 178).

In Ellen's (1988: 215) synthesis of the psychoanalytic, anthropological, and Marxian discussion of cases of obsessive collecting where collections have become a fetish: "it is no longer clear whether the collector controls the objects or the objects control the collector". Belk (1994: 319) furthers this argument stating that in some cases collecting can be likened to an addiction with both "obsessive and compulsive tendencies":

Some collectors forestall completing collections for fear of the withdrawal symptoms. As might be expected, 'dual or poly dependencies' commonly occur, with a collector diversifying into a number of collectables. So also is intergenerational transfer of collecting (although perhaps not of the same collectable) a commonplace occurrence.

In some cases there may be some concern for the immortality of the collection itself and in such cases collectors either "attempt to convince a museum to preserve their collections", have their collections featured in an elite collector publication or a "caring heir is sought who will appreciate the collection" (Belk *et al* 1991: 191). These heirs are frequently sought in grandchildren – "an elephant replica collector hopes his two year old granddaughter will take over his collection and was preparing her by reading her elephant stories and giving her elephant gifts" (Belk *et al* 1991: 191).

What becomes evident from this broad overview of collector culture is a common understanding of a diversity of motivations amongst collectors. Formanek (1994: 334) in particular invites a speculation on "the function of collecting to the individual personality". This paper therefore investigates these individual motivations through narrative portrait photography inviting South African collectors to assist in the visual representation of themselves as collectors while simultaneously entering into discussion on their collection and collecting tendencies of the individual collector.

### **Narrative portrait photography**

Through the use of photographic narratives, that Chase (2005: 657) describes as being "socially situated interactive performances", it is possible to further reflect on the interrelated use of text, photographs and the subject. Photographic narratives have the potential to be seen as a new visual way to show and understand one's own and others' actions and interpretations; show how events and objects are visually narrated into a meaningful whole; and be able to connect and see the consequences of actions and events over time (Chase 2005: 656).

Ketelle<sup>5</sup> (2010: 548) similarly suggests that by combining images and text, one may generate narrative images through photographic images and the photographer's proposed intention; the written reflections of those in the photographs; the photographer's own responses to the photographs; and, the subject's interpretations of their portraits and thus of the negotiated constructions of the images.

As a result, Ketelle (2010: 564) proposes that photographers and narrative researchers have common objectives, and thus have the capability to integrate the photograph and narrative, to create a photographic narrative. These shared objectives suggest that both narrative researchers and photographers have to slow down in order to self regulate when their concern is fixed on an issue, consider many factors and perspectives before making a decision in order to move forward

and therefore have to carefully delineate areas of relevance. Additionally, both practitioners need to have an eye for composition, which is understandably used in different ways, both need to have a gentleness, which connects them to humanity, and both need to have the ability to capture a specific moment.

Thus, through considering both Chase and Ketelle's theories behind the relationship between photographers and narrative researchers, it is evident that there is potential to expand on the idea of a photographic narrative. Both specialists share similar objectives that tend to consider the relationship between self and other, and, where mostly, emphasis is placed on building associations that are ethically based, hold integrity, and hope to reflect a mutual, respectful and collaborative relationship. A photographic narrative broadly encapsulates a practical study that involves the self and other, but suggests itself as a starting point, or working methodology, for both photographers and researchers alike. It needs to be emphasised that while narrative researchers benefit from working with photographers there are many instances where the photographer works alone or with the subject to create photo narratives which comment on society but were not intentionally done for research purposes but can be seen as a genre evident within the photographic discourse.

### **Collaborative process between photographer and collector/subject**

Increasingly, contemporary photography projects concentrating on the documenting of the human subject and society actively include the participation of the subjects. The subject participates in their representation, allowing a more subject-sensitive photographic narrative. The emphasis is placed on the personal experience rather than a collective or outsiders view.

In Bright's (2005: 13) opinion Postmodernism exposed "how photography was used and understood as a medium, as a material and as a message". The study of photography's masters became "increasingly irrelevant and problematic" as the photograph was no longer seen as "the creation of a single 'author' who retained the monopoly on its meaning but as a product of a certain context with a multiplicity of meanings" (Bright 2005: 13).

Contemporary projects concentrating on the documenting of the human subject and consequences of social crisis or injustice, actively include the participation of the subject's and the photographer's role has become that of a mediator. The subject is given more control over their representation, the photographer bears witness to their existence and self-possession. The photographs are normally presented along with factual information on the subject and environment and in some cases quotes of the subjects not only give subject reflection to the photographed but emphasise the photographers role as mediator. This type of reporting is usually done over longer time periods with repeated visits, photographing from an informed position.

South Africa's past has been well-documented but the process was not necessarily a relationship between sitter and photographer in an attempt to allow the sitter more self determination in the representation. In particular during the 1980s and early 1990s, a time of social crisis, "The camera became a voice and a weapon for those denied basic human rights and was instrumental in bringing atrocities perpetrated by the state to the attention of the international community" (Grundlingh 1999: 248). In Nadine Gordimer's (1989: 10) view<sup>6</sup> "... [a] great responsibility devolves on artists and cultural workers to align themselves consciously with the forces of democracy and national liberation in the life and death struggle to free our country from racist bondage".

Democracy in 1994 can be seen as a turning point as the photographer no longer documented a unified drive for democracy but now turned on the diversity of South African society. As Barnes<sup>7</sup> (in Garb 2011: 8) describes:

The dynamism and urgency surrounding photography in South Africa today is partly explained, perhaps ... by its local context: embedded in colonial history, ethnography, anthropology, journalism and political activism, the best photography emerging from the country has absorbed and grapples with its weighty history, questioning, manipulating and revivifying its visual codes and blending them with contemporary concerns. Post apartheid, complex and fundamental issues – race, society, gender, identity – remain very much on the surface.

The challenge to contemporary social documentary photographers it seems is to re-evaluate the past photographic representations under the repressive apartheid state, and to consider a new working methodology, and ways of visually relating to aspects of contemporary society. This paper reflects on photographic narration, and the relationship between photographs and written text, and the photographer and the sitter, as a possible methodology to consider, as it attempts to deal with visual identity. The sitter's opinion gains prominence in the photographic representation allowing the "quirky" and "obsessive" tendencies of the collector to become more apparent.

Documentary portraiture thus has the ability to address and reshape how the relationship between photographer and subject is approached, technically related and visually presented. By realising the potential of photography as an influential visual medium, the possibility of exploring varying mediums within photography is both relevant and significant. This could be explored and hold integrity by simply considering the use of text and photographs as a form of interaction between photographer and subject, and a means of allowing the subject to participate in their representation during, and as a lasting effect after the photographic process.

### **Discussion of the photo-narrative portraits of Hannah Minkley**

The photographic series, of collectors and their collections, titled *Collecting Lives* set out to explore, develop and investigate people's personal collections, through the use of documentary photography, and to consider related visual mediums, as a means of addressing, and reshaping how the relationship between photographer, subject and collection could perhaps be more intrinsically presented. Thus, through investigating these visual methodologies; the relevancy, and potential of using text and photographs, as a form of interaction between photographer, subject, and collection seemed compelling and constructive in potentially allowing the subject to take part in creating his or her visual identity during the photographic process and providing insight for the captioning process. This collaboration therefore essentially provides visual narrative material that can be directly linked to collectors and their object affinity.

This particular study worked within, and extended on these ideas by incorporating the concerns with personal collections, reflected as subject-object relations that signify important aspects of visual identity. Exploring subject opinion through the use of text and photographs, and, importantly, in relation to people's personal collections. This idea is essentially reflected in the title: *Collecting Lives*. By focusing on various members of society, the series illustrates, through identifying key objects, or collections, that collectors have a thing or things that contribute/s to their lives. And, significantly, that these collections vary in meaning and intention. "Collections, and the act of collecting, reveal that we, as people, have rather complex identities" (Enwezor 2006: 19). By understanding collections as partial representations of visual identity or "segments

of self”, one may perhaps better understand how the connections between image and text, and of giving voice through photographic narratives, focused through these collections, could occur.

The collectors, who were based in the Eastern Cape in particular East London, Port Elizabeth and Cathcart, agreed to be interviewed and photographed, thereby forming a fundamental part in compiling the series *Collecting Lives*. What becomes interesting when reviewing the participants, and their relevant collections, is that particular trends, and what one may term themes emerge. Bearing in mind the project is still ongoing, the results for this paper are determined by a limited scale of availability and participation that to date represent a largely middle aged, white group of individuals. In so doing, the question of depicting a new South African visual commentary has been somewhat curtailed and compromised, within the context of this article, when considering the more popular areas of interest when referring to new forms of visual commentary. However, at the same time, the research to date convincingly shows an aspect of South African visual social identity as a common, central theme that in the past has received little attention. Parallels were drawn exploring primarily, the association between individual collector visual identity, and their material object driven collection – and, in doing so, a more subject driven visual identity and “segment of self” is exposed. By doing this, the images and self-narratives, and the connection between the two, reflect a photographic narrative that is more subject-centered and personal than would otherwise have been the case.

Aileen Berrington is a collector of sentimental pieces with correlating memories, which she perceives as objects of beauty, and is particularly drawn to what she terms “intricate detailing and intriguing shapes and patterns”. For her, this patterning of attachment is best found in her twelve bone china tea sets on the one hand, and in drawers upon drawers of various sized seashells on the other.

Aileen is a petite woman in her eighties, and lives in a small inland Eastern Cape town. She shares a birthday with the Queen of England, and this sharing marks a profound continuing sense of affinity with Englishness and with the British Empire. At the same time, having grown up on a farm near Birds River, Aileen is a practical and capable woman, who despite her age has very few idle moments in her day and maintains an attachment to a particular sense of being South African and belonging to its landscape and community. She is involved with various local societies, such as the *Golden Girls* (a group of close friends, who refuse to grow old too gracefully) and *Garden Club*, but is always dressed in chiffons and silks, wide-spanning hats and floral detailing, with a variety of pink and mauve tones in her clothing and makeup, which replicate the image of the Queen.

Aileen professes to have had a lifelong tendency to collect and her first collections were of porcelain dolls and fairies. Porcelain dolls were not readily available in South Africa before World War II, and Aileen first started collecting dolls as a young adult. She would only keep a doll if it “felt comfortable and right in her arms when she held it close to her body”, which made the whole process of collecting dolls a sentimental and personal one. But after, fairly recently, moving to a new house, she gave quite a few of her dolls away, deciding that she “could not provide a home for all of them, and keeping just the dolls most special to her”. Aileen did however decide to keep some of her fairies, and has pop-up books, ornaments and paintings of these magical miniatures spread around her home.

As mentioned, Aileen’s most impressive collections consist of bone china teacup sets and various shells found along the South African coastline. As a mother, Aileen collected shells with her children. Aileen, like all other collectors, was invited to write about her collection and the

following is an extract from her handwritten text, “We would pack up and spend two to three weeks at the sea. We all were intrigued by the beautiful colours, shapes and sizes of shells, and so the collection grew, and grew, until I was able to identify them and able to arrange them each to its own kind. And, so the interest grew”. The process of collecting shells, as Aileen explains, was important in that it created a stronger bond between her and her children, it was something that each family member was interested in doing at the relevant time, and it was something that she has held on to, and held as a commemoration of the past. As Winget (2011: 27) effectively illustrates, “a collection is often [seen as] the ability to look at a collection and remember different periods of one’s life [and], to associate objects with experiences”. Aileen’s private individual collection resonates with Kremmer’s (1992: 2) notion, which has already been defined as suggesting that such collections demonstrate “personal attachment, affection, passion and sentiment towards objects [and objects as memory]”.

Family members and friends gave most of the tea sets to Aileen, and each has a significant importance in defining herself and her life – in that each tea set, as material object, holds a specific memory and association with a person, place and time. As Figure 1 and 2 illustrate, these associations are made more visible when linked through the text, which is handwritten by Aileen, and which is individually interpreted alongside the images. This enables consideration of both the photographer’s and participant’s point of view, and thus tries to generate a more collaborative photographic approach. As Pearce (2007: 7) has suggested individuals collect from the past and that structuring past plays an important part in structuring identity. Thus, Aileen’s teacups, which collectively configure a sentiment of colonial nostalgia in both the past, and the present, while visibly simultaneously commemorating those tea-cups as objects influential to it, and as her own attached written text illuminates, coincide with Pearce’s observation as the past being an important element in structuring and shaping one’s identity.

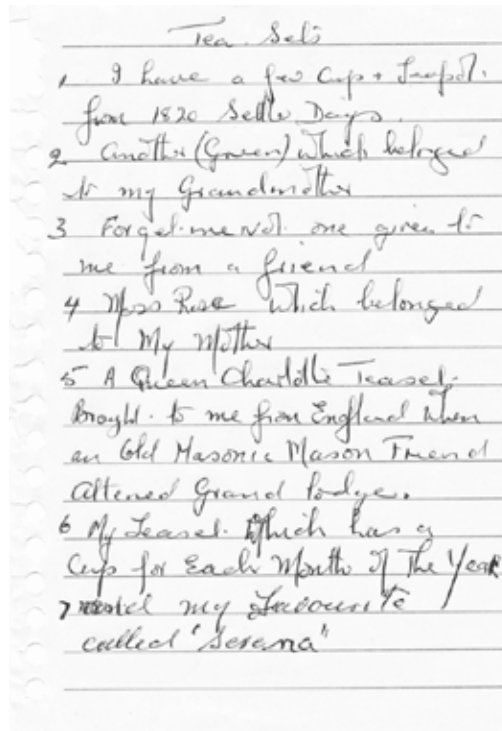


**Figure 1**  
**Hannah Minkley, *Aileen Berrington***  
**(from the series *Collecting Lives*).**

When viewing Figure 1, and the manner in which Aileen has set the table, it seems as though she may be present at such a tea party – entertaining, and taking pleasure in the company of the past, and previous tea set owners and invoking a sense of Empire – even if perhaps also an increasingly isolated and solitary location. Aileen, befittingly and elegantly, presents herself



to her guests in her finest attire – crowned with her favourite pink broad brimmed hat, and gently made up with subtle red lips (Figure 1). This, in essence, tells a story of Aileen, and her relationship to her collection. These particular collections reflect a sentimental nostalgic quality in Aileen’s personality, and play an important part in connecting her past and her present in a unique, special and memorable, if also limited and limiting way that tends to resonate the fading effect of the coloniser.



**Figure 2**  
**Hannah Minkley, *Hand Written Text by Aileen Berrington (from the series *Collecting Lives*).***

Drawing on Aileen’s collecting motives in a similar, yet contrasting manner is Joan Godfrey, Aileen’s daughter. Joan has an extraordinary stamp collection. Having identified her great grandmother as the originator of the collection, Joan recognises that a number of the stamps date back to the early 1900s. The collection was passed down to her grandmother, and then to Joan, who started collecting at the age of eight. This passing down of stamps over generations was influential in Joan’s relationship and bond with her grandmother, as they used to share stories and personal fascinations with the stamps. This relationship through object collections like Joan’s stamps may be seen to exemplify Walter Benjamin’s (1955: 60) comment that “collected objects may be cues that recall past collecting activities and contribute to our identities through this sense of past”. This collection also upholds Belk et. al’s (1991: 191) argument that heirs are sought to continue collections. Appropriately, Joan’s identification of her stamp collection as generational, expresses this idea of past and present being interconnected in a personal and relational way. The stamp journals laid across Joan’s table in figure 3 represent those of her great-grandmother, grandmother, and herself – and further illustrate the generational quality of her collection.



**Figure 3**  
**Hannah Minkley, *Joan Berrington***  
**(from the series *Collecting Lives*).**

Stamp collecting has played a significant role in Joan's life as she is not only fascinated with the colour, detail and decoration of each stamp, but also, as Joan recalls, with the knowledge and information about South Africa and other countries which her research on individual stamps has revealed. The organising and categorising of stamps has also been valuable, as this feeds Joan's need to be organised and structured in her life, generally (Figure 3).

Joan wrote, describing her collection:

Why do I collect stamps? Initially because I was fascinated by these lovely miniature pictures. Pictures that tell a story, that tell us a history of a country, that show us the flora and fauna, that tell us about the people and their customs and in essence give us an insight into the soul of that country. Essentially, I started collecting because of the beauty of the stamps. General knowledge was a by-product. The value of the stamps has never held much of an interest to me. I like research, organising, categorising, planning and this has fulfilled that need. Oh yes, and I am a great recycler and so stamps fulfill that need too! A thing of beauty is a joy forever!

One may reflect on Joan's participation with her collection as being one of a fictional narrative, where the stamps, as collected objects, transfer and construct a vivid, sentimental and personal attachment or narrative of experience to her own definitions of beauty and joy, but also enable attachments to wider frames of selecting and organising knowledge, truth and universality for her.

The sense of satisfaction gained by finding the stamps that complete a set is partly why Joan enjoys the act of collecting – and this again corresponds to another motivation identified with collecting: associated with systematic organising (Berry 2005: 34) and the need to collect a pack or set of something, as opposed to having a half-finished project. Joan explained that the colours, patterns and textures of each individual stamp fascinated and continues to fascinate her, but it is also the prominent attachment to nostalgia that forms a major theme in her collection. The collection itself is of sentimental importance (Kremmer 1992: 2), in that it connects Joan to the past, having existed in her family for two prior generations, and reminds her of personal associations with her grandmother. She, like her mother, chose to position herself at the head of the table with a considerable portion of her collection on display.

Nostalgia, too, as a defining feature of these collectors and collections, but in a slightly different manner, is Tersia de Bruin's ethereal collection. Tersia lives in Cathcart, and has been collecting fairies and porcelain dolls for many years. Tersia explains that when she visits East London or Queenstown, she continues to add to her fairy collection by searching for ornaments that she does not already have, and that can be added to her fantastical fairy homeland. These fairies inhabit and are a defining form of decoration in Tersia's home (Figure 4).

Moreover, these feminine miniatures bestow a sense of comfort and ease in her and as Winget (2011: 30) proposes, they can be seen to "play a more fundamental role in defining the personality of the collector, who experiences an almost worshipful attitude towards the objects in the collection" Fazio *et. al.* (2008: 37). further elaborate, and suggest that, "In the practice of collecting, subjects 'subjectivise' the objects they have acquired by assembling them to construct a narrative that resonates with their perception of themselves; this narrative reflects their personal desires as they are informed by the temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts in which they construct and express them". Tersia's involvement in her collection, both in the physical constructing of her fairyland, and in attaching an emotional status to her fairies, as inanimate objects, demonstrates a personal desire and sense of imaginary belonging. This subjectivisation of fairyland locates and expresses an imaginary spatial, temporal and cultural context removed from the realities of small town post-apartheid Cathcart. Here an imaginative fairyland becomes a process of communication between herself, as subject, and the fairy objects that occupy the space that she dwells in.

Tersia did not wish to be photographed with her collections, but instead offered a personal (younger) photograph of herself. Interestingly, her very refusal to be photographed in the project further suggests her desire to create, depict and exist in a fantasy world, in that only inanimate objects are arranged, organised and displayed as a means of self-representation. This coincides with Formanek's (1991) concept that collecting is a form of "self expression" and Winget's proposal that they define the personality of the collector, constructing, as Fazio *et. al.* (2008: 38) state, a "narrative that resonates with their perception of themselves" and which cannot be disrupted by her actual photographed presence.

As mentioned, Tersia's second collection consists of a number of well-kept porcelain dolls. These dolls are set aside in a separate living room, and guarded, by a seated porcelain dog (figure 5). Tersia explained that the dog was placed there to keep her three living dogs from entering the room, and potentially destroying her dolls. Considering this further, it may be possible to reflect on Tersia's guard dog (figure 5) as forming a significant, valuable and deep-rooted part of her imagined environment. In that, this notable inanimate object is assigned the role of a living creature – as the household guard dog. On one level, Tersia's doll collection (and her fairyland collection) become alive, are living in a separate living room, guarded by a porcelain dog, which has also been removed from its ordinary decorative use. In this sense, the porcelain dog (figure 5), as a non-living object, has been placed in a space to protect and ward off other living creatures, and is therefore adopting a "new way of life". Wintle (2008: 279) feasibly describes this, stating "collectors can select, juxtapose, and arrange their objects with calculated precision, addressing both imaginary and actual audiences to convey specific messages". As such, we are able, through the project and its connections of photographs and texts, to see Tersia's collection as proposing "ways of life" that are both imaginary, and removed from real life. Her collected items assume interactive positions playing out an imaginary role within the display of the collection.



**Figure 4**  
**Hannah Minkley, *Tersia's Fairyland***  
**(from the series *Collecting Lives*).**

At another equally intriguing level, though, this situates Tersia's porcelain doll collection, as it would also situate Aileen's tea cup and Joan's stamp collections within Belk's definition of the process of collecting as "actively, selectively, and passionately acquiring and possessing things removed from [their] ordinary use" (Belk, 1995: 67). As Belk and others have pointed out, this ability to remove objects from their ordinary use requires a prior capacity and middle class status in relation to having the means to accumulate and remove objects from their designated and prescribed use values in the first place. This reminds us that personal collecting tends to both reflect, and to further ascribe and constitute middle class (and in these cases white middle class status) as nostalgic worlds are built on the capacities to actively, selectively and passionately acquire, display and possess these collections within their own living environments.



**Figure 5**  
**Hannah Minkley, *Tertia's Guard Dog and Doll Collection***  
**(from the series *Collecting Lives*).**

Both Tersia and her husband, Willie (Figure 6), are avid collectors. Kept away in glass cabinets, and perfectly ordered in display, is Willie de Bruin's dinky car collection (Figure 7). Willie grew up in Sterkstroom, and has been collecting dinky cars, tractors and trucks ever since he was a young boy. At first he collected them purely for the joy of being able to play with them as toys, and in doing so, did not think to keep the boxes that the cars came in. The boxes now add a lot more value to the cars as collectables.



Figures 6 & 7

6. Hannah Minkley, *Willie de Bruin*; 7. Hannah Minkley, *A Selection of Willie's Dinky Car Collection* (from the series *Collecting Lives*).

Willie had very little pocket money when he was a youngster, and decided to work in gardens after school to ensure that he could afford the dinky cars that he wanted. He wrote explaining, "I was paid 2/6 (25c) an afternoon. Dinky toys started at 1/6 (15c) per toy, later 2/6 (25c) and then 3/6 (35c)". When Willie started his farming career, he grew interested in, and pursued collecting tractors and trucks. These treasures were then carefully placed in his ceiling-high glass cabinets, categorically arranged, and meticulously locked away, equally removed from their original use as children's toys.

As significantly, though, the depiction of Willie's collection helps us critically observe that, as Pearce (2007: 7) argues: "Women generally collect things that on the whole reflect their own personality and that of their families... They display what they collect to help make the home. Men, on the other hand, have their collections in the loft, shed, spare room or office for example. In other words they keep their collections separate and somewhat private. This also illustrates that the home is still much more the woman's domain". Intriguingly, this idea correlates with the de Bruin's home rather accurately. Willie's collection is separated from the living space in their home, and has been placed, almost secretly, in a dark passage, displayed in a non-interactive orderly manner. Tersia's collections, on the other hand, occupy both lounge areas, and are assigned interactive roles in a more outwardly visible public display. In other words, collectors, collections and their forms of display are also gendered, and it is intriguing to reflect on how these white middle class collections potentially open up the ways that public and private spaces are almost completely reversed within the imaginary homes of collections and material objects: women more public, with men more private.



Figures 8 & 9

8. Hannah Minkley, *Andre Horak*; 9. Hannah Minkley, *Female 'Chickens' in Special Display Compartments Built by Horak* (from the series *Collecting Lives*).

Correspondingly, the privately, practically hidden arranged cabinets of Willie de Bruin, simultaneously link to Andre Horak's collection of racing pigeons (Figure 9). Andre grew up in a small town where, as youngsters, he and his brothers were fascinated by birds. The decision to start racing pigeons, though, only came about in 2001. However, as Andre explains, the cost of keeping birds continues to rise, and so he decided to slowly withdraw from the sport. Yet he keeps his pigeons, increasingly as part of a deep, situated connection that he seems to share with his pigeons and one that is closer to definitions applicable to them as a collection, then as racing living birds.

In this context, Pearce suggests that, "Collections help create your environment, and again, your environment is a very important part of your identity" (Pearce 2007: 7). Around the back of Andre's family home is a wooden structure that houses his beloved, trophy-winning pigeons. For him, and in almost reverse logic to Tersia's porcelain guard dog, the pigeons are not just racing animals, but an actual collection. As such, these living birds, whose ordinary use is to race, have been removed from this space and practically made into an inanimate collection, if also simultaneously humanised at the same time. The pigeons housing has been meticulously constructed – such care has been put into beautifully building every room, stand and shelf that the pigeons daily occupy as to turn this space into one of selected, organised and arranged display as if a collection. This space, separated from the family household, allows Andre (Figure 8) a form of private self indulgence, suggestive of Pearce's (2007: 7) gender commentary. This personal collection also reflects how collected objects may move association, and visual identity between alternating public and the private spaces.

These collectors were willing participants in creating narrated visual identities that currently form the series *Collecting Lives*. It could perhaps be argued that this participation was viewed as a form of documentation for future continuation of their collections. While the research is ongoing the contribution of this paper places the individual South African collector within a global perspective and the images add to an ever-growing South African visual identity.

## Conclusion

In view of the diversity of motivations found, one may speculate on the function of collecting to the individual personality (Formanek 1994: 334). When reflecting on collecting motives

and individual personalities, it's valuable to consider Pearce's observation, that, "collections are essentially a narrative of experience; as objects are a kind of material language, so the narratives into which they can be selected and organised are a kind of fiction" (Pearce in Fazio *et. al.* 2008: 37).

The paper provides possible insights into a process where the photographer explores the subject's reflection of self through the use of text and photographs, as well as, importantly, in relation to personal collections. While a unified view of South African collector perhaps remains illusive, and the topic for further research, what is apparent is that the complexities inherent within a global understanding of collector motivations and acquisition tendencies as previously outlined by Formanek and Belk are mirrored within the collector personalities discussed as examples of South African collectors within this paper.

What Minkley achieves with her photo-narrative portraits is a visual understanding of the collector and his or her relationship with the collected objects. By interviewing the collectors/photographed subjects and inviting them to write about their collections, which are then included within the visual representation, acquisitive and possessive tendencies become more apparent. Each collector represented within this paper reflects a unique character based on how they are visually represented. These visual narratives, however, strongly represent character traits of collectors as determined in the broader understanding of collector culture reflected on within the paper, in particular the research of Belk, Kremmer and Pearce.

While it is argued that collectors reflect a wide variety of motivations Formanek's (1994: 335) statement: "what is common to all motivations to collect, and what appears to be the collector's defining characteristic, is a passion for the particular things collected", neatly encapsulates a general consensus as determined through global opinions reflected on. Minkley's photo-narrative portraits and interaction with collectors as subject provide a sensitive view of individual South African collectors.

## Notes

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|---|--|---|---|
| 1 | Kremer's PhD Philosophy thesis at University of Columbia entitled <i>Meaningful Materialism: Collectors Relationship to Their Objects</i> .  |   | the process of collecting as a major social and individual phenomenon.  |
| 2 | Russel Belk is a Professor at the Schulich School of Business at York University his work predominantly concentrates on consumer research particularly the meanings of possessions, collecting, gift-giving, materialism, and global consumer culture. | 5 | D. Ketelle Associate Professor, Educational Leadership, Director of the EdD, MA, and Administrative Credential Programs, Mills College with a research emphasis on 'writing life'.        |
| 3 | Anthony Storr, British psychiatrist and author.  | 6 | A South African writer renowned for her books that deal with moral and psychological tensions in a racially divided South Africa. Winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for Literature in 1991. |
| 4 | Susan Pearce is a professor of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, England. At Oxford University, she studied history and archaeology. She has written seven books about  | 7 | Martin Barnes is the senior curator of photographs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.   |

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