

## **Crime as Art. PRIVATE COLLECTION - Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkacova**

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Anetta Mona Chisa and Lucia Tkacova's Private Collection is made up of trivial objects: a coat hanger, a computer mouse, headphones or a hammer. They have been culled from a collection of like objects, stripped of all value via the gesture of a collector's acquisition, and situated in an entirely different context. This collection holds extremely important quality. Every piece was stolen by the artists from a gallery—a place meant for art—which serves to give surplus value<sup>1</sup> to specific objects<sup>2</sup>. This project was inaugurated in 2005 and have been continued to this day, and the artists, having been pulled into their kleptomaniac game, are apparently powerless to stop it from continuing.

What is the nature of the gesture of illegal gathering and combining objects into the framework of a collection? Does it hold the subversive power of the imperative that Raoul Vaneigem inserted in *A Revolution in Everyday Life*: 'Don't buy this book, steal it'? Can lawbreaking become artistic practice? Private Collection is undoubtedly a project that takes careful aim at artistic institutions and conditions of market turnover. The introduction of a turnover of material goods completely unlike that of the market is in itself an action aiming at destabilising institutional activities. And yet, the stolen objects, as I have already pointed out, are practically worthless, thus skirting round the category of crime. The artists' activities are deeds of marginal societal infringement, and thus do not put them in danger of standing on trial. Yet they are acts with an illegal overtone, and so, to a minor degree, are characterised by violence. One of the first modern art collections, the Louvre, was possible due to pillage. Pillage and war crimes are only justified by the law of the victors. The Third Reich, perhaps, had the largest collecting ambitions. During the World War Two, Einsatzstab Reichsleiter Rosenberg für die Besetzten Gebiete became a world-wide organisation that plundered around 22,000 works of art from German-conquered territories. Most of these were supposed to found their place in the Führer Museum in Linz, which was to possess the most outstanding collection of art in the history of the world. The other collector of the Third Reich was Hermann Goering. Joseph Margolis writes: 'Goering's passion as a collector makes us pause for thought, because it utterly exposes the colonial nature of collecting at the

moment when the problem of obtaining new items rears its head. And thus through a "natural" development of "aesthetic" interests, snatching up anything takes on a veneer of legality, as it is being done in the name of art.'<sup>3</sup> The analogy between the great plunderers and these two artists may be shocking, but, to some degree, it conveys the extraordinary ambiguity of the activity they undertook in choosing the first object for their collection. Comparing the horror of the Third Reich with these minimal crimes emphasises the subversive nature of Private Collection. The value of these objects raised to the ranks of art resides not just in their material form, but also—and perhaps above all—in the crossing of forces that evades research and easy explanation, somewhere between the market, art criticism and collecting, crossing whose symbol is the gallery. In this public space mysterious rituals breathe surplus value into the artistic material, thus having a direct impact on market value. Through the arbitrariness of their gesture of assimilation and conferring artistic status upon everyday objects, they emphasise the arbitrariness of the art world's activities in shaping the fashions and prices of works.

But there is still something else at work in Private Collection. Goering's collection expressed the aggressor's totalitarian power. Lawless accumulation turned out to be both military and ideological power of a regime.

The collection legitimised the violence committed, and stood as advocate for it. Consequently the colonial power of collecting emerged. Two artists from Eastern Europe are taking up the same game with regulations imposed upon them by art institutions from the 'civilised' world. The violence they use against their employers is imperceptible immediately—the manipulation and abuse is visible only in the framework of redistribution in the form of the growing collection. According to Marx, the fetishism of commodities is 'a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things'.<sup>4</sup> In this case the products of the artists' work are fetishised, and their value is estimated by market principles (even if the art market is a special variation of a wider category). The artist can reveal false understanding by placing an object in a different context, and simultaneously expose the violence that exists between individuals. György Lukács once claimed that 'the radical separation of the concepts of violence and economics is an inadmissible abstraction, and that an economic relation unconnected with violence whether latent

or overt cannot be imagined'.<sup>5</sup> This is why the act of theft is so very important to the Private Collection project – by coming in conflict with the principles of the legal system governing capitalism, it designs a new joyful economy.

1. Karl Marx' term.

2. A reference to one of the most important minimal art texts: Specific Objects by Donald Judd, 1965.

3. J. Margolis, 'Koncepcja muzeum sztuki', in Muzeum sztuki, M. Popczyk (ed.), Kraków: Universitas, 2006, p. 153. 4. K. Marx, 'The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Therof', in Capital, Volume 1, Chapter 1, Section 4, transl. by B. Fowkes, London: Penguin Classics, 1992.

5. G. Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness. A Study on Marxist Dialectics, transl. by R. Livingstone, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1982, p. 240.