



# GALILA'S P.O.C Passion, Obsession, Collection

François de Coninck

**As I see it, we suffer, you and I,  
of the same grave illness:  
curiosity. Do you know that the  
word curiosity comes from the  
Latin *cura*, care? Let us be proud  
of our faults: to be curious,  
is to take care.**

Erik Orsenna, *Les Chevaliers du Subjonctif*<sup>1</sup>

## **A cabinet of contemporary curiosities**

Galila Barzilai Hollander's collection resembles a contemporary cabinet of curiosities: an accumulation of largely incompatible objects of every possible genre, which are grouped together thematically according to various categories – much like the natural, artificial, exotic and scientific categories that shaped Renaissance cabinets of curiosities.

If, at first, our gaze loses itself in this joyously disordered space, make no mistake: in fact, the disorder constitutes a self-organizing order. At the heart of this accumulation of artworks is a singular interpretation of the world – the construction of a personal universe of forms, textures, colors and materials. The passion that animates Galila Barzilai Hollander's collection is first and foremost a passion for form, as employed by contemporary artists in order to give material expression to ideas, emotions, questions, intentions, daydreams, injuries, and fantasies. The artworks with which she has surrounded herself reflect thoughts, questions, intuitions, states of turmoil, and unspoken choices, made manifest by means of plastic forms: the cross-pollination effected through their joint exhibition is thus a product of her own internal world.

These numerous acquisitions, juxtapositions and confrontations form a collection that has gradually come to reveal some intriguing sensibilities and unexpected affinities between different themes, ideas, objects, forms, techniques, materials, and contemporary art mediums. In the end, the works can all be arranged according to one of the themes dear to Galila Barzilai Hollander. The chair, the book, the eye, money, the egg, and the color white are some of the categories according to which she has organized this unusual and fantastic theater of objects.

A collection is a singular entity that ties together diverse objects and forms of production. As the Belgian Surrealist Louis Scutenaire noted, "It is not the pearls that make the necklace, it is the thread." In other words, what makes up a collection is not a mere accumulation of works, but rather the gesture that ties them, the spirit that animates them and brings them together. This is the purely subjective dimension of the collection: it is the singularity of the gesture that assembles the objects,







which otherwise would have remained dispersed in the chaos of the world. The collection is made in the image of the personality for which it serves as a mirror, endowing it with its character. What, then, characterizes this collector's unique gesture and the spirit of her collection?

## A lively aesthetic sensibility

For more than ten years, the passion to see has been the guiding force behind Galila Barzilai Hollander's instinctive choices, representing the chief strength of her approach as a collector. Her attraction to works of art, as to objects in general, expresses a purely aesthetic passion for forms, colors, vibrations, materials and textures that solicit in her an entire range of pleasing visual experiences. Thus, it is the pure force of attraction exercised by the artworks on her aesthetic sensibility that determine her acquisitions: she abandons herself to the magnetism of the works whose physical forms capture her eye, and never succumbs to the guidance of calculated reason or speculation. Her choices are not informed by the ancestry of the artist, her knowledge of the market, or any desire to anticipate contemporary art trends, and her intuition remains unclouded by preliminary judgments. "I look without seeing, and I see without looking," she remarks. If collecting has become the motor of her existence, her sensibilities are her only fuel. In a certain sense, she exercises her free choice and awareness by trusting her aesthetic sensibility, while letting herself be steered by a force that does not cease to surprise her, often taking her where she does not expect to go.

## A fortuitous misunderstanding

This is precisely what happened in New York in 2005, on the day that contemporary art took Galila Barzilai Hollander by surprise, lodging itself in her heart and leading her to establish her collection. While marking the first anniversary of the unexpected death, at 65, of her husband Jacques

Hollander, a great collector of antiques, she came across an advertisement for the Armory Show in New York City, and decided to attend it in the hope of healing her wounds by means of visual first aid. Having mistakenly thought she was going to attend a show of ancient weapons, she found herself at the famous contemporary art fair, where she discovered a work by Tom Fowler that was love at first sight: a sheet of paper on which the artist had used ink to write the word "Why?" 11,522 times. Fowler's question resonated with her psychological state at that very moment: the work had reconnected her to her despair, but also to her sense of mystery, so that she felt suddenly restored to life. Deeply moved, she bought the work without hesitation, and proceeded feverishly through the show with her very first acquisition under her arm. A world had suddenly opened up to her, demanding nothing but exploration. She experienced rapture in the primary sense of the term, an unexpected abduction. As she puts it, after spending 30 years of her life immersed in the world of 16<sup>th</sup>-century antiques, she renewed her deepest self by finding, without the intention of looking, the object of her desire in the contemporary.

## The collection as self

Since works of art and lived experience merge and nourish one another, this collection is a self-portrait in a state of permanent construction: an elective site of self-exploration through the other, which Galila Barzilai Hollander defines as "a quest resembling psychoanalysis." The works she collects explore her desires and fears, coaxing her ghosts, translating her confused thoughts and prolonging her instinctive impulses. Within each work, she has deposited a fragment of her intimate life, repeatedly rediscovering parts of herself. Thus, each new work acquired for the collection amounts to a new piece of a large puzzle, gradually composing an image which, she hopes, will one day give her a glimpse of her personal truth: her passion to see is thus correlated with the desire to pierce the enigma that she constitutes for herself.







Her constant efforts to decipher objects amount to an apprenticeship in the grammar, vocabulary and syntax of plastic language, which has its own inflections, allusions, metaphors, double meanings and silences. Her interaction with these objects may be likened to an incessant game of ping-pong with the works, a constant dialogue nourished by interrogation, reflection, doubts, and silences. Existing in a state of constant motion, the collection is at once a site of research, a perpetual wasteland, and a place of rediscovery and self-testing.

## The passion for the incongruous object

A particularly salient feature of her collection is Galila Barzilai Hollander's inveterate passion for objects of curiosity: paradoxical, offbeat, playful, or facetious objects that provoke surprise in the face of the unexpected, creating a diversion from reality and inviting us to enter a different mental space. This diversion is effected by rerouting the language of objects and the objects of language via works that disorient, revive and astonish us, while encouraging us to think. The collection thus entertains a strong affinity with Surrealism and the theme of the incongruous object – one that amuses the eye and the spirit by means of its singularity, while removing the object from its ordinary frame of reference, function, and banal meaning – only to reinject it into the real, as a critical means of questioning reality. In this same spirit, one can note the particular interest that the collector demonstrates for what she calls “the poetry of waste”: many artists represented in her collection testify to a common desire to rehabilitate objects stranded in the domestic chaos of the modern world. In this context, everyday objects deemed unworthy of dignity or attention once they have been consumed, used, or worn out, are recycled into artworks that reendow them with value.

By humorously catching our gaze and creating a shift, these works reopen our consciousness, reviving our imagination and resuscitating our intellectual curiosity. In doing so, they change our approach to the world far beyond the artistic realm: Galila Barzilai Hollander's collection stimulates our

inventiveness, creativity and sensitivity. In this sense, it perfectly matches Robert Filliou's definition of art as: “what makes life more interesting than art.” These unusual works take us off the beaten track and beyond our habits, offering us another experience of the world. Far from the seriousness and hermeticism associated with contemporary art, they reflect the concerns and questions of today's world.

Galila Barzilai Hollander's collection includes a significant number of works by young and emerging artists from around the world, which she rapidly chose as the focal point of her collection: “It's a stimulating, exciting and rewarding choice,” she says. Some of the artists whose works she acquired early on have since gained international acclaim. Meeting the artists is an essential dimension of her relationship to contemporary art. These meetings take place most often after the acquisition of a work, and are always positive. Each work seems to perfectly perform its role as an ambassador of the artist: through the work, Galila intuitively senses into the person who made it, and something is then confirmed in the meeting, resulting in a communion of spirit and sensitivity. In some cases, this experience goes further, creating a tight bond that leads the collector to then commission a particular work. It is her belief that the collector incurs a commitment to the artist – a kind of moral duty to support them and show their work, so that she never refuses a request to lend a work from her collection.

## A collection of collections

The eye, the chair, the book, the egg, the pubis, money, white, black, the watermelon, the pencil, the broom, measurement, the duality of man-woman, works on paper, obsessional drawing . . . Where do the strange and heterogeneous themes that make up Galila Barzilai Hollander's collection come from, and what is their meaning and function?

The expansion of this collection is born out of a ripple effect: the attraction to a particular object or theme raises the collector's awareness to the existence of this theme in her collection, while nourishing her







interest in works that refine it or expand upon it. However, if the rush of adrenaline provoked by the sight of a work that does not fit any of the existing categories is too strong, the collector may very well circumvent the rule by which she abides and decide to create a new theme, based on her newly found love. In the end, the principle of the cabinet of curiosities is to allow and even to encourage the infinite expansion of the world, and of the categories of thought that organize it through its reading and its representation.

Among these themes, the artist's book occupies a very special place in Galila Barzilai Hollander's personal cosmogony: it is one of the main themes of her collection, both quantitatively and qualitatively. She is an indefatigable observer fascinated by the book object as a visual art form: its materiality, texture, appearance, color and shape. Her focus, in short, is on the container rather than the content: the book is diverted from its original purpose as a tool for acquiring knowledge through reading. Shaped, carved, cut, hollowed out, trimmed or reassembled by contemporary artists, these books are transformed into works of art, which have paradoxically become unreadable, now sheltering knowledge, thought, and narrative as one shelters a secret. Impenetrable, their opaque mystery mirrors the opacity of the world. However, they open up our imagination: by introducing a shift, or crack, in our usual perception of the book object, they offer us a glimpse into another mental landscape superimposed on their pages. As a result, they arouse our curiosity, trigger our reflective capacities, sharpen our sensitivity, and conjure up images and associations. In this sense, they are by no means lesser than other, "real" books.

The "artist's chair" forms a second important theme in the collection. The chair is a neutral object with a particularly solid function, which often obscures its aesthetic singularity. As such, it offers a fertile playground for creative diversion and for a playful redistribution of the balance between the utilitarian and the imaginary. It is thus reserved a place of choice in this collection, where it is disengaged from its utilitarian function, relieved of the weight of its common meaning, and given a new mission. Once again, singular objects invite us to take a different look at the world, offering

recreation for both eye and mind as they subjectively reappropriate the meaning and beauty of the things that surround us on a daily basis.

Last but not least among the collection's underlying themes is the color white, which brings together works of different types that might also belong to other categories. Here too, we are confronted with a paradox, in the sense that white contains the full spectrum of colors, while nevertheless appearing colorless. At the same time, it carries a deep symbolic richness, as well as particular positive, negative or ambivalent meanings. Insofar as it contains in identical quantity the entire spectrum of colors, it represents equilibrium, equity and justice. White is also the color of new beginnings: the blank page waiting to be filled with writing and the hope that the moment when everything is still possible, as well as the absence of words and the fear of not finding the right ones. White reassures and soothes, bringing with it calm, confidence and serenity. This theme begs for a comparison with the related theme of black-and-white, which is concerned with the polarization of energies, once again returning us to the conception of the collection as an aesthetic reading of the self.

Francois de Coninck is an artist, curator and writer.

\* The text was translated into English by Jeff Gleich and edited for the current publication.

1. Erik Orsenna, *Les Chevaliers du Subjonctif* (Paris: Editions Stock, 2003).