

POPULAR CULTURE CONFERENCE: A Report by Anna Banana

The Conference of the SW/Texas Regional Pop Culture Association, held in Albuquerque Feb. 13-17 offered over 475 panels in the short span of four days. Each of the 1½ hour time slots from 8 a.m. to 9:30 pm averaged 20 panels so it was possible to sample only a few of the offerings. Panel topics cover the entire range of contemporary life; computers, ethnicity, film, TV & radio, science, physical & material culture, human relations, gender, literature, visual arts, mythology, religion, to name but a few of the areas covered.

A sampling of titles of individual papers sets the tone; *Radiant Ruby Learns There's no Place Like a Wedding Dress*, *Loneliness and Loss in Harry Chapin's Music*, *The Cryptical Envelope Filter- Nomenclature of Grateful Dead songs*, *Media, Markets and Messages-Consumer-Driven Faith in Contemporary America*; *The Stitch and Bitch Club- Nektonic Ecologies of Resistance in Salt of the Earth & Animal Dreams*, *Anti-Communist Propaganda Maps in Popular Magazines*, *Tired of the Hole business-Doughnut Lore in American Culture*, *Politics of the Sit-Com Formula-Friends*, *Mad About You*, and *the Sapphic Second Banana*

Given my interest in finding a home for my archive of Mail Art, I spent most of my time attending Collections/Collectors panels. Susan Koppelman, Area Chair of the "Collecting" panels states her new focus is with the activity of collecting, rather than with objects collected. She sees collecting as a way in which individuals seek to understand the world; it's a discipline that offers a way of organizing reality for those who are neither academics nor people whose employment provides a satisfying means for doing what an academic discipline does for most academics. Why, she asks, is the "professional" collector, the archaeologist, a highly respected member of our society, while the "amateur" is regarded as a pack-rat, or other derogatory terms. Is it perhaps the fact that the archaeologist seeks artifacts intentionally placed in tombs or graves, while the "garbologists" seek "accidental" treasures and traces of contemporary history in the waste dumps and thrift stores of our recent past? Collecting is a tool for understanding our lives.

Fabric artist and independent scholar Alison Franks discussed picking and pocketing rocks; a case of metonymy; getting a piece of the whole scene. While some rock collectors classify their pickings by mineral content, size or shape, Franks uses hers as memory pegs from which she recreates the original environment; they become the "souvenir that recreates the journey." Her rocks are filed (boxed) by the location where they were found, and she still

has "Agnes," a rock she played "dolls" with as a child. Another long-term "friend," is a unique black stone with white irregular bands throughout which was given to her by her mother. Franks is particularly interested in rocks that bear marks of human activity, such as hide scrapers, tool maker discards, written messages, but her current criteria for collecting are that the rock catches her eye, and feels good in the hand. Collection as memory peg.

Melissa Johnson's paper on the *Mass Media Scrapbook of Hanna Höch* was of particular interest, since the mail-art I've been involved with for 30 years harkens back to Dada. Höch used two issues of *De Damma*, a women's fashion magazine into which she collaged images of Weimar culture from 1919 through 1933; new woman, dance and sports, body culture, movies and actresses, foreign & exotic, wild and domestic animals, plants and flowers, factories, cityscapes, and everyday life of trivia and trash. Höch's life was in a state of personal upheaval from illness, the deaths of her mother and a close friend and the exodus of many friends in the face of the Nazi regime. In this context, she recreated herself through the scrapbook; a commentary of her concerns, and a way of repositioning herself in relation to the world. A personal souvenir of Höch's coming to terms with the times, the scrapbook becomes, after her death, a collection that gives a history of the everyday experiences and concerns of that period.

Inevitably, there was a presentation on collecting Elvis memorabilia, with a commentary on sex, shopping and consumer culture. This presentation by Sandra Schackel of Boise State U, epitomizes the way in which consumer culture capitalizes on nostalgia. While her collection began with 45 RPM records bought in the 50's with 75¢ out of each week's \$1 allowance, these primary objects were soon overshadowed by Elvis lipsticks, t-shirts, skirts, posters and other memorabilia produced for the consumer market. Astute to "market conditions" in which magazines and newspapers vilified Elvis, James Dean and Marlon Brando, Elvis' manager also produced "I HATE ELVIS" buttons. Inspired by Elvis' overt sexuality, the emerging sexuality and consumer power of teen aged girls created a multi-million dollar industry by 1956, which still goes on today. Here we have the collector as consumer.

The most esoteric collection presented was Frank Oglesbee's "The Phoenix of the Cutting Edge; Safety Razor Blade Sharpeners." Using close up video shots, Oglesbee showed each of the 20 devices in their cases, then demonstrated how each of these tiny, intricate devices held the blade and was moved (back & forth, rotary) to bring the blade in contact with the strop. One could not help wondering at the economy between the cost of the device and the savings in blades accomplished by its use. Here again is the Collector as preserver of the esoteric products of the past.

Andrea Lapin asserts that "objects define character," that

the things with which we surround ourselves are a kind of public autobiography; "the set on which I perform the role of myself." Passive collectors, she states, are known for some themed objects that others buy and give to them, while for active collectors, the hunt is as much a part of the pleasure as the object. The stories of how and where the object was found become noteworthy moments in their her/history. Lapin makes a distinction between collectors and accumulators. The boundary between the two, she suggests, is intention. Making a set or serial is motivation of the collector, while the accumulator acquires things randomly. While both pathological miser and assiduous collector might fill their houses to the rafters, the collector will have a method of acquisition and filling, while the miser just hordes everything without rhyme or reason. Collecting as a means of crafting identity."

Collecting via e-bay and internet auctions was addressed by both John Seibert-Davis and Emily Katz. While Seibert-Davis collects vinyl records, Katz acquired Jewish ephemera for the exhibition *Culture as Commodity; Internet Auctions and Judaica Collecting*. Seibert-Davis spoke of a sense of community within the field of vinyl collecting; the closest comment I heard to my experience of mail-art networking. Both found advantage in the internet's wide-ranging sources and disadvantage in the lack of universality of descriptions. Katz also faced problems of fakes, replicas and the provenance of objects such as a brass Shabbat lamp which could as easily be created today as 200 years ago. Interestingly, the catalogue for the exhibit at The Judaica Museum in Riverdale, NY, listed the first bid, winning bid, and the number of bids. Collecting as a way of finding community.

Kelley Christine Smith spoke about how individually authored web sites have generated nostalgia and a desire to collect the digital. She states that the popularity of "eye stuff" on some sites has led to the production and sale of memorabilia from those sites. Individuals create sites to promote their own "stuff," acquire notoriety and celebrity status; their 15 minutes of fame. Exhibitionism and voyeurism are part of the appeal, along with humor, much useless but fascinating material, and the ability to distribute one's ideas vitally. Smith states that in spite of the non-commercial aspects of individual sites, financial value is created by sites being "cool," entertaining, historically significance and creative. By way of example, she mentioned the British site that for several years posted a continuous, real-time video of the "Trojan Coffee Pot." Valued at \$45, when it was taken off the internet, it was sold for \$7,000.

Jacqueline Reid, Reference Archivist of the Hartland Center at Duke University in North Carolina described their archive of advertising art acquired from the J. Walter Thomson Agency in New York in 1987. This agency, started in 1864 as an ad placement service, kept all their

client records; correspondence, advertisements, minutes of staff meeting, research, and radio and TV scripts for shows such as Lux Radio Theater, sponsored by their clients. Duke University acquired 4,000 linear feet of these records, which included the ad campaigns for Ford Motors from 1943 on. In 1992, Duke University established the Hartland Center for Sales, Advertising & Marketing History which now has several major collections from agencies and private collectors. The Center provides research for individual and institutional use, including movies and TV productions. Travel grants of up to \$1000 are available to students of popular culture who wish to do research at the center. Collecting for contemporary cultural history.

Another internet collector, Emily Toth, regaled her audience with witty tales of her collection of *Penis Pics, Wankers in the Night*. Perhaps bored with her academia, Ms. Toth decided to explore her "inner slut/bitch" via chat rooms on AOL where she assumed a screen name and identity. Describing herself as a 28 year old female who likes to look, she sashayed into the scene where freedom of speech, sexual fantasies, jokes and savage intensity are the order of the day. In one night alone, she received 15 photos. She sends a polite thank you note to each contributor, along with some positive comment on the photo sent. Of her 180+ pics to date, few show anything but the penis. On the question of her motivation, penis envy comes up, as does curiosity, imagination and unconscious desire. What's in it for the men, she's not sure; are they lonely? too shy in "real life?" is it just a natural male exhibitionism? Whatever their reasons, she asserts, it keeps them off the streets, or from exposing themselves in parks and beaches. Collecting as research?

The National Popular Culture Association's annual conference took place March 13 to 16 at the Toronto Sheraton Center in Toronto. Membership in the association is \$35. For details of the National Convention, contact the association web site at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~pcaaca/>
<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/%7Eepcaaca/annual02/pcaaca02>

— Anna Banana

The Editor of Umbrella also spoke about Mail Art and gave a guided tour of her residence full of umbrellas.