

Chapter 9

An actor-network perspective of collecting and collectables

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Introduction

Approximately 30 per cent of British adults currently engage in collecting, and since the 1970s their collections have increasingly comprised of mass produced objects (Pearce 1998: 176). Collecting is clearly a significant aspect of contemporary consumer culture and for this reason it is worthy of study. Much of the consumer research literature focuses on the importance of collecting for the individual actor, the collector (see Belk 1982 and 1995; Belk et al 1988 and 1991; Belk and Wallendorf 1997; Guerzoni and Troilo 1998). Some authors acknowledge that voluntary organizations such as collectors' clubs 'serve to reinforce the social and psychological significance of collecting', although the impact that these organizations and their activities have on the collected objects themselves is left unexplored (e.g. Belk *et al.* 1991: 187). A number of studies have used ethnographic research methods to investigate the activities that take place within collectors' clubs. Good examples within sociology include Fine's (1987) study of mushroom collecting and Olmsted's (1988) on gun collecting and within museum studies, Martin's (1999) analysis of popular collecting¹ via the British Beer-mat Collectors' Society, The United Kingdom Spoon Collectors' Club and the Leicestershire Collectors' Club. Taken together, these studies contribute to our understanding of the social practices involved in creating a sense of community among particular groups of collectors. However, like Belk *et al.* (1991) they too leave unexplored the processes in which

natural things such as mushrooms, and mundane artefacts such as beer-mats, spoons and guns are conceived of and sustained as collectable objects.

In a later study, Belk (1995) situates an analysis of contemporary collecting within a detailed discussion of the historical development of collecting and ascertains that the value of potentially collectable objects is 'determined by social valuation and not by any intrinsic properties of the objects themselves' (1995: 38). He maintains that rarity and scarcity are other factors that affect the social valuation and the 'collectibility' of objects and, further, that mass production does not preclude objects from being perceived as collectable. Indeed he suggests that mass-produced objects are quite appropriate for collecting because of 'their frequent seriality and abundance' (1995: 62).

This research focuses on the dynamics of how mass produced artefacts are conceived as collectable objects. The study is based on a larger research project in which the author conducted an ethnography of a novelty teapot collectors' club. Drawing on the actor-network perspectives of Callon (1986) and Star (1991), the research contributes to our understanding of collecting by illuminating the social and material activities or 'work' involved in rendering objects collectable.

Processes of becoming

Actor-network theory describes a body of theoretical and empirical writings developed in the sociology of science and technology and associated most often with the work of Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and later John Law. Broadly speaking, actor-network theory examines how it is that certain 'social facts' or 'truths' establish their facticity or truthfulness while

others do not. Thus, one could argue that actor-network theory is essentially a theory of process or ‘a sociology of becoming’ (Cooper and Law 1995: 238). Based on the interrelated assumptions of relational materiality and performativity, actor-network theory challenges the notion that things have a fundamental essence. It argues instead that actors, whether humans or non-humans, emerge and take form only as a consequence of their interactions - their relations - with other human and non-human entities. Thus actors are said to be performed into being through their interactions with other people and things. Hence the name ‘actor-network’, which was consciously designed to embody the tension between the centred ‘actor’ on the one hand and the decentred ‘network’ on the other (Law 1999: 3).

Callon’s (1986) study of the scallops at St. Brieuc Bay provides the most famous work undertaken in the name of actor-network theory to have ‘rubbished’ the divide between the human and the non-human (Law 1999: 4). In this study, Callon presents ‘the sociology of translation’ to chart the processes in which previously disparate entities - scallops, fishermen and marine scientists - take their form and acquire their attributes as ‘actors’ as a result of their interactions with one another. Callon’s analysis weaves the theoretical assumptions about relational materiality and performativity into four interrelated ‘moments’ of translation: namely problematization, *intéressement*, enrolment and mobilization. Taken together, these four interrelated moments allow for the examination of the dynamics of the performance of identity within the network of marine scientists, scallops and fishermen.

This analysis of novelty teapot collecting will draw on the first two moments of Callon’s (1986) sociology of translation, namely problematization and *intéressement*. The moment of problematization describes the initiation of an actor-network. This involves the network builder, which could be a single actor or a group of actors as in the case of St. Brieuc Bay,

defining the identities and problems of all of the other humans and non-humans that are to be implicated in the (future) network currently in development. The moment of *intéressement* describes the processes through which the network builder(s) invites or ‘interests’ these as yet undefined actors to perform the identities prescribed by the network builder(s) in the moment of problematization.

Callon suggests that the moment of *intéressement* captures the notion of being betwixt and between various problematizations. In that study, the scallops were betwixt and between the problematization of three marine scientists, who attached a series of collectors on the sea bed in order to provide a secure place for them to anchor and reproduce, and those of the sea currents, predators and fishermen, whose interactions with the scallops would inhibit them from anchoring and hence reproducing. The moment of *intéressement* thus describes a state of flux, which Callon describes as the ‘in-between’. Nonetheless, for Callon to be in-between is to be at a very specific point: it is to be at the crux of becoming one thing or another. In the case of the scallops they either interact with the three marine scientists to perform the identity of scallops that anchor or they interact with the fishermen or the predators or the sea currents to perform other competing identities. If they move towards the three marine scientists they move towards becoming translated in accordance with the problematization of the three marine scientists. If they move in the direction of the sea currents, the predators or the fishermen they move towards competing problematizations thus resisting this translation.

Actor-network theory has been criticized for its attempt to bring non-humans into sociological enquiry (see Collins and Yearly 1992; Lee and Brown 1994). While Collins and Yearly (1992) develop a humanist critique, Lee and Brown (1994) applaud bringing non-humans into the sociological fold. They are concerned instead by the fact that actor-network theory

‘colonizes’ the non-human ‘other’ and they argue that in so doing, it makes it ‘difficult to consider any facet of the world in terms other than domination and resistance’ (1994: 781).² Star (1991) also criticizes actor-network theory for reducing the processes of becoming to the subject of domination versus resistance, arguing that despite suggesting that all points of view are important in principle, actor-network studies only show us how to discuss the process of translation from the privileged point of view of the scientist and not from the less privileged view of other actors in the network such as the fishermen. In focusing on the network builder we erase the ‘work’ of other actors in a network and ‘when this invisible work is recovered a very different and more complex network is discovered’ (1991: 29). Star draws on personal experience of coping with the relatively uncommon disorder of being allergic to onions while eating at McDonald’s to illustrate the way in which the ‘work’ of others in an actor-network is rendered invisible. On the first two occasions of visiting McDonald’s since discovering the allergy, Star had to wait an interminable time to receive her order of ‘a burger with no onions’. In order to avoid the inconvenience of a long wait, the next time she simply ordered a standard burger and scraped off the onions.

Examining this scenario following Callon (1986) would be to assert that in order to extend its network McDonald’s must interest Star to leave what he calls the ‘in-between’ and Star calls the ‘high tension zone’ (1991: 45). There are two options - either Star accepts the *intéressement* of fast food in the shape of a burger with onions, thus succumbing to the domination of McDonald’s by performing the identity of a burger eater and taking a place in its network. Or, more likely given her allergy, Star resists the *intéressement* and refuses this translation thereby remaining outside of the network of associations comprising McDonald’s. While Callon’s analysis suggests that Star must leave the high tension zone in order to join the actor-networks of McDonald’s, Star’s analysis suggests otherwise. Through the ‘work’ of

scraping onions off burgers Star maintains membership in two communities simultaneously being at one and the same time a member of the McDonald's burger eating community and a member of the community of people who are allergic to onions. Star refuses to leave the high tension zone and become one thing or another. Instead she interacts with McDonald's by scraping off the onions and in so doing she co-creates the *intéressement* of fast (if not quite so convenient) food. This story therefore challenges an important aspect of actor-network theory: the omnipotence of network builders, for it suggests that they are not the only ones working at *intéressement*.

In spite of the criticisms of actor-network theory outlined above, I believe that adopting an actor-network perspective can usefully illuminate the subject of collecting because: it provides a conceptual lens that refocuses analysis away from the individual collector; it outlines a theory of process; and it facilitates an analysis of collecting that embraces both the social and the material world.

Methodology

To the extent that actor-network theory encourages the researcher to focus on the practices and interactions within which things establish their facticity and come into being, this theoretical approach clearly lends itself methodologically to ethnography. This is not to say that adopting an actor-network theoretical perspective requires an ethnographic research design: Callon (1986) clearly did not base the empirical study of St. Brieuc Bay on ethnographic research methods. As indicated above, this study draws on a larger research project involving two years ethnographic fieldwork focusing on the activities surrounding a novelty teapot collectors' club.

I first met William,³ the founder of this collectors' club at an antiques fair where he was exhibiting several examples, partly to promote this genre of collecting, but also to advertise the club. There are several novelty teapot manufacturers in the UK who also run their own collectors' clubs. However, one of the principal distinguishing features of William's club is that it operates independently of the ceramics industry; as the club's website suggests, 'it is run for collectors, by collectors'. This 'chance encounter' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 28) with the club's founder led to an invitation to attend the first of the annual events hosted by the club. These events comprise an auction on one day followed by a fair on the next. Whilst I made audio-recordings of the auction at this and at subsequent events, I felt that it was inappropriate to tape-record the conversations that I had with various people in the course of these events, in so far as this would detract from maintaining a 'spontaneous, informal conversation' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 139) with them. I therefore wrote up field notes as soon as possible either in quiet moments during, or soon after, the events.

Participant observation at the events was supplemented with a variety of data collection methods outside of the events, including formal unstructured interviews with individual collectors and with novelty teapot designers.⁴ I also had countless conversations with William and accompanied him on a number of visits to various novelty teapot manufacturers, an activity which allows the club to keep abreast of the latest developments on behalf its members. I recorded William's monthly radio programme and analysed a variety of material artefacts such as the club's website (as well as the websites of novelty teapot designers), its bi-annual newsletters and a variety of books and CDs that were currently used by the collectors.

Adopting an actor-network theoretical perspective in conjunction with ethnographic fieldwork facilitated a conception of novelty teapot collecting as something that is produced, shaped and contested through interactions among a variety of activities, people and things. While some of these came together in the annual events hosted by the club they are also distributed geographically and through time. Framing the ethnographic analysis thus, I found myself questioning a variety of social facts and investigating a number of processes; such as, how do people become novelty teapot collectors? How do novelty teapots become collectable? And, why are some novelty teapots collectable and valuable and others not? The following analysis draws in particular on conversations with William, my audio-recordings of the radio show and the club's newsletters and website.

Recovering the invisible work of novelty teapot collecting

In the third issue of the bi-annual newsletter, William suggests to the members of the collectors' club that:

...the profile of teapot collecting is slowly being raised and, who knows, it may become the true collectable in ceramics (it already is to us), due to the fact that so much information can be carried on a teapot...

This excerpt is significant for a number of reasons. In the first instance, it is interesting to note the passive tone that William adopts in this communication with the members: 'the profile of teapot collecting is slowly being raised'. I would argue that the use of the passive tense here renders the enormous amount of personal time and effort that William devotes to promoting

novelty teapot collecting as an established genre of collecting ‘invisible’ (Star 1991). It also belies the activities, the unintentional work of the members of the collectors’ club.

Secondly, it seems to suggest that novelty teapot collecting is rather an ambiguous genre of collecting. In this regard, Martin (1999) informs us that there is disagreement among collectors as to whether objects that are purpose-made by manufacturers as collectables are ‘genuine’ collectables. Along with Belk (1995) Martin notes that some collectors hold such ‘orchestrated collectables’ or ‘limited editions’ in low esteem. However, Martin argues that there is a difference between orchestrated collectables and the quality objects which are sold to collectors by certain manufacturers who also run their own collectors’ clubs, including ‘the best output of the British Potteries and individual designers working for themselves’ (1995: 131). Indeed, even if in overview they may seem the same; to the ‘discerning’ collector they are quite distinct. Thus, Martin argues that ‘the bottom end of the ‘made-for-collectors’ market is spurned by ‘real’ collectors, while the upper reaches of it straddle the apex of the popular and the lower regions of the classical collecting market’ (1995: 131).

I would suggest that novelty teapot collecting currently inhabits the in-between or high tension zone between popular collecting and classical collecting (Martin 1999). Some members of the collectors’ club already endorse novelty teapots as collectable objects. However, as is shown above, others apparently do not.

Working to raise the profile of novelty teapot collecting

William employs a variety of media in order to generate interest in novelty teapots among a range of audiences outside of the collectors’ club. One example of this is the use of local radio. William met Brenda, a local disc jockey, when she covered the first annual event

hosted by the club for the local radio station. Together they developed the idea of co-hosting a monthly one-hour 'slot' called *Talking Teapots* on her afternoon show. William feels that the show has really taken off - indeed Brenda told him that they have had more calls for this show than previously known. It is clear that William and Brenda are co-creating this *intéressement* device (Callon 1986) for their mutual benefit: while the slot allows Brenda to generate and maintain interest in the afternoon radio show, the programme allows William to generate interest in novelty teapots. William informed me that one or two interesting pieces have arisen as a result. However, most of the callers are not collectors, but people who have some kind of teapot, usually a family heirloom, and who want to know more about it. Still, William is very happy to be involved and indeed suggested in a personal conversation that this activity is 'aimed at raising the profile of novelty teapot collecting rather than necessarily speaking to collectors or recruiting new collectors'.

Examining the content of just one of these monthly programmes (*Talking Teapots*, 2000), let us observe the way in which William, with assistance from Brenda, uses conceptions of authority to establish the credibility of novelty teapots as collectable objects. In the first instance, Brenda introduces William to the audience as a teapot expert:

William is in - he's your top man he really is...one of the country's top teapot collectors - he can put a price on every lid so get your teapot out - before you make a cup of tea next - it could be worth a lot more than you think. Give us a call and William will give you a value.

While William accepts the title and indeed demonstrates a capability as an expert, in the course of the show other experts in related areas are enlisted and insinuated as authority figures into the actor-networks of novelty teapot collecting to further bolster the novelty

teapot as a collectable object. Thus, when Brenda questions the highest price ever paid for a novelty teapot William responds by recalling a payment of £35,000 for a Minton ‘Smoothing Iron’ teapot at Christie’s some six months previously. Indeed, the club’s website also introduces prestigious British museums into the field, informing the audience that while:

Novelty teapots are a comparatively new field for collectors...examples have been included in collections of ceramics for many years – there are some famous ones in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum.

What better way to establish the identity of the novelty teapot as a collectable object, sanction this genre of collecting, and move it towards classical collecting, than to inform us that Christie’s, the Victoria and Albert and the British Museum have included novelty teapots in their auctions and permanent collections?

The way in which William uses the show to stimulate the ‘market’ by assigning a market value to the novelty teapots and thereby tempting callers to sell their teapots should also be noted. Indeed, the programme is reminiscent of *The Antiques Roadshow*,⁵ with some callers thinly disguising their disappointment on discovering that their family heirlooms are less valuable than they had hoped and others sounding pleasantly surprised when they discover that their teapots are quite valuable. Thus, when Kristine calls to discuss a ‘Cockerel’ teapot she is pleased when William values it at £175 and intrigued to learn that he knows of one or two collectors who are looking for such an example. The presenters go on to discuss the fact that if these collectors were to attend the same auction and bid against one another Kristine might get even more than £175. Kristine responds with ‘ooh, I might hold on to it for a bit longer then’. We are left speculating as to what the object’s future might be; perhaps Kristine

will hold on to it satisfied in the knowledge that the family heirloom is worth something after all. Or perhaps she will develop an interest in collecting. Although William suggests that recruiting new collectors is not a primary concern, the opportunity the radio provides for advertising the collectors' club and its website is certainly used.

Working to develop the actor-networks of novelty teapot collecting

The main device that William uses in the *intéressement* of novelty teapot collectors is the collectors' club itself. Of course, the success of the club depends for the most part on its members. As the club has no physical location but simply a contact address and telephone number, when William first founded the club the bi-annual newsletters provided an important mechanism for giving the club a material reality. In the first issue of this newsletter William tells his members:

I'm trying to run the club on a nice family/feelgood basis and, so far, it seems to be working as I regularly speak to members on the phone. Everyone seems down to earth and easy to get along with, let's keep it up!

While William is clearly the driving force behind the club he endeavours to ensure that the club is perceived as being synonymous not with its founder but with all of its members. Thus future newsletters provide the means for members to share something of themselves and their lives as collectors with other members, as the following extract from the second issue of the newsletter indicates:

I started to collect them for history sake, and then I noticed the beauty in the work and shape. So I started to look at them as works of art. The next stage was the dawning that there was humour and fun as well with teapots. I then found that other people collect them; guess what I also found out that these people all had three things in common:

1. They were very nice people
2. They all are totally mad and have a great sense of humour
3. They will do anything to get a teapot (with perhaps the exception of murder).

Other collectors responded, and in the third issue of the newsletter a collector in America ends the synopsis of their career in novelty teapots by saying ‘William I can’t thank you enough for creating this club. It’s great to hear about what is out there, or will soon be available, and to hear from others interested in teapots’. Club members thus clearly contribute, working towards the development of the newsletter and hence the development of the club. If these newsletters facilitate a sense of community (c.f. Fine 1987; Olmsted 1988: 279), they do so by establishing a ‘material link’ between the members of the club (Martin 1999: 74). This sense of community is then consolidated further through the personal interaction among those collectors that attend the annual events.

These newsletters also provide a means of circulating information on novelty teapots. In the first issue of the newsletter William provides complete listings of all the examples produced by certain designers and manufacturers with the promise that later issues will carry complete listings of the teapots produced by others. I would suggest that these listings mark the beginning of a catalogue or collectors’ guide: a material document of both the ‘seriality’ and the ‘abundance’ (Belk 1995) of collectable novelty teapots. With the launch of the club’s

website, two years after the club was formed, these early fragmented lists were brought together, extended and are now regularly updated.

The website gives the club a different material form, allowing its members and activities to be broadcast to a much wider audience, thereby facilitating the *intéressement* of new members and facilitating engagement with producers. Examining the website in conjunction with the newsletters, it is clear that William's relationships with manufacturers provide him with access to 'inside stories' on novelty teapots. Sometimes these 'inside stories' present information concerning changing circumstances that may have a bearing on collecting:

I was talking to Andy a few weeks ago and he told me he's finished making the large size teapots, as the work involved in humping around the large moulds has taken its toll. He's now concentrating on mid-size teapots and small size teapots...I'll be sending out his full 'manufactured' list in due course. Meanwhile, if you see any of his large size teapots about and you like them, buy them, - there won't be any more.

As this extract from issue one of the newsletter indicates, William works hard at cultivating relationships with manufacturers in order to generate information to keep the members of the club interested. These collectors also constitute one of the devices for prompting new members to join the community as well as a method by which manufacturers are encouraged to keep on producing novelty teapots ideally in small edition sizes and thus expanding and developing the actor-networks of novelty teapot collecting.

Conclusion

This research contributes to a body of work that is seeking to develop our understanding of the complex relationships involved in collecting (See Belk 1995; Martin 1999; Pearce 1998). It does so by illuminating at least some of the work that underpins and sustains ‘orchestrated collectables’ as collectable objects. This analysis builds on that of Callon (1986) by way of recovering some of the less visible work of other actors in the network besides that of the network builder (Star 1991) and it therefore presents a more nuanced account of the formation of actor-networks than he was able. In terms of the actor-networks of novelty teapot collecting, these actors include, but are not limited to: collectors; designers; manufacturers; dealers; auctions; fairs; collectors’ clubs, their websites and newsletters; radio shows; museums and let us not forget the novelty teapots themselves (See Cheetham 2009 for an analysis of the agency of collectable objects).

Consumer research tends to conceptualize collecting in terms of consumption,⁶ however by drawing on actor-network theory and recovering the work of some of the aforementioned actors, this analysis foregrounds the productive aspects of collecting. A number of authors working from a variety of theoretical traditions have argued that conceptualising a division between consumption and production only serves to limit our understanding of a variety of cultural phenomena (See du Gay et al 1997 in cultural studies and Miller 1987 in material culture studies). I am suggesting that by providing a conceptual framework from which to challenge the division between consumption and production, an actor-network theoretical perspective can enhance our understanding of cultural phenomena such as collecting.

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Notes

¹ Martin (1999) uses the term ‘popular collecting’ to distinguish this form of collecting from the more traditional, rarefied world of antique or art collecting, which he calls classical collecting.

² These authors are particularly concerned by the fact that actor-network theory describes rather than challenges the colonization of non-human others.

³ All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

⁴ I made audio recordings of these interviews when participants gave their consent for me to do so.

⁵ This is a British television programme, filmed on location around the UK, in which antiques and fine arts specialists offer free advice and valuations on objects brought onto the show by members of the public.

⁶For example, Belk describes collecting as ‘consumption writ large’ (1995: 157).