



The Meaning of Collections between Media and Practices

Special issue of **Punctum**. International Journal of Semiotics 9:1 (2023)

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TIMELINE:

Deadline
for Abstracts:
February 15, 2023

Notice of acceptance
of the Abstract:
February 28, 2023

Deadline
for submission of
full papers:
May 31, 2023

Peer Review Due:
June 30, 2023

Final Revised
Papers Due:
August 10, 2023

Publication Date:
September 2023

In 2009, in an essay that was to become famous, Umberto Eco associated the *list* with a kind of *dizzying, vertigo-like* semiotic mode of accumulation and categorization. The list, the catalog, the register, the inventory, are indeed quasi-synonyms, all united by their belonging to a specific semantic area: they refer to a *set of things*, whose being together is governed by some kind of *pertinence* and *relevance*. This is, *de facto*, the very same principle that guides the semiotic researcher in the act of carving up the text to be studied, in the act of constructing the *corpus* of analysis, which to be *meaningful* must show an isotopic coherence, at least – as Peirce puts it – in some respects. There is, therefore, a sort of elective affinity between the procedure that the semiotician puts in place in building their own field of action and the subject who draws up their lists and, even more generically, collects and sorts things.

But this is not all, because *sets* are also capable not only of signifying as semiotic objects, but also of profoundly resemanticizing the elements that compose them. This is precisely the principle of the *collection*. For instance, a beer cap is, in itself, an object whose significance is rapidly exhausted and, basically, strictly limited to its primary function (that of preventing the liquid from escaping from a bottle). However, that same stopper takes on another, higher value when it is associated with others in a syntagma defined by the collector. The *collection* is therefore a primary whole, which by semiotic statute precisely defines its boundaries and their value, what they contain and what they exclude. Collecting is a practice already codified in antiquity, as demonstrated by the medieval and then Renaissance *Wunderkammer*, an exercise in orderly accumulation that ennobles both the contained object and the container context. From here arises the iconographic flow that makes the “chamber of wonders” a spectacle for the eyes not only on account of the objects it contains, but also because of *how* they are contained. Collecting is not simply gathering, since the term takes on specific semantic values, which recall the grafting around the practice of identity communities, forms of life, market sectors. The collection also pushes us to reconsider an assumption shared by semiotics: the collecting market is in fact a market dominated by *tokens*, rather than by *types* (essential for the expert in establishing, however, the authenticity of the *token*). The sense of the whole is capable, *à la* Aby Warburg, of illuminating the sense of the single component.

The market – economic and symbolic – of collections is now so in vogue that it represents in itself an area of great importance. If earlier collections were based on the semantic remodeling of an object whose value transliterated, in an astonishing way, from the condition of a simple object to that of a treasure, today it is increasingly common that collectibles are already *born as such*. If, previously, bottle caps, stamps, comics, butterflies, etc. were devices that were “recovered” in the act of the collector, nowadays industries produce items that can be collected “in the matrix”.



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It still makes sense to reflect, in this era of alleged “dematerialization”, on the semiotics of collections, including digital ones. Starting from these considerations, suggested topics for this monographic issue of “Punctum” may include:

- Epistemological and typological framework of the topic (lists, *corpora*, ensembles, categories, classes, collections, archives, canons, and counter-canons).
- Pre- and post-digital collecting (of objects or digital semiotic materials).
- Collecting as community, identity, form of life, pathology (e.g., disposophobia)
- Collecting as a format and a form of entertainment (both active and passive, e.g., see textual genres such as that of “unboxing”, or the codified gesture of *swiping* on Tinder).
- Digital collecting: *bookmarking* something on the browser, YouTube’s *tops*, *binge watching*, “*tube*” sites, the recent trend of NFTs etc.
- Limits or unlimitedness of the “collectability” of things.
- Semiotic relevance of the category of “thingness” or the possibility of its regimentation in the discipline of meaning.

Prospective authors should submit an abstract of 250-300 words by email to the guest editors, Bruno SURACE (b.surace@unito.it) and Gabriele MARINO (gabriele.marino@unito.it), including their institutional affiliation and contact information. Acceptance of the abstract does not guarantee publication, given that all research articles will be subjected to peer review.