

# REVIEW: COLLECTING THE COLLECTIONS

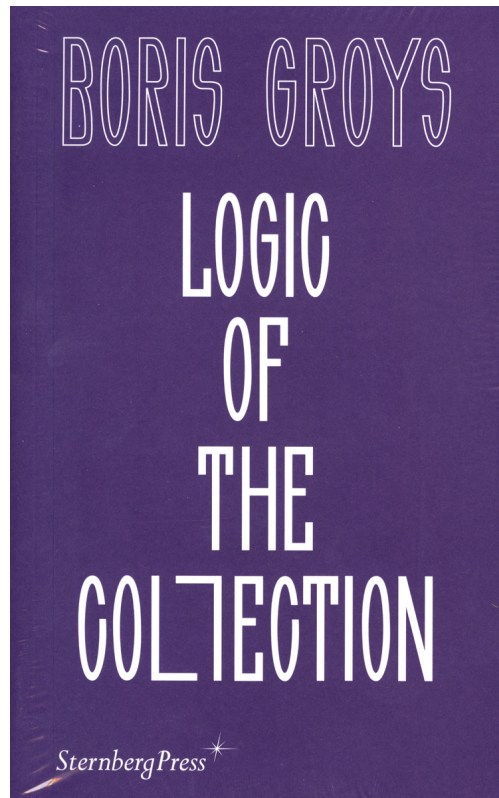
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## ABSTRACT

The review of *The Logic of the Collection* (2021) by Boris Groys addresses how the proliferation of images in digital space is reshaping the role of public collections, and discusses how contemporary forms of art collections—and the critique thereof—align with the universal logic of collecting.

Keywords: Art; Museum; Collecting; Digital media.



*The point of collecting is that the process doesn't have to do with preservation but rather with always having the opportunity to throw everything the hell out of here.*

Ilya Kabakov

(Groys & Kabakov, 2010, p. 77)

The last edition of the Venice Biennale prompted, time and again, an avalanche of rampant critique. Adriano Pedrosa, the curator of the international exhibition “Foreigners Everywhere,” who brought together a large number of artists from the Global South, faced criticism for not being able to offer a satisfying analysis of “the structures or systems that incentivize the marginalization and exploitation of the communities it claims to highlight” (Córdova, 2024). As Boris Groys — who by hasn't yet publicly spoken about the last edition<sup>1</sup> — would have it, it failed to align with the currently prevailing “logic of the collection.”

Groys' interest in the principles of art collecting goes back to the 1980s, to the times when he and his lifelong interlocutor, conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov (1933-2023), were actively discussing what criteria had to be met for an artwork to be accepted into a contemporary art museum. While Kabakov's artistic quest was epitomized in his famous “total installation” *Not Everyone Will Be Taken into the Future* (2001), featuring a sight of the last train car leaving from the platform filled with piles of obsolete canvases, Groys' decades-long theorization of the role and the foundational logic of art collecting appeared in German as a compendium of essays titled *Logik der Sammlung: Am Ende des musealen Zeitalters*

<sup>1</sup> Boris Groys' text on the political meaning of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* in the Soviet context appears in the catalog of the project by Anna Jermolaewa, which is on display in the Austrian Pavilion.

(1997). Nearly two decades later, as the conventional forms of public collections—especially the museum—are being contested by the total overabundance and accessibility of images, Groys added six more essays reflecting on the growing presence of the Internet and its influence on the practices of art collecting. *Logic of the Collection* (2021), the updated English translation combining the old and the new texts, is set to defend Groys' conviction that, in spite of the changing contexts and the loss of the exceptionality of the museum, the crucial property of the collection is still the immutable permanence of its inherent logic. In other words, the essence of collecting remains the same.

Even though each of the book's sixteen essays employs a methodology familiar to anyone who has ever read Groys—which means that each text usually states and then thoroughly reinforces one singular reflection throughout the essay without giving a reader a chance to be carried away to any form of side commentary—*Logic of the Collection* reads as a collection of essays that are put together without adhering to a strict logic. The book, rather, is conceptualized to reflect the plethora of the author's interests in the realm of art. Building his argument on the thesis that the need for universal representation articulates the logic of collecting (Groys, 2021, p. 7), Groys talks about the fate of collections in the era of the Internet, as well as the renewed theoretical interest in the museum, about the role of museums as institutions of memory, and the universal selection criteria of collecting in different times and places. In doing so, he is interested not only in patiently demonstrating what all art collections have in common but also in dissecting universal recurring patterns of collecting that resist transformation. The obvious and much-celebrated strength of Groys' approach is his ability to outline such patterns through a constant zooming—in and out—between the current moment and a larger plain of history. When zooming in, however, he never reaches a full blow-up: concrete personalities, artists, artworks, institutions, curators, or exhibitions are rarely discussed. In other words, Groys abstains from critique in favor of an all-encompassing and, therefore, inevitably generalizing theorization.

The lack of contextual details, however, is cast into the shade by the abundance of contexts within which Groys places his main object of interest—the collection as a space of representation. His insights into the ontology of collecting rest on the conjunction of topics that address the genesis of art forms in the 20th and 21st centuries, the evolution of digital media and its function as a global archive, the modern ideologies of self, and the illusory inclusivity of the Internet. In relation to the latter, for instance, several times throughout the book, Groys highlights the fallacy of the impression that the global web constitutes a truly global archive that is able to de-functionalize the traditional museum. He points out that the Internet, as a privately coordinated source, can not be “stabilized” and, therefore, entrusted with the role of a material archive. Furthermore, in the moment when the Internet, a privately curated space that comes in the guise of an open and transparent network, is set to cater for specific interests and expectations of users in order to generate financial gains,

the role of any curated public collection (a museum, an exhibition, or a biennale) is actualized by the necessity to provide a properly open and transparent space able to highlight and intensify the presence of differences. Thus, according to Groys, the museum is “the only institution that does not totally belong to our contemporary world” (Groys, 2021, p. 265) and allows for a meta-position.

Coincidentally, in line with Groys, such positioning creates an aperture into the contemporary logic of collecting: today, in order to be collected, an artwork doesn’t have to look differently (since all formal differences, the previous prerequisite for entering a collection, have been exhausted), but rather to gesture towards a difference in the cultural contexts in which it was created. The responsibility to make these contexts visible and understood is given to the curator. Groys’ observation helps to clarify why the criticism of the last Venice Biennale is so fixated on the figure of the curator and is hardly interested in artworks themselves—the differences in the contexts haven’t been sufficiently explained. However, such interest in the cultural contexts might also be a temporary phase, given that individual, social, and cultural contexts are also finite in number. Once exhausted, Groys speculates, the logic of collecting will revert to its original course.

## REFERENCES

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