

ARTH-469 Spring 2005: Issues in Museum Collections Planning

Book Review of Leah Dilworth, "Acts of Possession: Collecting in America"

Leah Dilworth faces the oppression of commodity by defining her efforts as an anthology rather than collection. Dilworth's compilation transcends the commodity of collection by renouncing her cultural authority as a collector in favor of anthology. By separating herself from the ritual of collection, her anthology becomes a subtle political tool.

Dilworth's introduction reflects the "millennial anxieties about capitalist consumer culture and the authority of institutions" her audience feels. She writes for theorists and scholars who are supporting these authoritative bodies. Her act of 'fighting without fighting' offers an approach for her audience to transcend the restrictions of this society by creating an alternative approach to manipulating an objects meaning.

Dilworth introduces the practice of collection and collecting as inquiry, never developing because the collection, fraught with restriction, can only present an incomplete picture. The act of inquiry consumes its participants - they become a part of the collection. As a part of the collection, the collector loses the ability to further the collection, to think outside the box. She proposes the juxtaposition of essays included can alter their meaning, but dares not to inquire, avoiding participation and subsequent inclusion in the collection.

Dilworth asserts that American society values history attached to a commodity. Her book is a commodity and she adds value to it by creating a serial narrative. By describing the historical foundation of works influential to the authors collected, she narrows the focus of their interpretation. Dilworth invites the reader into this discourse "that

will never be finished” creating a continuous community. Collecting these authors and readers together becomes an anthology on the commodity of collection.

She says collections become sites for cultural memory and reproduction, an idea aligned with James Clifford who discounts the loss of culture as a transformation instead. The audience-author community then becomes a site for enhanced cultural memory and reproduction, simultaneously supporting the industry and focusing meaning towards specific, hidden goals.

This anthology can be considered as a way to transcend the commodity of collection and the restriction of their frameworks. By shifting the focus of abstraction away from the collection, towards the framework, critical discourse becomes a new type of recognized value. Museums first started doing this by abandoning thematic grouping to favor of the theatrical flourish open to reinterpretation time and time again. Museums confronted with “sharply reduced financial resources” have turned to these market-driven frameworks and the discourse surrounding them to build value.

Dilworth offers relief to the anxiety of capitalist consumer culture and belief in the authority of institutions. Her anthologized cultural discourse is a way to assert ideas and beliefs without stating them directly. By renouncing her authority, she transforms the collection into an anthology, transcending the commodity of collection. Her readers who often will participate in this society can participate in this discourse without the hidden assertion being open to criticism.