A bouquet of red roses superimposed on a vintage profile of a woman by Linder.

A hanging metal shop sign by Kara Hamilton and Angie Keefer that reads "WHERE WERE WE."

A fax from Paul Elliman that traces the British coastline through handwritten regional sea areas from the BBC's daily Shipping Forecast.

In what is probably the only outbreak of sentimentality in the oeuvre of one of the driest logicians in the history of philosophy, Rudolf Carnap once offered as an example of a "categorical contradiction" the following proposition:

This stone is thinking of Vienna.

In Carnap's mind, this was a case of a sentence that is grammatically well-formed, but is neither true nor false, because it makes no sense: like "this sonata is aquamarine," it tries to apply a predicate to something that belongs to a different category than that to which the predicate refers: "is thinking of" can only refer to sentient beings, just like colors can only refer to visible objects. A hundred years after it was written, however, a sentimental reader of this sentence might instead see it as something completely different: its author, exiled to the United States after the Nazi occupation of Vienna, could indeed have reasons to believe that even stones might still be thinking about it.

Categorical contradiction is also a fundamental motif of many modern and contemporary artworks. It is the premise of much conceptual art, for instance, as well as the animating force behind the found object. However, in one key sense what all artworks share is simply participation in the category of art: they are objects either created or selected to offer a specific kind of aesthetic and/or intellectual experience. As such, viewers of artworks always arrive with some idea of how they are supposed to approach them: not necessarily what questions to ask the work, but what the question should look like. It should look like a question about art.

This principle — that all artworks, no matter how diverse in terms of medium and age, belong to the same ontological category — is precisely what had been radically subverted by *The Martian Museum of Terrestrial Art*, an exhibition curated by Francesco Manacorda and Lydia Yee at the Barbican Centre in London in 2008. The exhibition was based on the conceit that both the arrangement and the explanation of the objects displayed had been carried out by an alien civilization whose only knowledge about contemporary art was what could have been deduced from the objects themselves. In one way, this can be understood as a radical experiment in formal analysis, a way to work seriously against any notion of contemporary art as an obscurely coded field governed by mystification and insider knowledge. In another way it can be seen as a way to make the gesture of saying something about a set of objects without actually engaging with what they say.

This introduction to the collection of The Serving Library is doing both things.[1] The collection itself is doing them, too.

[A piece it once included] was withdrawn after an argument with the artist who made it about the dubious status of the work in relation to the whole, particularly as articulated through information surrounding the show, i.e. whether the exhibition was presented as a collection of independent pieces, or a single piece comprised of composite parts, as a general group show, or one with an explicit curatorial theme. And by extension, who was being represented, exactly: the individual artists, the group of artists [...], its editor, or [...] its publisher.

This is how a contentious incident was reported in an earlier text about the collection by one of the editors, who explains: "I didn't really have a good answer, or rather I had a non-answer: that the only intention in this respect was to present something — for better or worse — outside any of those designations."

Two photographs, taken from different vantage points, of Paulina Ołowska's performance *Bauhaus Yoga*.

Unwitting sister logos for the Massachusetts Institute of Technology by Muriel Cooper and hardcore band Black Flag by Raymond Pettibon.

An upside-down facsimile photograph of an early sketch for the London Underground map by Harry Beck.

An acetate sheet with an example of long division used on an overhead projector during a talk by Perri MacKenzie.

This collection does not only include artworks. However, the contexts in which it has been exhibited, the professional trajectories of the people assembling it, and the ways in which it is displayed jointly conspire for it to be understood in terms of an art collection. The many reasons why this label does not fit are just as relevant to understanding it as the reasons why it does. In art, a "collection" is a set of artworks gathered according to certain guiding criteria, such as their being representative of something — a certain movement or technique, a historical development, a social group. A "collection" is also a set of artworks gathered according to that intersection of personal inclination, geographical proximity, market forces and happenstance that we call taste. Despite sharing a name, the intellectual operation these "collections" invite viewers to perform are diagrammatically opposite. The first kind uses the collection's guiding criteria to understand and contextualize individual works; they appear as parts of a whole. By knowing, say, that a given collection has a focus on unorthodox traditions in the Italian Renaissance, you might be able to better understand the works of Cosmé Tura and his school:

These X are all somehow related to Y.

In the second case, the absence of an explicit criterion for inclusion reverses this intellectual operation, the objects on display functioning as a set of parts whose analogies and similarities might offer clues to what the whole is about:

This Y is somehow related to all these X.

In the first case, the criteria allow viewers to understand the works; in the second case, the works collectively guide viewers towards understanding the criteria behind them.

The artist's decision to withdraw the work from this "collection" was a direct reflection of the ambiguity and confusion between these two operations. The artist's objection was that it wasn't clear to them whether their work was being displayed as the

result of a deduction or the base for an induction. The answer was that it wasn't clear to us either.

However, a "collection" is also simply a set. In mathematical set theory, the word is used in textbooks to skirt around the obvious embarrassment of defining a primitive concept in terms of itself: "a set is a set of objects" not being too promising as the founding definition of a whole discipline.

In set theory, a set can be defined by a criterion for inclusion, called a function ("the set of all odd numbers under 8"; "the set of all the people I drunk-dialed in 2014") or by a list ({1;3;5;7}, {Fabio, Natalia, Francesca, ...}). In principle, the two methods are equivalent — the difference is only in whether one works from the top down or from the bottom up. This mirrors rather precisely the two operations of collections we saw before — the one defining elements by what they have in common, the second offering a list of elements leaving one to ponder what, if anything, they share.

Curiously enough, the relationship between these two ways of defining a set generated a great deal of ambiguity and confusion in set theory, too, at least in the philosophical inquiries into the way mind and language work. Since the late 19th century, set theory has been used as a formal system to explain the underlying mechanisms through which words and concepts relate to things — "semantics." In its most basic version, this system would identify every word or expression with the set of things it applies to. "Red" would then refer to the set of all red things; "Vincenzo Latronico" to the set that includes only me, assuming I have no homonyms; "prime numbers" to the set of prime numbers; "the collection of The Serving Library" to the set of objects described in this book; and so on.

A sentence such as "Three objects in the collection of The Serving Library are red" would then be understood as saying that there are exactly three things that those two sets share — or, more precisely, that three things stand in the intersection of the two sets.

This, however, ends up generating bizarre consequences when combined with a foundational principle of the glamorous-sounding Zermelo-Fraenkel formalization of set theory, generally used as a standard, called the axiom of extensionality, which states that if and only if two sets have the same elements, then they are the same set.

$$\forall A \forall B (\forall X (X \in A \iff X \in B) \implies A = B)$$

This axiom is apparently straightforward: the set {1; 3; 5; 7} is identical to the set {3; 5; 1; 7}. However, sets can also be identified with their inclusion criteria — their functions; this would imply that, in case two functions identify the same set, they are the same. However, consider the previous example — "Vincenzo Latronico" being the set that includes only me. Coincidentally, also "Human males writing in the dining room at the Performing Arts Forum in Saint-Erme-Outre-et-Ramecourt, France, on August 19th 2020, at 11:38 local time" is the set that includes only me. The axiom of extensionality thus stipulates that the two expressions are identical, interchangeable, synonymous.

There is a sense in which this is true, as they both refer to me, but many in which they don't. Those two expressions (and countless others, such as "the owner of a VW van with a MCBO100 German plate") do refer to the same thing, but convey profoundly different information about it. In order to grapple with the discrepancy, philosophers of language have coined the notion of "intension": if the "extension" of a given term is the set of objects it denotes, the "intension" is the *way* in which that extension is determined. The vagueness and arbitrariness of all this (what is a *way*?) engendered a dispute — between so-called "intensionalists" and "extensionalists" — whose dying gasps can be heard to this day in remote philosophy departments.

Another example might help show why this is relevant here. "Prime numbers" denotes the set of numbers that admit no integer factor except 1 and themselves, which we know to be {1; 3; 5; 7; 11; ...} all the way to countable infinity. Prime numbers have been studied for millennia, and theorems about them — that is, the discovery of the properties that characterize all and only prime numbers — are a crucial part of pure mathematics. Take, for instance a theorem on the factorial of prime numbers, first stated around the year 1000 by Arab mathematician Asan Ibn al-Haytham, that for the vagaries of Eurocentric history is known today as Wilson's theorem.

The proof of Wilson's theorem amounts to the demonstration that its statement identifies exactly the set of prime numbers, just like our initial definition of them as numbers that can only be divided by one and themselves. Following the axiom of extensionality, this would imply that these two concepts (our initial definition, and Wilson's theorem) are synonymous, interchangeable. But the discovery of this synonymy, far from being trivial, has taken several centuries of mathematical research.

This is the very stuff number theory is made of: the study of how and why a certain collection of objects happens to share different properties, or how apparently different properties characterize exactly the same collection of objects.

We're back to "collection," because the problem of the relations between the properties that can be identified as shared by a given group of objects is precisely the problem the artist who withdrew their work from this collection raised, the problem I have been dancing around in this introduction without trying to solve.

> The juxtaposed versions of what appear to be proportionally-enlarged scans of original pages from Stéphane Mallarmé's seminal 1897 poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard" [A throw of the dice will never abolish chance] and Marcel Broodthaers' 1969 abstracted and/or censored version of the same, both labeled "Courtesy of Seth Price."
>
> A double-page spread headed "Money / History" from the 1971 *Whole Earth Catalog* that details the publication's financial accounts.

In "Futures," an essay published in issue #7 of *Bulletins of The Serving Library*, Angie Keefer writes about the museum job she had during college:

> I wound up underground, in the basement woodshop beneath the exhibition galleries, alone with one of [Duchamp's] readymades — the snow shovel — *In Advance of the Broken Arm*. I was to outfit a shipping crate in made-to-measure foam so as to safely send the shovel somewhere. While this was

not an especially interesting job in terms of the labor involved, three long afternoons with *In Advance of the Broken Arm* did expand the scope of my mental Duchamp to encompass the patently obvious: what had registered primarily as a disembodied idea, transmitted through images and texts in books and magazines, was indeed a thing. No "as-if" attached to the task of packing it. I was not performing an absurd and rather boring piece of theater. I was working for an hourly wage. And all of this was supposed to be somewhat beside the point.

The property shared by most objects in this collection is that they have appeared in the pages of the journal family *Dot Dot Dot*, *Bulletins of The Serving Library*, and *The Serving Library Annual*. But beyond that, the very absence of recognizable visual ties between the objects forces a curious onlooker to make a "close reading," towards their own personal disambiguation. This generative gesture embodies the collection's fundamental reminder: meaning proliferates within and around any singular object if interrogated with enough attention. No surprise, then, that the collection has been consistently used as a kind of 3-d PowerPoint presentation during workshops and seminars —as a toolbox for teaching.

However, in any given collection of objects one can also identify shared properties that happen to be trivial. For instance, all the objects in this book have at some point existed in a storage space in Liverpool; they are all physical objects; they are all worth less than a yacht. Early exhibitions of the collection were a means of upending the usual hierarchy between text and image in the journals—the former being preponderant and elaborately typeset while the latter, partially because of practical constraints, were rarer and often of poor quality. In our model, this is a property that can be derived a priori from the initial criterion for inclusion (having appeared in the journals).

I believe the passing of time has made this property trivial. In 2004 there were no social media; phones didn't have cameras; Frieze had just closed its very first UK fair; Donald Trump was starting the very first season of *The Apprentice*; packs of velociraptors roamed the streets at night. Advances in printing, the massive influx of fashion advertising into the art publishing sector, a vertiginous financialization of the art market and the radical changes technology has brought to our habits of mind all allow images, today, to fend off well enough for themselves. Text, meanwhile, is afforded less and less space, pushed aside by the stream of increasingly visual matter that is curiously still referred to as "art discourse." The publication behind this collection was initially biannual, then became annual a few years ago. My personal hope is that in the future our publishing schedule will keep on doubling every two years: the next issue would come out in 2024, the following one in 2032, and our glorious 20th number would hit the shelves in 2080—assuming shelves still exist.

If a property can become trivial with time, another can become relevant; and what has happened to text over the past two decades seems to point somewhere in this direction. While the contents of *Dot Dot Dot*, *Bulletins* and the *Annual* have varied widely in topic and form, they all share the same temperament, or something akin to a family resemblance. They are rather long; they often deal with abstruse topics with an almost awkward degree of specificity; they try to deliberately transgress boundaries between disciplines, not so much as looters (a specialist in discipline A applying concepts from discipline B), but rather as smugglers or bearers of gifts (a specialist in discipline B bringing their skillz elsewhere); they share a dry, abstract humor that might be correctly characterized—both as praise and as insult—as "college professor's." They require from their readers a higher than average attention and time.

In what would to a certain extent be a typical gesture within this approach, this is the moment in which the text wraps itself into quotes and turns meta, becoming the set of itself, since of course all of the above is true of the present introduction, too. Indeed, the typeface you are looking at is called Meta-The-Difference-Between-The-Two-Font.

An angular plant and its background collaged by Frances Stark using fragments from a color proof of some of the objects in this collection.

Jason Fulford's C-Print of a Polaroid of an LP and a Polaroid of the LP that depicts German singer-songwriter Ulrich Roski four times.

Philomene Pirecki's *Grey Painting: Text Version 2*, whose palette of primary colors combine to form its muddy frame.

There is an obvious sense in which many of these objects participate in the family resemblance between the texts they have in common—appearing either as family members proper, or as the family's therapists, jesters, teachers, pets, gods. Those of them which are coded as artworks share the logical clarity, formal simplicity, and tongue-in-cheek humor of a bookish approach to conceptual art that flourished around the turn of the millennium. Those of them which are not often invite the viewer to a similar exercise in order to peel their separate layers or to understand their subtle irony. Rather paradoxically—this being a collection of objects whose alleged common trait is their having been printed as illustrations—none of them makes for an immediately compelling, visually striking image. They want you to look closer or to look twice. This is precisely the opposite of the images that come across as most impactful on a smartphone's small screen. Makers of those images know that people today never look closer, never look twice.

This, I think, could be the key to what I'm looking for here —which is the interpretation of someone whose experience of this collection is much closer to that of an affectionate viewer than to its originator. What these objects share is an approach to viewing, to looking for meaning in an object, that they seem to invite, or to offer a reference library for. Such an approach now appears to have been specific of a certain time—a time in which our understanding of "meanings" was informed by the Internet as a hypertextual utopia as much as by the fear of the image-based corporate Battle Royale that it was about to become. This approach includes a loving mistrust of images; a fondness for the methods of Western modernism combined with a drastic disillusionment as to the purported validity and morality of the results they have yielded;[2] a tendency to "favor the oblique over the categorical, the indirect over the blatantly transparent." This last quote, in my mind, was from "Dispersion," a 2002 essay by Seth Price which is informed by pretty much the same approach. Curiously enough, I could not find it to double-check it—either there or anywhere else in his writings. In the aptly named "Teen Image," from 2009, I found this instead:

Art is sometimes taken to be a kind of seismograph that registers the effects of cultural change. In this view, art's objects and gestures yield distanced reflection and insight: from the frenzy, a distillation. But the term "ritualized unknowing," used above in reference to the Internet, could also describe a response to the banal condition of trying to understand what's happening that one finds in art discourse, which seeks to explain how art explains, to show how art shows, to suggest what art is trying to suggest.

There is a paradox in the very attempt to understand an unfamiliar art practice, which today is usually initiated through the medium of two-dimensional or screen-based images. Initially you grapple with a nebulous apparition in your mind's eye, a suspicion that something hovers beyond with no name forthcoming, but this sense of looming energies and meaning often shrinks when you finally inspect the actual artworks, which reveal themselves to consist of mere objects or gestures, as do all artworks. No matter how powerful the work, you're tempted to say: "But this is just . . . ." Just an object, just a gesture. It would be a mistake, though, to think that your disillusionment upon scrutinizing the "actual" art is a bad thing. A gap has surely opened in your experience of the work, but art depends on this split between the fragile interiority of speculation and the more public and bodily activity of looking, which partakes of space. Your first impression, rare and valuable as it is, is only richer for the betrayal.

> A silkscreen frame made by Stuart Bailey hung back-to-front with an old Esperanto motto, "Logika, Neutrala, Facila" [Logical, Neutral, Easy].

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NOTES

1. There is a biographical reason for this. The objects in this collection have been assembled over almost two decades as part of the making of *Dot Dot Dot*, then *Bulletins of The Serving Library*, then *The Serving Library Annual*. The editorial group has fluctuated over the years. Stuart Bailey and Peter Bil'ak were *Dot Dot Dot*'s main editors from 2000 until 2006—which is around the time that this collection was first conceived and installed (about 15 items in Tallinn, Estonia). David Reinfurt then replaced Peter as co-editor until the final, 20th issue in 2010. Stuart, David and Angie Keefer founded *Bulletins of The Serving Library* in a similar but expanded vein, and with a digital bias. Francesca Bertolotti-Bailey came on board in 2016, just prior to the journal's deceleration into *The Serving Library Annual*. Angie left in 2017, and I joined a year later. As the most recent addition, I have thus been called upon to write about something that I am both part of and that predates me, a tree I prune regularly without ever having seen its trunk.

2. This, of course, doesn't mean it is exempt from them. Informed and guided by the discourse around Western modernism, this collection—and to a large extent this publication—is a mirror of its own flaws and blind spots, and over the years it has displayed them in egregious ways, its platform reflecting to a disturbing extent the preponderance of cishet able white males in the European, colonial modernist canon.

Cover: Linder, *Scarlet Else*, 2020, lithographic print, 24.3 × 35.3 cm

CAMOUFLAGED SHIP IN DRY DOCK

Edward Wadsworth, woodcut, 1918 (lithographic book proof, 1974), 51.2 × 41.2 cm

Now see this, dear reader, imagine the scene:
Of a submarine hunting the sea.
A brain and two eyes inside spy through a viewer,
Thinks: down here, ze ships can't see me!

All it takes is one look, and doing some sums
Tells me where and how fast the ship's going.
Launch a torpedo to meet when it comes,
In bitz the güt ship be a-blowing.

But what if Heinrich was unable to fathom how
A boat was a-coming or going?
Ist starboard port when stern becomes bow?
Mein Gott! Sums have no way of knowing.

The ship that he saw, yet did not, had been Dazzled.
Camo-, but not, stalled his thinking.
Two hundred + ships, painted starboard + port
= Thousands were saved from a sinking.

See — confusion has function before it is measured.
Brown cows lazy dogs in equation.
And what we can't fathom should therefore be treasured.
Look-stopping is good on occasion.

– "These Woodcuts Could Safeguard a Nation!,"
Will Holder, *Dot Dot Dot* #9, 2004