



CONNECTING A COLLECTION

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facing Announcement for the Going Bananas
performance presented in collaboration with Enrico
Sturani, Belgium, 1986.

WHEN I FIRST BEGAN archiving Anna Banana's collection, I was overwhelmed by the disordered sea of yellow objects that were exposed to daylight for the first time after decades of sitting in Anna's basement. I sorted through each object one by one in its box, assigning it an archival number before placing it back. Sometimes I processed an entire box in a day; other boxes took weeks, as they were filled to the brim with banana earrings, patches, and other small knick-knacks. The music of Mozart made the monotonous deed a soothing, but still bureaucratic, experience. I am familiar with collections

management procedures, as I am trained in art history and museum studies. However, the end result of this collection was very different than simply maintaining the traditional museum standards; in fact, it undermines the very protocols and procedures of "museums" and "collections."

Occasionally, visitors who had followed the yellow brick road of banana stickers to the Dr. A. F. Banana Specific Research Institute Archive would interrupt me. After I described my epic banana project of cataloguing Anna's pieces, "Have you gone bananas yet?" was a frequently shared joke. This question drove me more bananas than



the endless repetition of documenting hundreds of objects. Second and third to this inquiry were “Where did all of these items come from?” and “Why is she giving the collection away?” These simple questions demanded thoughtful answers.

Almost everyone, at some point in life, has collected something. As philosopher Jean Baudrillard points out, the most active time for collecting is childhood,¹ when we cannot help but accumulate seagull feathers found on the street or plastic keychains from the many towns we have visited. Baudrillard proclaimed that this process seems to disappear for most people in

their pubescent years and then commence again as an adult. However, maybe this has changed lately, as many teenagers seem to be collecting Facebook friends or Twitter followers.

But why do we collect? Philosopher Walter Benjamin believed collections keep memories of the past “to renew the old world.”² This explanation clarifies why collecting is embarked on as adults, at a time when nostalgia provides the illusion of comforting stability in a constantly changing world. Others, like Baudrillard, are more cynical and think collections allow people to have relationships without the need of other



¹ Anna Banana standing in Dr. A. F. Banana Specific Research Institute Archive, an office open to the public, that Curatorial Assistant Regan Shrumm used to archive the banana collection at Open Space.

Photo: Jacquelyn Bortolussi

² *Banana Rag*, issue #43, September 2013.

humans.³ Either way, collecting is a deeply personal and revealing activity.

When Anna Banana began her artistic career in 1971, she performed as a rain-bow-clad Town Fool in Bastion Square in Victoria. There, she asked for people to give her banana stories, jokes, and other anecdotes. As Anna states, “When I first did the Town Fool, it was because I was isolated, and I was trying to figure out a way of connecting with people . . . In a way, everyone can relate to a banana.”⁴

She even founded the *Banana Rag*, a newsletter that solicited and compiled banana news stories, ads, and information that had been sent to her, as well as shared her standing request for more. Anna had copies available at her table in Bastion Square,

but she mostly distributed this publication through the International Mail Art Network. This popular artistic movement, which began in the late 1950s, centres on exchanging artworks and news in a type of gift economy⁵ through the postal service.

It was through this network that Anna began receiving banana items in the mail. Anna never specifically asked for these items, but they kept on coming from other artists, most of whom she had never met. Some objects are handmade and would traditionally be defined as “art,” such as a drawing of a man in sunglasses holding a “radioactive” banana or a ceramic banana slug with a human face. Other items looked like they were purchased in a dollar store or tourist gift shop, like the handful of banana-shaped harmonicas, which all state “I WENT BANANAS IN . . .”

To treat such everyday souvenirs as symbolic objects of social and aesthetic value fit for an exhibition was perplexing to some visitors. But the mixture of art and common items can raise questions about how museums give their collections value. All objects, in general, only become meaningful because of their worth as ascribed by individuals, societies, and institutions.

Every object in Anna Banana’s collection could be turned into an artwork if its social and historical context were provided.

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Dear Friends,
Following up on last years newsletter, I'm happy to say it looks like my 40 Years of Pop Culture bananas exhibit, INTERACT will get a showing, but probably not until September 2015, so that's all I'll say about it for now.

This summer has been devoted to gardening, organizing and producing a limited edition, stamp sheet commemorating Patricia Tavener, the Mail Queen who died in May this year. She was well known in the 70's for her artistamp editions, but like many early mail artists, she gradually focussed less and less on network projects and more on painting and printmaking. Twenty-four mail artists contributed designs and money to get the edition produced and mailed.

For the mail-art exhibit at the Berlin Art Academy, I did a large collage spelling out SECURITY OBSESSION, from the security patterns many of you sent. I cut it into twelve puzzle pieces, sent them to 12 network artists asking them to amend then send their piece to the exhibit. So far 11 of the 12 have made it to the Academy. I recently received a link to a web catalog, and saw many early, not very active artists sent work to this exhibit.

Big THANKS to the over 45 artists who've sent packets of the printer test strips I asked for. I now have more than enough for my project. Senders will get a copy of what I do with them, but to date, all I've had time to do is trim them. I have a busy fall schedule, so it may be december before I get to working on this project. Don't give up, I'll get down to working with them eventually!

For those of you who have contemplated having a stamp produced on my *International Art Post* editions, you might want to start thinking more seriously about it. Currently, I have enough dry-gummed paper to produce two more editions; No. 26, & 27, Dec/2013/14. To do more, I would have to purchase a case lot of 2,000 sheets; sufficient paper to do another 8 editions. By that time I will be 75, and I'm not feeling inclined to take on 8 more years of production. While I still love getting and assembling the images, the rest of the process has become a lot like work; separating and packaging single stamp orders being the most tedious part.

After those editions, I will put my motorized Rosback perforator up for sale. It's Patented Feb. 2, 1915 and is a gem, but a very heavy gem of cast iron, and is really only useful for printed editions of 500+ sheets. Because there are only 5 perf. wheels, all sheets have to be hand fed into the machine four times to get the full sheet done, thus the need for the 100 sheets of make-ready, to get the perforation wheels correctly positioned.

The big network events for me this past year, were in Seattle. The first, organized by Carl Chew was *AARPEX Artistamp Artists Reunion & Philatelic Exposition* which met at University House, Nov. 10th. twenty artists from Vancouver, Gulfport, FL San Francisco, NYC, and the Pacific Northwest had display tables, sold & traded works and stories. Buz Blur of Gurdon ARK planned to attend, but his house was struck by lightning and burned three days before he was to leave for Seattle! Carl produced a stamp edition commemorating the event of works by 20 artists, and I gave a slide talk about the 71 books, catalogues and publications on artistamps published between 1975 and 2012, in my collection; the number of which surprised us all!

This eye feast was followed the next day by the opening of *MOA; Dogfish/Rudine's Museum of Artistamps*, named for the extinct, flightless moa of New Zealand; an obscure, useful coincidence in the acronym as Artistamp artists and their products are rare birds too. The opening was a full-scale, ceremonial event, with costumes, presentations, formalities, acknowledgements, not to mention food and beverages enjoyed by many artists from the *AARPEX* event. The exhibit, co-curated by Rudine & Jas W. Felter, is displayed in two rooms. The first with two banks of vertical, pull out frames of art stamps by over 50 artists, the other with a wrap-around counter topped with 25 easel books of artists' stamps. All in all, a spectacular weekend!

All best wishes,
Anna

MOA
MUSEUM OF ART STAMPS
GRAND OPENING
NOV 11 2012

BANANA RAG No. 43, Sept. 2013

For example, a common item that I found repeatedly was a banana-shaped Tonga postage stamp. The Kingdom of Tonga is a sovereign state that issued the world's first self-adhesive stamps in 1963.⁶ Six years later, Tonga created the banana stamp, one of the first stamps in the world that was not rectangular or square. This unusual stamp was so popular with stamp collectors that it became a significant source of revenue for Tonga. Each object in the collection has this type of interesting history and could be displayed in a museum. But instead of letting a museum or gallery ascribe the value, Anna invited visitors to assign and document personal value by choosing their own objects to take home. Of course, this was after they had completed a catalogue form documenting their objects, fulfilling her objective of actively engaging gallery visitors in her process.

Although Anna accumulated these objects, she does not call herself an active collector, nor does she call her assemblage an intrinsic collection, *per se*. While Anna may have bought the occasional item, the vast majority of the collection was given to her. Yet she did not purge any of these items and in fact kept the objects systematically tucked away in her basement. As Baudrillard indicates, collecting is just as much based

on “ordering, playing, and assembling” as it is on searching and possessing.⁷ I imagined that her residence would contain a chaotic array of bananas that would lie on every surface. While visiting her house, I found that her residence was spare and serene. The odd banana object would appear, but these articles were carefully selected due to their special significance to the artist. The only indication that Anna collects was a line of rocks that covers the deck railing of her home, a collection she began as a child in Victoria. But these gratuitous natural materials coincide with Anna's anti-consumer art practices.

Just because Anna did not deliberately amass this banana collection does not mean that the assemblage offers no reflection of the artist or her work. As Baudrillard states, “For what you really collect is always yourself.”⁸ Through these items, you can



1–3 Items from *Regifting the Bananas*, an interactive event presented at Open Space, Victoria, B.C. Photos: Jacquelyn Bortolussi

4 A display of banana items hang along the back, west wall of Open Space during *Regifting the Bananas*. Photo: Jacquelyn Bortolussi



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find references to Anna's past work—an Anna Banana exhibition poster from 1993 Germany, or a puzzle comprised of Anna's art stamps. One of my favourite items I came across while archiving was a 1980 Banana Olympics award.⁹ The object is roughly made with a wooden artist palette and two foamcore bananas, along with a bronze plaque engraved with the title "3rd Banana." Held in Surrey, British Columbia, the 1980 Banana Olympics was a project organized by Anna and the Surrey Art Gallery that invited public participation in a number of races and contests, including banana discus throw and a banana-balancing race. The 3rd Banana award winner must have left the park before the awards presentations and therefore the award became Anna's possession.

A constant theme when looking through the banana collection was how the objects reflected Anna's connection to other people. Notes to Anna were often inscribed on the back of an object with a Post-it note. The artist P. L. Grosse wrote a message on the back of an artwork titled "Ceci est une," a semi-preserved marzipan that is framed in a glass shadowbox. As well as thanking Anna for his degree in Bananology, a reward that Anna gives to those who contributed banana material, P. L. Grosse goes on to remark, "Sorry, this took time. It is as you say, 'I'm



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preparing for great things.” This comment, written from one mail art colleague to another, exposes the impact that Anna has made throughout the network. The fact that the banana collection totaled 1,158 items, with objects from Germany, Japan, Turkey, and New Zealand, also demonstrates Anna’s international appeal.

Now that Anna has regifted the items back to visitors through *Regifting the Bananas*, these objects have received a second chance to connect with individuals. While Baudrillard reasons that collectors are “impoverished and inhuman” from a lack of relationships,¹⁰ Anna, in fact, met and interacted with Open Space staff, volunteer attendants, and visitors through these objects, defying the famous philosopher’s theory. As



Anna states, “We often don’t connect with each other in a public kind of way. . . . I’ve always wanted to remind people of being here and now.”¹¹

The regifting process also invited visitors to think about their own consumer and collecting tendencies. These banana objects were sent voluntarily through the Mail Art Network in a gift economy and moved on in this anti-capitalist manner through the regifting process. In fact, for Anna, the collection “demonstrates the generosity that is inherent in all people, if they’re given the chance.”¹²

The collection made me think about the number of items that I have accumulated over my lifetime—products I bought myself, as well as gifts that I’ve stockpiled from holidays and birthdays, many of which were eventually donated to a thrift store. Yet every time I came across an item from the collection that struck me—a 1950s ceramic monkey holding a banana, a set of fridge magnets from the TV show *Arrested Development*, a retro Chiquita banana phone—I could not help but want to take it home.

What does this say about myself? That I am just a hoarder at heart? Or did others have this same temptation of wanting to start a new banana collection because of the exhibition?

The frenzied opening on September 19, 2015, demonstrated that I was not the only person who became obsessed with the bananas. Many visitors started to show up before the gallery was even open. The banana objects disappeared rapidly, I started to take out boxes of inventory from our supplementary banana storage, nicknamed the “banana vault.” But instead of waiting for me to place the objects on the table, people began to pick straight from the box. Everyone wanted a souvenir, and my jealousy seethed as I watched the artifacts disappear with their new owners.

I soon realized that I wanted to take these items home with me because each one has its own story and history. I felt that I had temporarily become the caretaker of this collection, as I know each item by heart, and have researched and arranged some of the objects. Like people, objects have a cultural “biography.” With objects,



1 Curatorial Assistant Regan Shrumm making final touches at *Regifting the Bananas*. Photo: Jacquelyn Bortolussi

2 Visitors choosing their regifted banana objects during the *Regifting the Bananas*' opening. Photo: Jacquelyn Bortolussi

3 Visitors filling out catalogue forms in exchange for regifted banana items at *Regifting the Bananas*. Photo: Jacquelyn Bortolussi

their biography adjusts and adapts as they are bought, sold, exchanged, broken, and mended. Once the banana collection was regifted, I felt that the objects had lost the meanings and histories that I had compiled, only to continue in a new direction of their “lives.”

While I mourn this loss, I am absorbed by the thoughts of where the objects are now. Why do people choose a particular item? What does the item mean to them? Where will the object go once it has been taken home?

Now, several months after the exhibition, I do have an idea of what happened to one of the banana items.¹³ Carollyne Yardley, a Victoria artist known for her signature style of using squirrel characters, seized a pair of “The Original Top Banana” glasses, a set of Groucho Marx–like spectacles with a plastic banana attached to cover the nose. Yardley then attended a mail art workshop at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, where her regifted item became a source of inspiration, combining Bananology with Squirrealism to create the perfect compounded Dada absurdity.

While the majority of the banana objects will remain forever lost to me, at least I know that though Anna Banana’s project has ended, the journey of each object has only just begun.

NOTES

- 1 Jean Baudrillard, “The Non-Functional System, or Subjective Discourse,” in *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 1996), 2.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, “Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting,” in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 61.
- 3 Baudrillard, 17.
- 4 Anna Banana, interviewed by Regan Shrumm and Alicia Lawrence, personal interview, Robert’s Creek, BC, January 18, 2015.
- 5 Gift economy is a type of exchange where objects are given without an agreement of good or service in return.
- 6 David A. Norris, “11 Stamp Stories Worth Retelling,” *Mental Floss*, <http://mentalfloss.com/article/20249/11-stamp-stories-worth-retelling>
- 7 Baudrillard, 3.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 9 After fighting crowds of people during the exhibition’s opening on September 19, 2015, this was the one item I chose to take home with me after filling out my catalogue form.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 11 Anna Banana, interviewed by Regan Shrumm and Alicia Marie Lawrence, personal interview, Robert’s Creek, BC, January 18, 2015.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Not all of the banana objects found an owner after *Regifting the Bananas* finished in October 24, 2015. The remaining objects were given to *LunarFest*, a celebration of the Chinese New Year put on by the Asian Canadian Special Events Association. The bananas were put on display as a part of the festival’s exhibition, *Reflections-What do We See in Monkeys?* where the bananas were put on display with *LunarFest*’s monkey mascot.

