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Collecting the Biennale

An ephemeral pursuit



Thomas Heneage holding salami selected by Maurizio Cattelan

By  Thomas Heneage

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We build libraries for people all over the world, but probably the most fun project we do is to beg, borrow or steal to help build an archive of the Venice Biennale for the [Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute](#). These efforts will culminate in July of this year, when The Clark premieres the exhibition “[Art’s Biggest Stage: Collecting the Venice Biennale, 2007–2019](#)” (on view until October 2019).

Around 10 or so years ago, the Clark library director and chief librarian, Susan Roeper, and Terri Boccia, the acquisitions librarian and special projects officer, approached me with a challenge. They had a lot of material relating to the Venice Biennale because Sterling Clark—who founded the institute—used to go regularly. Nowadays, though, the things they want tend to disappear before they can be saved—books, posters, ephemera that’s given away free at the vernissage. They wanted to know if I could help.

I did have one solution but I didn’t think they would go along with it. I suggested that they send someone to the vernissage to find the things they wanted. But I had no idea what it would cost and who could predict what the outcome might be? I

couldn't imagine a librarian would be mad enough to say yes to that.

How wrong I was. They rather bravely said: "Well, what can it cost? You'll go, right? Let's just do it!" So, we worked out the parameters. Basically I was to use my initiative. The idea was to get as much material as possible on the artists that governments had sent to represent their countries in the national pavilions and at collateral events. There are a lot of first appearances in Venice and it's quite nice to keep some of that material. I said I would try to grab what I could.



Thomas Heneage in The Clark's archives

It is the most tremendous fun. I visit every pavilion and related event, and get to see inside palazzi that are not normally open.

As soon as I land in Venice, I head to a working neighborhood—there are still a few left—and find a hardware store where I buy wheeled shopping trolley bags. Then I traipse around the biennale collecting everything I can find, which I bring back to my hotel room to photograph and list before packing and shipping it all off to the Clark.

I walk miles. I've been disorientated in dark rooms visiting video installations; deafened in sound installations; I've had a couple of climbing ordeals, such as the giant bamboo structure *Big Bambú* behind the Guggenheim in 2011 by the American artists Doug and Mike Starn, or Gregor Schneider's *Totes Haus u r* in the German pavilion the same year (the latter drew blood and cost me a pair of trousers, but I didn't charge the Clark for that, of course).

I find books that we can't get elsewhere as well as the little things that get thrown away or overlooked—press releases, posters, postcards, lists and biographies of artists. There used to be lots of CD-ROMs, whereas now we get memory sticks. I've collected wristbands, invites, stickers and badges. I once got a roll of incredibly chic wallpaper as part of Jasmina Cibic's exhibit in the Slovenian pavilion in 2013 and I wish I had got another roll for my bathroom, but it was very heavy. From the Greek pavilion in 2015, which featured the work of [Maria Papadimitriou](#), I got a metal artist's sheep's bell—like a cowbell, but much smaller.

I've found the most extraordinary tote bags. The best was perhaps in 2009, when Elmgreen & Dragset did an installation called *The Collectors* at both the Danish and the Nordic pavilions. Instead of a catalogue they had produced what they called a "bag-agogue concept", which was a very smart tote bag full of goodies created by the artists.



Thomas Heneage was tasked with collecting books, posters, ephemera that's given away free at the vernissage.

By that stage I was carrying approximately 24 tote bags so staggered back to the hotel. As I placed them on the floor, a salami rolled out of one of them. The question was: which one? It turned out to be from a famous salumeria selected by Maurizio Cattelan as part of the bag-alogue concept for the first 500 bags. I texted the Clark to ask if they wanted a salami selected by Cattelan. I got the answer immediately: "Absolutely!"

How to ship the thing, was the question. I could not send it back with the books through customs—that would have been a nightmare, and of course we had to do it legally. So the Clark applied to the US Department of Agriculture to have the salami registered as art. Guess what the department said? "No way."

So, the fridge in my shop in London is currently an outpost of the Clark Institute and I welcome anyone to come and look at this decaying salami. It's now rather disgusting. [When Maurizio was asked about it, he said we should just buy a new one.](#)

One of the great things about the project is that it gives us wonderful snapshots of changes in the art world—the collection is formed without a view on quality or judgment. We collect simply to document. You see certain themes emerging every year—I suspect this year will be about migration.

I have seen some disastrous things, as artists try to catch the public's attention in appalling ways. But I have also seen some wonderful things such as Christian Marclay's [The Clock](#), which won the Golden Lion in 2011 or the Ghanaian artist El Anatsui's sublime, shimmering bottle-top [wall-hanging](#) (2007) and watching Urs Fischer's huge wax replica of Giambologna's *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1583), in which he had embedded candle wicks, dramatically melting, in 2011 was irresistible.

The collection may well be the only institution in America to have some of the items we've documented. Last edition, for example, I walked into the [Iranian pavilion](#) and told the director what we were doing. He said: "For an American museum, I would like them to have everything from my country. You can have anything you want." I reckon the Clark will be the only place in America to have such stuff.

Interview by Charlotte Burns

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