



The Collector's House – Hans Op de Beeck

By Selina Ting
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Hans Op de Beeck, *The Collector's House*, 2016. Monochrome solid plaster and other sculptural materials; large-scale installation. Courtesy of the artist. Photo by Artsy.

For many art fair trotters, the Art Basel Unlimited is the most enjoyable sector of the whole fair business. Its popularity and success has prompted other fairs to adopt the same strategy of giving space (though in a more modest manner) for ambitious museum-like presentations which are not necessarily marketable but are good for marketing.

This year's Art Basel is no exception. The Unlimited sector which opened a day earlier than the main fair has attracted a huge crowd (this year's recorded visitors number reached 95,000) to see the 88 monumental projects curated by the New York-based curator Gianni Jetzer. Amongst the big names such as Ai Weiwei, Tracey Emin, Frank Stella, Sol LeWitt, Paul McCarthy, etc., is another Unlimited regular, Hans Op de Beeck (*1969, Belgium).

Invited for the fifth time to the Unlimited sector since its inception 16 years ago in 2000, Hans Op de Beeck has created an immersive monumental installation *The Collector's House* (2016) for the "ultimate RDV" marketplace of collectors. A staging of a strange Gesamtkunstwerk sculpted and handcrafted from monochrome soft grey plaster, the fictitious collector's house contained a neoclassical evocation of a private room, a Wunderkammer-like lounge with its grand piano, art library and museum drawing room and a waterlily pond running at the centre of the house. Sculptures, paintings, furniture, books, still-life objects, animals, cigarette butts, ashtrays, wine glasses, high-tech gadgets, etc., are scattered everywhere while dwellers of the house couching and resting around. The strange monochrome setting with the stillness and mysterious mood has created an overwhelmingly disoriented and timeless sense of being. To put it in the artist's words, "[as] if everything, like in Pompeii, were frozen and petrified".

Definitely one of the most Instagrammable pieces at this year's Art Basel fair if not the most collectible one, *The Collector's House* has become a 2016 iconic work of Unlimited exemplifying its self-defining terms : grandiose, museum-quality and risk-taking.

CoBo spoke to Hans Op de Beeck at the art fair on the ideas behind the making of *The Collector's House* and its possible final destination.

Hans Op de Beeck: *The Collector's House* (Marianne Boesky Gallery, Galleria Continua, and Galerie Krinzinger), Art Basel Unlimited 2016, June 15, 2016. from VernissageTV on Vimeo.

This is your latest project, the Collector's House. It is 250 square metres and the idea is to create a fictitious space with references to a collector's home. Did you come up with this idea particularly for Art Basel because of the collecting business context?

Yes, for the first time I felt I'd do something with the idea of a space dedicated to collecting because this is the ultimate RDV place for people to meet up when it comes to collecting art. But collecting itself is a very broad idea. Human beings love to collect, whether it be food, cars or whatever.

What interests me about collecting are the many aspects of the psyche that are involved in it. There are right and wrong ways to collect, in the many meanings of this word, but there is also something very human about collecting, as we do it more than any other animal. Of course, animals collect food, but in our case, it can be something as luxurious as collecting art. This is something that intrigues me. When we are trying to write history, or collect facts in order to create a paradigm or frame of reference to put data together, we narrate what's been happening to us or what will be happening, so that we can understand things and relate them to one another.

I thought this Collector's House was a good reason to create a fictitious, immersive space that invites you to be overwhelmed in a silent, strange setup, which includes a lot of information in between the lines of the image. It's not a purely self-referential work. It is not just about the art or just about collecting. It's really about how we stage our lives. This could be someone's secret collection house or the space of a well-to-do person who has a room available for art and knowledge, such as a big library with a grand piano. So, it is a place for culture.

The collection is very diverse and eclectic, with a vast mix of objects and artefacts across different cultures and periods. What kind of image of the collector do you want to convey?

Yes, it is a house with a real mixture of things, some of these are good taste, some are bad taste. There's real art and fake art. It's also full of cigarette butts, soft drink beakers, coffee beakers and newspapers. So it is beautiful, strange, weird or ugly, all at the same time, and I love these contradictory, tragic-comic notions of something that's both appealing and annoying, and trying to find a balance between all of these elements. Of course, when I make an installation in grey tones, there is always a reference to archaeological objects. It's like when archaeologists dig up a cup from 500 years ago or find a fossil, there is a stone version of what it once was, an imprint frozen in time, like at Pompeii.

This is a very static surrounding. Everything is inert, heavy, sculpted, handcrafted, grey, monochromic. The skin is soft and velvet like, but the objects are quiet and heavy. It should feel like a frozen memory or something that resembles the things you know. Yet it's also very different from what you already know because it is a portrait of a fictitious character. And it makes you think, who has a house like that? Who has this weird water lily pond in the middle of the room, and this weird collection of eclectic arts? There is a fifties sculpture and then on its pedestal there's an ashtray. So you then wonder if this is part of a contemporary sculpture and a comment on 1950s sculptures, or if it's an actual 1950s sculpture with an ashtray left behind by the collector's son after a party here with his friends. So, there is this very strange mixture of old fashioned, neo-classicist nonsense and modernism, with things like monochromic paintings, but there are also old school landscape paintings, a mountain-scape and a seascape.

And then, there is a collection of African masks, a woman with earphones and a little girl with a motion capture mask on her face, so there is a lot of technology. There are two sculpted laptops in the installation as well, so it's not just neo-classical, it includes all eras from a hundred years ago up until now.



Hans Op de Beeck, *The Collector's House*, 2016. Monochrome solid plaster and other sculptural materials; large-scale installation. Courtesy of the artist.

Is there a particular reason or logic in the way that the objects are arranged and relate to each other?

Yes, it's a fully staged situation. That's what I always do. When I created a life-sized motorway restaurant with a view on a sculpted nocturnal motorway [*Location (5)*, 2004], it was fully orchestrated or fully conceived as something that was as immersive and accessible as possible. I always think about how people might circulate through it, where they could sit down, their perspective from a certain point of view, and so on. It's never random, and the process comes to a point where everything falls together, and everything feels like a whole. This is very experimental. I put one thing here and another thing there, and then I shift up to the point where it feels like a good composition. But I always think about the spectator or the person who will be wandering through it and how I could optimise their experience.

The piece is considered as a whole, as an installation, rather than a series of objects.

Right, the objects are not important. The most important thing is the installation. As is always the case with my large immersive works, you come in and are instantly surrounded by an overall mood. So when you sit down in this strange, fictitious Collector's House, you start to discover there is a butterfly on one of the water lilies, a snail in the library, and crates on the side with fake leaves for the water lily pond. So you understand that, oh, this is an art piece as well, or a depiction of an art piece. It is not a representation of a pond, but a representation of an art piece, which is a representation of a pond. So, the status of every object is very confused. However, this is not the most important point about it. The most important part for me is the atmosphere that the installation evokes. It's a very nice challenge and an adventure for me as an artist to fine-tune all of the messages in between the lines of what you see. For instance, this is like a Brancusi-column sculpture and yet it's not. There are other works like this in the installation. There is a fine art, still life table in there that is entirely sculpted and a work of mine. I've put it in the Collector's House ironically, as if the fictitious person had collected it.



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Lighting is also a very important element in your work. Is this the ideal lighting that you wanted to create?

Yes. I wanted to have a very soft light, like morning light on a grey day. It's not yellowish, it's more like a neutral light. When you look at the pond, you feel that daylight is falling on the pond, and that is very important to me. If you look at the installation, you'll notice the shadows are extremely soft. It's all very diffused, like on a rainy day, and that's the softness that gives this specific velvet skin to all the furniture and objects that I like a lot. If you look at the little boy, and how the soft light falls on his hair and shoulders, it is the type of light that I was trying to achieve.

If I could install this installation permanently, I'd make the roof more architectural. Ideally, I would have beams of wood or supports underneath this canvas, but I'm very happy with the lighting achieved. I slightly regret that I couldn't shape the ceiling in a nicer way here in Basel, but it's not overly important.

How would you compare this project to Elmgreen & Dragset's 2009 Venice Biennale presentation of *The Collector*?

It's a pity because I've been told that: "Someone else has made a collector's house with a dead body in the swimming pool." I did not know, so I replied to them, "I am sorry, with all respect to my colleagues, but I was not thinking of them when I conceived this installation." I was not commenting on my colleagues, nor did they inspire me. Apart from the subject orientation, I think it is very clear this is an entirely different work. So, I give all my respect to them, because they are great artists, but no, I wasn't inspired by them. It is just a coincidence. I would much rather prefer that there was no link here to any other artist, but that's not possible as everything's been done already. And that's fine.

When you present a piece of work like this at an art fair, who are the ideal buyers – private collectors or institutions?

I hope it will be an institution who will buy it and then dedicates a room or a space to this kind of fiction, because it questions the whole collection of objects in museums, and to a certain extent how they deal with it, how they stage their collection, how they make it communicate what it says about the psyche, what it says about how we reason, and how we try to give value to things. As you know, if Picasso or a great contemporary artist puts some crap together, like an old umbrella, a sack of sand and some stuff, it becomes a work of art of enormous market value. It's like the fat of Joseph Beuys. It is just some fat, but when it is his fat, it's like the *Merda d'Artista* of Piero Manzoni. You have transformed something ridiculous, which is of no value, into something of great market value, and once an artist has signed it, it becomes something else. So, the status of the object, when it turns from the very banal into something extraordinary is very interesting, and this is also why I don't work with ready-mades. Like the blackberries in this installation, the nuts, the

pears, the cigarettes and the ashtrays; everything is sculpted because in that way you transform a banality into something that is remarkable or strange, you then give it another status.

Would it surprise you if an individual collector finally acquired this piece?

It would be very nice, in a way, because it would be a collector who could then put himself or herself into perspective. It would mean that they understood the mild irony and sense of humour of the installation, as well as the relativity of things. It is like self-questioning and it also about introspection in a way, I think, for people who walk through this artwork and are collectors, and I am not just talking about art collectors, but collecting in general, or staging your surroundings so that you give value to what goods and materials you have. There is also, of course, a big immaterial representation, the blind library. You can't see what it is, but it represents all kinds of accessible knowledge. Many people have libraries, but they never read the books in them. Others read them all.

I think if a private collector has the courage to buy this work and give it the space it needs, it would mean he or she understands both the socio-cultural references of this alienating surrounding as well as the overall mood: a quiet, intense, meditative place for an introspective moment or a quiet gathering. When you make large, immersive installations, you always hope they can be installed in a public collection because more people can enjoy it.

Are you a collector yourself?

I have some artworks that I've exchanged with some colleagues, but I am not a collector. Everything I receive from selling my work is immediately put back into my work again, and into the good salary of my six assistants. I am not a big star in the art world, so I still have to get everything financed myself. I finance the production costs of my work. Christo also does with his enormously big project, which is self-sustaining. I manage to do it entirely autonomously and I love to have this autonomy. It is a costly freedom, but it is worth it because someone is not commissioning you. Of course, the galleries here help me to show my work because they share the cost of showing it here at Art Unlimited, but I finance the production costs, which gives me the freedom to take it where I like. It is not a commercial act by itself. It is created for the sake of creation, and not because it is an easy thing to merchandise or sell. So, most of my projects are financial disasters, but by selling my smaller works, like the watercolours that I paint at night, or the small sculptures, I manage to create enough money to do full on art pieces that are non-profit making.

How would you comment on the expanding scope of an art fair like Art Basel to cater for this kind art, which is difficult to sell but has a more in-depth meaning? Do you think the nature of the art market or the capacity of the art market to absorb this kind of work is different from before?

I am too young in the business to comment on this. I am in mid-career, of course, but started to become a professional artist 16-17 years ago. Before that, I was so naive that I did not have a clue about the art market and art fairs, and I never studied how it functions or how it used to be in the sixties, seventies, eighties or the beginning of the nineties. I do not have a clue how it functioned at that time. So, from the start of my career, well 2005, I had been a professional artist for about five years and participated for the first time in Art Unlimited. So, for me, it has always existed. I can't say, "Wow, all of a sudden they came up with this exhibition concept". I know it has been there for quite some time, but of course, it is a great thing that here in Basel they have this almost biennale quality event. They always manage to have some really good pieces here and it is great they do this, and are also very firm with their policy, so that it's not just an extension of the art booth at the fair, but is really an exhibition or an experience.

How many times have you shown at Art Unlimited?

Five times. This is my fourth large-scale, immersive installation, and I also showed a big film projection one time, so I am a regular now. I know how to put up something at very short notice, but I also know that thousands of people have seen it, so you get an enormous reaction to it. That's really beautiful and very intense.

Thank you.

My pleasure.

About the Artist

Hans Op de Beeck (pronounced as "be") was born in Turnhout in 1969. He lives and works in Brussels and Gooik, Belgium. Op de Beeck has shown his work extensively in solo and group exhibitions around the world. Hans Op de Beeck produces large installations, sculptures, films, drawings, paintings, photographs and texts. His work is a reflection on our complex society and the universal questions of meaning and mortality that resonate within it. He

regards man as a being who stages the world around him in a tragi-comic way. Above all, Op de Beeck is keen to stimulate the viewers' senses, and invite them to really experience the image. He seeks to create a form of visual fiction that delivers a moment of wonder, silence and introspection.

He has had substantial institutional solo shows at the GEM Museum of Contemporary Art of The Hague, The Hague, NL (2004); MUHKA Museum of Contemporary Art, Antwerp, B (2006); Centraal Museum, Utrecht, NL (2007); the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC, US (2010); Kunstmuseum Thun, CH (2010); Centro de Arte Caja de Burgos, Burgos, ES (2010); Butler Gallery, Kilkenny, IRL (2012); Kunstverein Hannover, D (2012); Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa, USA (2013); the Harn Museum of Art, Gainesville, FL, USA (2013); FRAC Paca, Marseille, F (2013); MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Boston MA, US (2014); MOCA Cleveland, OH, US (2014); Sammlung Goetz, Munich, D (2014),...

Op de Beeck has participated in numerous group shows at institutions such as The Reina Sofia, Madrid, ES; the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art, AZ, US; the Towada Art Center, Towada, JP; ZKM, Karlsruhe, DE; MACRO, Rome, IT; the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, GB; PS1, New York, NY, US; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, FR; Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Köln, DE; Hangar Bicocca, Milano, IT; the Hara Museum of Contemporary Art, Tokyo, JP; 21C Museum, Louisville, Kentucky, US; The Drawing Center, New York, NY, US; Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, AT; Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, CN; MAMBA, Buenos Aires, AR; Haus der Kunst, Munich, DE; Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, Bologna, IT; Kunstmuseum Bonn, Bonn DE,...

Hans Op de Beeck is represented by Marianne Boesky Gallery, Galleria Continua, and Galerie Krinzinger.