

**collectorspace
presents:**

**Napoleone
Collection**

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*Madame
Blavatsky*

by

Goshka Macuga

Foreword

Haro Cumbusyan

As this is the introductory text in the first publication of Collectorspace on its inaugural exhibition, it would be apt to start off thanking everybody who contributed with intellectual, moral, material, and/or financial support to get this initiative off the ground. Collectorspace is the type of venture that requires a leap of faith. It needs risk-takers who believe in its relevance and viability. And arguably, the biggest risk in the whole scheme must be borne by the collector who agrees to go first. By no coincidence, that collector turns out to be Valeria Napoleone.

Valeria is the editor of an upcoming cookbook with recipes contributed by over 50 artists in her collection—an indication that she seeks out challenging, out-of-the-ordinary initiatives. She is also a patron of Chisenhale Gallery, South London Gallery, and Studio Voltaire—all edgy, experimental institutions that tremendously enrich the cultural life in London where she is based. Plus, Valeria collects works by living women artists. She is a collector who clearly possesses the level of risk-tolerance necessary for this kind of project.

Valeria's deliberate and disciplined approach to collecting renders itself well to critical analysis and discussion. In addition, together with her husband, Gregorio, she has deeply engaged with the art world, going beyond the simple accumulation of artworks. This active

support of artists, art initiatives, and art institutions makes her an especially attractive collector to present at Collectorspace, in particular, given its mission of creating reference points for the next generations of art patrons. I am thrilled and grateful that she has generously accepted our invitation to go first.

Another big risk-taker in this project is undoubtedly the artist who is asked not to hesitate to let her work be exhibited in a brand new institution that is yet to build its exhibition history and archive. In today's art world where many artists seek the comfort and approval of big brands, this requires a high level of self-confidence and intellectual sincerity. Being able to show Goshka Macuga's *Madame Blavatsky* (2007) as part of the presentation of the Napoleone Collection was critical as this single piece told so much about its collector and the collection as a whole. Without Goshka's willingness to experiment with a new context for her work and to place it in unfamiliar territory, this initiative couldn't have started.

Our main mission at Collectorspace is to bring significant artworks in private collections to public view. We are pleased to have the opportunity to start our exhibition program with an artwork that has the power to engage a broad and diverse audience. Another objective of Collectorspace is to profile reference-worthy collectors, and understand why, what, and how they collect. The video interview with Valeria is the first in a series that we hope to develop into a useful archive to serve that purpose, but maybe

our most ambitious goal is to open up private collections to critical review, and to establish a platform for creating an objective feedback loop. This publication series is an attempt at fulfilling that goal.

Along with the collection review commissioned to Ben Street, an independent writer, this edition includes a text by Özge Ersoy on the artwork that is exhibited, an essay by Lara Fresko on the significance of this specific artwork's public presence in Istanbul, as well as the transcript of the in-depth interview with the collector. We are indebted to all the writers who contributed with critically engaging and perceptive texts and made this publication possible. Thank you.

Madame Blavatsky

Özge Ersoy

Two wrinkled hands hold a medallion with a set of symbols: a whirling cross, the Sanskrit word *Om*, the Egyptian cross, and a serpent swallowing its own tail. The look then shifts to the aged face of the elderly woman garbed in black velvet. With the eyelids closed, her face—made of carved wood—has a discomfortingly calm expression. She is perhaps resting or meditating. Or she might simply be dead. The eye roams on to her garment sweeping the floor, and then to her worn-out, small, black suede shoes. She lies horizontally in the air, with her head and feet resting on two chairs. Her pose defies gravitation. At first glance, Goshka Macuga's *Madame Blavatsky* (2007) evokes uncertainty and restlessness. And it is these very qualities that the artist seeks to explore through her work.

At Collectorspace, *Madame Blavatsky* is seen from the outside through the transparent glass wall of the gallery—slightly above the sidewalk. While the passerby experiences the piece as if it is on a stage, the viewer entering the gallery is invited to walk around *Madame Blavatsky* and thereby moves beyond the staged versus the spectator divide. Here, Macuga places a sought-after question at the heart of her installation: how does the act of

display create, change, or fixate the value of the object that is exhibited?

For her sculptural work, Macuga takes the 19th-century Russian scholar, writer and spiritualist Helena Petrovna Blavatsky as her subject matter. Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy—an esoteric movement based on spirituality and occult practices—is depicted levitating, similar to her live performances in front of audiences of her time. *Madame Blavatsky* introduces somnambulism and its transcendental qualities—a situation between life and death, waking and sleep, consciousness and unconsciousness. The artist thus brings forth the very tension between the material and the spiritual, and therefore poses the question of what can be known and what creates and reflects meaning.

The viewer can also think about Blavatsky through her presumed influence in the avant-garde movements in the arts. Expressions on levels of human consciousness, imagined and theorized by Blavatsky in her lifetime, resonate in pioneer artists around the turn of the century, including Mondrian, Kandinsky, and Malevich. These artists who became part of the Theosophical Society at a point in their lives, are believed to have sought for the spiritual aspects of color, line, and abstraction. Macuga, however, does not seem to emphasize a causal relationship between Blavatsky and artistic production per se. She rather suggests the prominence of passed-on knowledge. Similarly, Macuga's *Madame Blavatsky* does not cultivate a historical distance or

recuperate a historical figure; the artist rather makes homage to constant negotiation in value creation in ideologies as much as in the arts.

By looking at the sculpture, the viewer can easily assume a historical value for the figure of Blavatsky. However, Blavatsky is also known as a preposterous fraud by many, because of her claims of performing supernatural powers. Through her work, Macuga plays with this bifurcation: fluidity and uncertainty are not only about the subject matter but also the displayed imagery and its reception. The artist thus also questions the act of display as a propaganda tool.

Madame Blavatsky seems to mimic formal museum and display concerns—namely preserving and exhibiting selected objects worthy of being made public—and yet Macuga problematizes this very convention. Through the ideas of somnambulism and the multiple influences of Theosophy known in philosophy and art, *Madame Blavatsky* opens a discursive field about passed-on knowledge and subjectivity in history. The work ultimately explores the curious, constant negotiation between the presenter/appropriator, the displayed/appropriated, and the viewer—who gets to determine meaning and value?

Meditating in Public: A Window into Private Collections

Lara Fresko

*In Becoming Istanbul: An Encyclopedia*¹, Gökhan Özgün writes about the living room in terms of a center for the middle class in Turkey. He differentiates between the smaller, more modest living room where the family sits together and a larger one where they host guests among their most valuable possessions. He adds that while the smaller one where the family spends most of their time is sheltered from “the world,” the larger one where the family is united with the world is carefully sheltered from “life.” Özgün, in his concise text, identifies a bifurcation of value, physically manifest in quotidian practices. The main axis on which this schism takes place is either solid walls or invisible barriers that separate the private realm from the public. An important part of what lies on the other side of the wall—both in respect to the private side and the public side—is the objects with which we live. Be it

our most valuable possessions or the generic dog trinket on top of the TV set, objects are judged by different sets of values in different contexts. It is perhaps Orhan Pamuk’s greatest feat to have placed such things at the heart of this very schism in many of his novels, most recently in *The Museum of Innocence*, in which he went as far as to place these objects that weave the story into an actual museum—a museum built into the home where a big chunk of the story takes place. This spatial choice is quite significant.

The room in which Collectorspace operates is a bare 20m² that was formerly connected to the living area of the apartment next door. What used to be a private space is now made visible to the outside, situated in the cultural and political center of the city. Collectorspace shows selections from private collections from around the world along with video-interviews with the collectors, thus opening up the collectors’ living rooms and private practices to the public world. In this sense, Collectorspace makes visible the walls that separate the two living rooms, as defined by Özgün. By doing so, the question of whether art and art collecting belong to the private or the public (or perhaps to a place in between) is expanded from the realm of capital investment to the realm of critical perception and possibly, beyond.

Collectorspace inaugurated its program on September 12, 2011, only a few days before the opening of the 12th Istanbul Biennial. As an institution whose primary goal is to

1. Pelin Derviş, Bülent Tanju, Uğur Tanyeli, eds., *Becoming Istanbul: An Encyclopedia* (Istanbul: Garanti Galeri, 2008).

open the doors of many collections to the general public, Collectorspace's time choice reflected their interest in professional and non-professional publics alike. Looking at the inaugural show in which Goshka Macuga's *Madame Blavatsky* from the Napoleone Collection was displayed alongside a video interview with Valeria Napoleone, this essay intends to elaborate on the new institution's choice of place, program, audience, and niche among Istanbul's burgeoning art community.

In order to contextualize Collectorspace in space and time, it is crucial to first articulate the recent history of contemporary art in Istanbul. For the past decade or so Istanbul has experienced an increasing interest in contemporary art. Commercial galleries, privately funded public art institutions, support structures for artists such as residencies and research programs, have come into existence, grown and multiplied at rapid speed. The local market grew, international interest in Turkish contemporary art followed (or the other way around), and events such as the Biennial placed Istanbul on the international contemporary art map. This increased prominence is usually looked at from the perspective of material growth: exploding number of art galleries, record prices for works by Turkish artists at auctions, acquisitions by major international institutions, etc. However, this growth is fueled and sustained, in large part, also by a wide variety of activities by private collectors; collectors'

support is not only financial but also, at times, emotional. Individual support for artists and small projects as well as the collectors' community involvement carry the potential to make a significant impact, but are often unrecognized. After all, these activities are not necessarily what come to mind first when one thinks about the title "collector." In simple terms, an art collector is someone who acquires artworks with the purpose of building a collection. At this point, it becomes important to contemplate on this label, and perhaps think through the idea of an art patron. This would especially be a pertinent issue to raise in a community like Istanbul where collecting contemporary art is gaining momentum.

In its broadly delineated mission, Collectorspace hints at an intention to think about the distinctions between art collecting and art patronage, however it does not confine itself to this particular role. It has rather placed itself, both physically and mentally, as a platform in which the private and the public stage an encounter. An encounter, however, always produces feelings, questions, and tensions. Even the choice of space, in terms of size, location, and history, has already given us a lot to think about. How can you fit a collection here? Are (private) collections supposed to be on display as a whole? What are the implications of the space's previous function as a living room? What does it mean that it no longer carries that function? At Collectorspace, every new show of

an artwork from a different collection should bring up many more, detailed, challenging, intricate questions. These might even, at times, lead to uncomfortable questions to be raised, discussed and maybe even answered. Trying to bring private collections into the realm of criticism will also bring up the question of how far the critic can go in asking questions. How public can a private collection be? How far would collectors be willing to open their homes, living rooms, private collecting practices to the public and to critics? Would it be crass to question the issue of money, the collectors' business dealings and engagement in other networks? How is it possible to judge a collection that reflects someone's private taste? How are we to make sense of these private sensibilities in a wider context? And why is it important to do so?

To give a global example, at a time when funding the arts is being debated around the world, questions of the "cleanliness" of money seems to be at stake. The British public has raised this question in terms of BP's funding of Tate, which is a public institution. But when it comes to private collections, how far can the criticism in this respect really go? Locally, recent debates on censorship,² for example, have made it clear that even the concept of censorship now needs to be re-articulated and re-defined in

2. In a debacle between the Istanbul Modern and the artist Bubi concerning the rejection of his donation for the fundraising event that IM hosted for its educational programs, one of the claims to justify the actions of the institution was that the event was a private gathering with commercial intent and therefore could not be tagged as censorship.

order to make sense in an era and geography where private support has far surpassed state support. How far, though, are we willing to take the freedom of speech clause when there's private taste and influence of support involved? Is it the private ownership, or the public viewership that defines the principles of an institution? Further still, can we expect certain principles from non-institutional collections when they are opened to the public and the critical realm? Asking these questions is important even if to only find that we do not feel like answering them. This is a rather ambitious, yet crucially necessary role to take on in Istanbul. In this respect, Collectorspace will hopefully also be a platform where criticism will finally have to deal with these ethical issues of the ever-thinner line between the private and the public interpretations of art history. Then again, it will always be a question whether Collectorspace can sustain its claim to independence in the face of their such close and personal collaborations.

With all these questions already in mind, the inaugural show begins to contribute to an initiative of archiving as well as critiquing the content and practice of contemporary art collection. The first work that was displayed behind the transparent walls of Collectorspace was Goshka Macuga's life-size sculpture/installation of Madame Blavatsky—a nineteenth century figure who is known most importantly for her role in the founding of theosophy.

In an interview I had conducted with Haro Cumbusyan, he said that his initial sight of *Madame Blavatsky* in Valeria Napoleone's hallway left a deep impression on him. That she had chosen to live with this work of art in her immediate living space said a lot about her. The public's reception of *Madame Blavatsky* was varied during the time it lay in a storefront in Taksim Square. A woman in black garments, in trance and balanced horizontally between two chairs—which are not necessarily comfortable nor appropriate for the task—drew shock, sympathy, curiosity, and attention of all sorts. Once, the dolmuş drivers standing in front on the sidewalk, waiting for their vehicles to fill up pulled a prank on one of their colleagues, leading him to believe that *Madame Blavatsky* was, in fact, the woman who used to live at the space and had recently died, and the family was displaying her corpse for several days in accordance with their tradition. On another day, someone walked into Collectorspace, having recognized the suspended body, to talk about Madame Blavatsky's practice of theosophy in great detail, oblivious to the work's artistic nature. These reactions and the reflections that they prompt in people were complemented by the video-interview with the work's collector Valeria Napoleone. The video-interview is a powerful component that Collectorspace adds to the viewing experience in that the interview molds the personal reactions into an art work and into a contemplation on collecting.

The question then becomes concerned with how the collector relates to this work in particular, as well as to other works and collecting in general. And thinking about how someone else, the collector in particular, relates to a work is perhaps the perfect point in which it is introduced into the critical realm. It is then, not only the work itself that is open to critical viewing, but the value relation it has with the collector. That Collectorspace displays these works through the viewpoint of the collector rather than the curator, the art professional, or the public offers fertile ground to meditate on some of the mentioned questions and elaborate on different stakes. That this display is open to all, suggests that we are in for a wide-range of discussion.

It would be valuable at this point to take a look at some main threads that come out of the conversation between the two collectors, Cumbusyan and Napoleone. The first thing to keep in mind in this exchange is that it takes place between two collectors, making the questions about collecting as revealing as the answers. The first question is the very obvious why—“why do you collect?” The answer opens up one of the vital strands of the discussion. Napoleone's answer that, she sees collecting “not as a desire to accumulate objects and to live with them, but as a desire to grow as an individual” exhibits a counter-intuitive approach. Considering that we began this essay by laying the context in which Collectorspace was established, material growth in the area of contemporary art seemed

of great importance. This very first part of the conversation, however, automatically shifts the way in which we are able to look at the idea of growth, giving way to a perspective that allows contemplation of the immaterial, intellectual, and emotional growth.

While most collectors limit their collections by media or thematic constraints, Napoleone doesn't feel that her collection is limited by the fact that it focuses on works by women artists. Her "pretty naïve and simplistic" decision—in her own words—to only buy work by women offers a unique engagement with contemporary culture. A focus on women artists, but not necessarily issues of feminism or femininity is also an interesting angle. As such, the Napoleone Collection is an example, among many others, of a perspective towards contemporary culture. Considering recent curatorial efforts concerned with women artists, the collection and its criteria also motivates comparative perceptions. Asking questions about the criteria of a public collection may be the first thing Istanbul has been missing, simply because there are no public contemporary art collections. The collections that we see and think about as public are, in fact, private collections that are open to the public. This is a very important nuance, which is reflective of the particular way Istanbul engages with contemporary art. Which brings us promptly back to the initial question concerning the space between the private and the public, occupied by Collectorspace.

Gökhan Özgün ends his article by saying that he had written it in the private living room, the public one would not allow such indiscretion. Perhaps the question remains—as many of the questions raised above come with their possibilities as well as obstacles—where does public begin, and how comfortably can we talk about the private there?

Napoleone Collection

Ben Street

First, surfaces. The rusted corners of used metal objects. Encrustations of modelling clay. The mottled skin of concrete. The objects placed here construct a taxonomy of surfaces—each retains a provenance of bumps and bruises. Consider, for instance, this: a column of rust-battered electric fans, separated by long screws that hold them apart at their own width. Stretching floor to ceiling, the column hints both at structural integrity and its absence: it's a column of air, a pillar of salt. Switched on, one fan in the stack will rouse to slow life, setting off its nearest neighbour, which revolves in concert, like a conversation between elderly men. This collection of fans (a piece entitled *Endless Column*, by Nina Cannell, from 2006) is both an art-historical in-joke (Brancusi meets Judd meets Oldenburg) and the epitome of the act of collecting: objects displaced from their original settings (windows in apartment blocks, the walls of artists' studios, the white gallery wall), made to whir and hum in sympathy when placed together—the turning is a kind of thinking.

Unlike the standard curatorial impulse in museum display—where works of art are divorced from the daily practices of looking, making, and thinking, which initially brought the

works into being—art placed within a domestic sphere can relax, exhale, and stretch its legs. Valeria Napoleone's collection (of which Cannell's work is one of over two-hundred pieces) is woven into its setting in such a way that the works of art within this setting mimic the conditions of their manufacture. The perpetual present tense of the white cube display strategy gives way to a gradual unspooling of an object's meanings. Napoleone's collection bares the scars of its production: its art history is a lived one. Look: the chandelier above your head is architecturally and contextually apposite (we're in Kensington, in a red brick Arts and Crafts building), but a closer investigation reveals telling chinks and scuffs. Its terracotta parts, like the broken bits of ancient figurines in a disheartening museum display, are revealed, in places, beneath the painted surface. Like the column of found fans, the chandelier—*Sunshine* by Pae White, from 2006—is a performance of its context: an architectural intervention that mirrors, in its elegant arrangement of unruly components, the collection of which it constitutes a part.

Collecting in its broadest sense implies its own obsolescence. The final piece of the collection will be, some day, acquired (that stamp, that butterfly); the collection will only manifest itself as such at its end. In this sense, a collection both justifies and effaces the act of collecting. However, where a collection is energized by ongoing acquisition, and the relationship of parts is perennially

open to adjustment, our definition of a collection must, concurrently, shift. Valeria Napoleone's acquisitions policy—all the works in her collection are by living female artists—was born of experiential empathy and continues as a desire to support and sustain the visibility of contemporary art by women. Yet, this apparent limitation speaks instead to a thoroughgoing patron-like engagement with artistic practice. The Napoleone Collection would be better understood as a series of relationships set in train by a totemic object passed between lives, like a MacGuffin in a Hitchcock film. Valeria Napoleone's own involvement with the object and the artist is an active one, maintained by a rotating curatorial policy, active loans program, and ongoing support of nonprofit art organizations. Through this process, the lives of art objects are extended through acts of continual jolting—they're surprised into life.

The nature of works of art within a collection is that they accrue meaning through their engagement with existing correspondences. This means treating the collection as an entity in and of itself, albeit one with nebulous, limpid borders. Across the span of a doorway, a Linda Yuskavage painting (*The Blonde*, 1998) and a Francis Upritchard sculpture (*The Gentleman*, 2008) engage in a tentative *folie à deux*. The confluence of the titles alone, with its echo of Marilyn Monroe, generates a kind of flirtatious energy: the collection is the mutual friend, setting them up. Yuskavage's painting depicts one of her

characteristic nude pin-up girls, sitting in the honeyed light of a half-lit room. In a pose of performative absorption, she sits with her hands at her crotch, her legs spread in awareness of being viewed. In sardonic allusion to the history of knowingly watched nudes in Western visual culture—from Titian to Manet to modern pornography—the painting acts as a peephole, the provision of visual information aligned with the anticipated interests of the watcher. Within Napoleone's collection, though, the painting sets off internal relationships that allow other works to acquire unanticipated inference. Upritchard's *Gentleman*—a small moss-green homunculus on a curved wooden shelf half-way up the wall—looks directly over, one hand palm-up in gesture of supplication, the other shielding the tip of his erect penis. With the Yuskavage placed within a recessed, proscenium-like niche, the room becomes a theatre in which the complex act of looking is dramatized. Slowed and absorptive looking—made possible by the domestic placement of the works themselves—becomes a dramatic subtext: the gradual revolutions of the stacked fans, the held-breath intimacy of the girl alone, the tentative peeking of the little green man, not sure if he's being watched.

Upritchard's *Gentleman* (whose wilfully roughened surface recalls a puppet in an early stop-motion animated film) might have wandered jerkily free from Nicole Eisenman's painting *Brooklyn Biergarten II* (2008), a 21st century take on Renoir's scenes of Parisian Epicureanism. As with



Goshka Macuga, *Madame Blavatsky*, 2007. Collectorspace presents the *Napoleone Collection* featuring *Madame Blavatsky*, 14 September—12 November 2011, Collectorspace, Istanbul.

a number of works in Napoleone's collection—from Rebecca Morris's webbed abstractions to Andrea Buettner's Kandinsky-esque glass paintings—modernism returns as a strange dream, not quite shaken out of the head. Eisenman's figures, stacked up in dense recession, seem culled from modernist figuration: heads out of Munch, Dix, Grosz, and Ensor slurp beer, bum lights, waltz, or sit in sad-sack isolation in the midst of the throng. As with Yuskavage's blonde, Eisenman's painting seems both an acceptance of the worn out tropes of figurative painting and a reassertion of those values: a shrugging affirmation, or a cautious cheer. The tics of painting's past seem re-energized in Eisenman's work: the beer mugs, picked out in hard white against the rich cobalts and umbers of the drinking characters, hover on the painting's surface like the tooled haloes of medieval saints. Color really does seduce the eye. Painting really is the language of pleasure. Intoxication becomes a correlative of looking. The mazy motion of your wandering eye is an impression of a drunkard's homeward stagger.

A collection is a map of experience, each object pegged to the past and reanimated in mixed company. Napoleone's regular reshuffling of her installation mimics an anxious host at a dinner party, rearranging the seating after every course. And just as knees and elbows bump around a table, the works in her collection make contact that is as much physical as conversational. Those scuffed

and roughened surfaces ensure the collection's ties to the world of bodily experience: the incarnate mind, intoxicated by lust, or booze, or a breeze, but above all by the act of looking itself. Consider Dee Ferris's *Twice Shy* (2009), a large and almost monochromatic painting, its surface worked with a flurry of spectral brushstrokes through which, gradually, an object materializes: a disco ball, as though seen through a dense scrim of fog. The physical act of painting works against its ability to describe the world. Instead, the act—the looking, the making, the thinking—slowly foregrounds itself. The body intervenes in the mind's construction of sense. Energized by acts of self-description, the works in the Napoleone Collection stumble into meaning, as if by accident. Surprise!

Conversation with Valeria Napoleone

Collectorspace: Why do you collect?

Valeria Napoleone: I ask myself why I started collecting, specifically because I don't come from a background of contemporary art collectors.

I think about this question very often. It's about me and the person I am. Collecting came to me very naturally—not purely as a desire to accumulate objects and to live with them, but rather as a desire to grow as an individual. I find myself a person who needs constant change, stimulus, and challenge. That is the reason why I collect—dealing with artworks and constantly revising my ideas and looking at myself, and challenging my vision of the world. The reason why I collect is purely to discover what I mean and to know better the person I am.

CS: How would you describe your collection? What are you trying to achieve with it?

VN: My collection is a lifetime achievement for me. It's a project that will take me as long as I breathe! Of course, if I'm lucky enough to be able to continue in that direction. I believe that the most interesting private collections are projects of a lifetime. They span through a generation, so you see the growth of the collection along with artists who grow together with the collector. You see the eye and

the focus changing, and you have a sense of time, which is very important for me as a collector.

CS: Considering a scale from infancy to full maturity, at what stage would you consider your collection?

VN: At this point in time, I still feel like a little girl. My collection is going to continue to grow, so I'm really looking forward to seeing what it will look like in twenty years, thirty years' time. I feel like a child, because I feel I'm constantly learning from artists, from different approaches. I guess I will think of my collection as young even when I'm in my eighties! That's the beauty of collecting.

CS: Why do you limit your collection to works by female artists?

VN: I don't see my collection as limited by the fact that I focus on women. I see it as great opportunity for me to be able to collect from great artists who have an important impact on contemporary culture. I see all these artists as great talents. I focus more on their work than the fact that they are women. Of course, they happen to be women because I feel connected to the reality of a woman. But my collection is not a purely feminist or feminine collection. There is an aspect of feminism or femininity because they are women. But some of the artists—actually, many of the artists—don't talk about feminism in their work. There is a total mix. It's a part of being a woman, an individual, but it's not the only aspect. It would be very limiting for me to only look at this collection and say it's a feminist collection, or it is an

approach—because it is not. It is not how I started.

I began by just looking at the great work that was produced by these fantastic women, and I kept on seeing women artists who are amazingly good and exciting to me at the time. And I continue looking at their work in that way, focusing more on their work than on the fact that they're women.

CS: For me, one of the interesting things about your collection is that you can think about whether this is a collection by women artists or not.

VN: I have people telling me: "It doesn't really look like a work produced by a woman!" And I wonder—what do you expect, pink and embroidery? Some of the works are quite tough—they are quite macho, if you want to call them that. Some are very feminine in the most aesthetic way you can imagine. But this is a really limited comment or aspect—the femininity or feminism in an artwork.

CS: When did you decide to focus on women artists?

VN: The first work I bought when I started collecting is a photograph—a photograph by a woman, of course. It's a small piece that I got in Williamsburg in 1996. It's by Carol Shadford, an artist who is totally unknown nowadays. It's a black-and-white photograph of soap bubbles. From a distance it looks very abstract, and as you approach it, you can see that inside each bubble there is an image of a woman, a face or a whole body.

I was very spontaneous at the time, very impulsive. I loved the image, I loved this connection between abstraction

and the figurative, and I loved the fact that these women were trapped in soap bubbles and were not able to communicate with outside world.

I thought, this is exactly what art gives me—the opportunity to communicate with contemporary culture and to contribute in ways that I can.

Back then, I said to myself in maybe a naïve and simplistic way: "I'm just going to buy work by women." And the first moment when I bought that work, I thought about it right away. Before I started collecting, I did a Master's in Art Gallery Administration at Fashion Institute of Technology, which is a very creative school, and they had two graduate studies programs: one in museum studies and another in art gallery administration. I wanted to get into art gallery administration, because I really felt that it was more dynamic and more engaging to be with artists. I started collecting after two years of going to museums, looking at shows and meeting professionals. In two years of maturing little by little, the decision came unconsciously. But it was not a hasty decision that I made in a second.

CS: Do you make any exceptions to this rule of collecting only women?

VN: Not for my collection. I go and see shows by men, women, and couples. I just want to be exposed to good art. But for my collection, I focus on women, as any other collector can focus on painting, photography, or video. I find this is not limiting at all, because my collection gives me the opportunity to surround myself with artworks that range from video

installations and photography to painting, sculpture, and film. I really have the opportunity to have artists who explore materials. For me, this is very important.

I would see it limiting for myself if I had to say I only focus on painting, because I love the fact that so many materials nowadays are part of the language of contemporary art. It would be really limiting not to be able to explore this in my collection.

CS: Do you use any other objective criteria to filter out potential acquisitions?

VN: The objective criterion is my taste. I find that the most interesting collections are dictated by the taste and the search of the collector.

The reaction to the work is very important, because I learned, throughout the years, that I have a physical reaction—it can be my heart beating faster or a few things that I know that happen to me when I'm in front of an artwork that speaks to me. If I don't have this reaction, I have my doubts. It's so personal.

CS: What are the subjective themes that you look for, if there are any?

VN: There are no subjective themes. I'm attracted to the figurative as much as I am to the abstract. I cannot find a theme. I'm attracted to artworks that come from a source, which is the concept behind them. It's very important for me that an artwork has a balance between the object that is actually created and the concept that it comes from. So when one overlaps with the other, probably I have a little bit of difficulty in connecting. It's very

important that the artist is able to portray to other people what he/she has on his/her mind.

CS: This is probably a difficult question for you to answer, but do you think a visitor walking through your collection would experience something more than simply seeing all the individual pieces?

VN: Yes, I hope so. This is what I always felt. This is what I really want my collection to be—to be a great collection, to be a choir of voices. I'm hoping to build something that is great and unique as a whole and more than the sum of its parts. All the pieces are very important to create this discourse. So every single artist is deeply considered and contributes in a very unique way.

CS: Are there collectors that you view as role models for you?

VN: There is an idea of a collector that I want to become. This is a collector who dedicates herself to a project that spans throughout a lifetime—a collector who is not just focusing on the activity of buying, collecting and accumulating, but is very much involved as a patron and as a giver.

I feel very privileged to be surrounded by these wonderful artists and artworks. I feel it's my duty to give back—not just my duty, it's my pleasure. Honestly, I could not just collect. I could not just buy artworks without looking, without engaging with artists, gallerists, museums, without being able to offer my help in an eclectic array of ways. So it's this type of collector who is just looking at this as a journey throughout life—open to

challenges and open to be exposed.

CS: Approximately what proportion of your collection is on display at any time?

VN: It's difficult to say. I don't even know how many are on display, how many pieces we have installed... But let's say that at the moment I have probably more than two-hundred pieces—I don't know how many exactly, but more than two-hundred. Probably twenty percent, twenty-five percent is on display. It's difficult to tell!

CS: When you acquire a new piece, do you typically feel an urge to display it right away?

VN: Yes! I really feel such an urge. But sometimes I cannot, so they go to the storage. The way it works in my home is a very fluid type of criteria of installing. I started doing this for a pragmatic reason, because we have a family living here, with three children, so I cannot have everybody out for a month and have people installing new pieces. I started changing works very organically and fluidly, making sure that each work stays at least two years in a place. But each work has a different life here, because it's installed in a different moment. We probably change something every month. There's constant change.

When we change one or two pieces in a room, we also add others. Sometimes, we re-hang everything or change things around. It's about the ability to curate the works in the house and to make sense of it. It's quite engaging and a lot of fun. Because everything has been carefully considered. I probably have a sensibility for this, about where I want

to hang what, and which piece is next to which. It's very important that there is a connection and there is a sense of curatorship, a curatorial element throughout the installation.

CS: Do you get advice from outside curators?

VN: No, I don't have an advisor. It would take away the pleasure for me to go on this discovery of young artists, new artists. I understand it, but I will never do it.

When you look for an artist, the moment you find it, the moment you read, you meet the artist, you look at the work, it's such an exciting moment of discovery that I will never take it away from me.

I collect what I like but I have a great group of people around me who are artists, curators, and gallery directors. And there is a system of communication with them. I have them coming in and saying, "Valeria, this artist is fantastic. You should look into it." All these people are my advisors, I would say.

CS: I think it's an important step when any collector starts keeping works in storage rather than displaying all the works they acquire. Approximately what proportion of the works that you have in storage do you think are still waiting to be shown in your home for the first time?

VN: Not that many! I've got a few, but I think probably thirty percent. And really, again, we change them very fluidly, so I want to make sure that I live with a work. It's so important for me to have my every day with the artworks and to give everybody a chance to live—and to give myself

the chance to be—in front of these artworks for at least one or two years. So we do it organically, the way I've been doing it for the past twelve years.

CS: Could you tell us a little bit about how you keep track of images of the works that you collect? Is there a system?

VN: There is a system, which is obsolete, and we're updating it now. It's very difficult to find a filing system that is exciting, makes sense, easy and practical. I think we've found a system so we'll change it soon. It's hard to realize, but the collection grows so fast and quickly, and then you are with this outdated way of keeping track of things! And you realize how much you really need a new one. And it's not easy, again. But it's very important, especially when you loan pieces.

When you have pieces in storage in different places and you loan pieces to museums, you have to have something that keeps track of your works.

CS: I'll ask some questions about the mechanics of acquisitions. Do you set a fixed annual budget for art acquisitions?

VN: Yes. I think this has been my strength throughout the years. At the beginning I thought it was a weakness. I thought, "Oh, why don't I have more money?" And I kept complaining to my husband—I still complain, because, you know, it's never enough! No matter how high you go, it's never enough.

I have a budget and I'm very disciplined with it. This has been extremely helpful for me to set out priorities and to analyze very thoroughly what I wanted in this

collection—not just the type of artist, but also the type of work. Because sometimes you find the artist, but then the type of work you want is not available. A budget gives you a focus. It keeps you directed to what you really want and what your priorities are.

I can wait for some artists, because they are very young. There may be some other artists I think it's a good moment for me to get works by, because otherwise the prices would go higher, and then... And also when I have been following an artist for a while, then I think it's time for her to be a part of my collection, and also when I find their work very engaging at this very moment. So the budget is definitely a plus. When you have loose ends, when you don't have a budget, I think you feel: "Okay, I can get it. No, it's fine." But when you have a strict budget, giving space to one artist or one work would take up space from another. So you just have to make sure that you are a hundred percent committed to it.

CS: Do you aim to acquire a certain number of works from a few different price ranges every year?

VN: Sometimes I follow an artist for years before I make my decision—for me, it's very important to get the right works, because I want this collection to have a certain level of quality. Yet it's difficult to maintain a high quality, especially when the market is very strong and you have a waiting list with a lot of people in it. But a committed collector has a good chance to work on the quality.

I don't get a work just because it's

available, if it's not the first choice for me. I will say, "No, I wait." And if waiting means that I miss the opportunities, it's okay, there are so many great artists. I'm fatalistic with that. Maintaining quality in a collection is not easy. No matter how famous or big of a collector you are, it's very difficult.

I also have a budget for each work. I don't spend more than a certain amount of money on each artist. Because I think after a certain amount, it becomes an issue of money and investment. I don't want to think about the money; I want just to think about the work. For me, if you want to know, usually I don't spend more than €30,000 on an artwork. Because if I go up to fifty, it becomes: "Is it an investment or is it... You know, is she going to be really growing?" Once you only think about investment and money in the arts, you're often up for disappointment.

Most of the time artists struggle—they go up and down, their life goes up and down. You will be disappointed if you just look at the money. If you primarily look at the works and the artists, you will always end up with artworks on your walls and in your collection that you like and enjoy, no matter what the outcome of an artist's career will be.

CS: In terms of sourcing the artworks, what proportion of your new acquisitions typically come directly from the artists versus from dealers, or galleries versus art fairs or auctions?

VN: I would say probably ninety-eight percent from galleries and a small

portion from artists. I don't buy at auctions, and I don't buy from the secondary market. I haven't done it so far—maybe I will do it in the future. I look for the engagement with galleries and especially artists, and I like that.

Art fairs are very useful to me. There are specific art fairs that are an excellent resource for research, to see a lot of good quality in one place, in a short time—but also to do a lot of research on prices, on availability. Sometimes when I arrive at art fairs I realize that I have spent already all of my budget! But it's not that I wait for an art fair to go and buy. No, it's a pretty intense, continuous activity throughout the year.

CS: And do you have a few favorite galleries, or do you work with many?

VN: Yes! I do have favorite galleries. I want to say that I'm a very curious person, I'm very adventurous, so I don't only link myself to one or two galleries. I really explore where the artists come from and the galleries they belong to. I find artists who are in galleries that I've probably never dealt with before, and I welcome that, because it opens a new chapter and new relationships in my life as a collector.

I have three or four people in the art world I admire, I feel very close to, and they support me. I respond to their program particularly. These have been long-term relationships. It can happen that sometimes with galleries I buy just one piece, and then I don't see them any more. But with these three or four gallerists, I have long-term relationships and I keep going back for further discussions. They support me as

a collector. Such support is also very important, because that's how you get the best works and that's how you get insights of a project by the artist you're interested in. It's very time-consuming, as it takes a lot of energy to be in touch with so many people. But I do it with pleasure.

CS: So those three/four people are your most trusted sources for learning about new artists and artworks, or do you also rely on magazines?

VN: I rely on many sources. I rely on myself, being a curious person and going through galleries. I rely on artists, telling me whether there is a good artist we should look into. I rely on magazines. I read reviews. For me magazines are a great resource to see what artists are doing, who is showing where, to see which museum and gallery shows are on, etc. So I rely on a large amount of resources. But these three or four people I mentioned are constantly part of my life as a collector. I always look at their programs, because I want to cultivate and follow the artists who are already in my collection.

CS: In your mind, how much time do you typically spend reading about art versus looking art versus talking about art?

VN: I talk about art a lot! That takes probably seventy percent of my time. I go and look at art and read magazines probably in the same amount of time. I try to go to galleries as much as I can. I have a very busy family life, and I try—you know, when my children are in school—just to dedicate as much as I can to go and see a show. When you see a show in

a gallery space or in a museum, it's a very different thing than looking at artworks in an art fair or from a magazine, or from jpegs that you receive.

CS: With your busy family and social life, how often do you travel internationally to art events like art fairs or biennials?

VN: I travel, but not as much as many people. I select a few art fairs or annual events that I want to go to. I go to the United States and I travel in Europe to specific destinations. By traveling you expose your eye to a different situation and also a different environment—you train your eye.

CS: And which are your favorite art institutions, and how did you get involved with them?

VN: Being in London, we are very spoiled. The institution I've been supporting for the longest time is the South London Gallery. I'm very close to it because it was the first one I supported since I arrived in London twelve years ago. Through South London Gallery, I met Margot Heller, who is fantastic. I connect with the ambience, the group of patrons that are there.

Another institution I'm involved in is Studio Voltaire. It's more of an artist's space. I dedicate a lot of time and energy to it, because I believe in it. I'm also involved with the Chisenhale Gallery and the Camden Arts Centre. I'm also a patron of Nottingham Contemporary in Nottingham. It's a great organization run by Alex Farquharson.

I'm involved with a large number of organizations in different ways, and

give my support in eclectic ways. I host dinners. I've just hosted a dinner for Haegue Yang in occasion of her first solo show in a UK institution. I constantly do events and go out of my way to support institutions and artists. I want to keep the budget tight, because I think it's important to focus as well!

CS: And how do your relationships and experiences with these institutions help your collecting?

VN: My collecting activity is not limited to the activity of buying artworks for my collection. For me, as a collector, it is very important to be a patron, to be contributing as much as I can beyond the artwork itself. So I could never simply focus on the collection without being engaged as a patron and give support to artists along with institutions. That would be very limiting for me. My engagement with institutions and artists gives me the opportunity to be the collector that I want.

CS: And what motivates you to commission artworks?

VN: I don't do commissions very often. I do sometimes—this is a commissioned work [pointing at *Up and down between twins*, 2010, by Haegue Yang]. Sometimes commissions are not really the best work coming out of an artist, because, you know, they're commissions. So I don't want to give directions to an artist what to do, when to do it. But I've done a few commissions. When I commissioned art works to artists, my directions were totally loose. I said, "Listen, I would like to have a sculpture or a piece by you. Why don't you take the opportunity

to experiment in something that you have never done before, or maybe to explore a direction that you really want to do and you haven't got the chance to do it until now?" This is my type of commission, not indicating what I want, the size I want, etc. I believe more in looking into the artist's body of work and picking from that, than to probably dictate. Commissions can be about total freedom, which I think artists should have.

CS: Could you talk about your cookbook project?

VN: I really like being engaged with artists and their production. We work on special projects or I give support for their projects in general. Three years ago, I started thinking about a book, because an artist told me, "Valeria, you cook so well. At all the dinners you have here for art, everything is cooked at home. And you should publish a book." And I said, "Well, maybe." She added, "I would make all the drawings, illustrations, and images." Then I told her: "Listen, I'm going to make a book and ask all the artists in my collection to contribute." It's total freedom, something that relates to cooking, food, flower arrangements, cutlery or anything they feel like. I asked probably sixty artists to be part of this group. The book is going to get published in 2012 and includes more than fifty artists, who created images in a very free way.

On my side I contributed with my family recipes and selected the artists I wanted to work with. It was a very personal contribution from my side and I wanted every artist to do something personal. That's why I didn't

give any directions. And there are going to be other contributors in the book—it is a surprise! And so this is a way for me to do something with the artists, to have a project with all these amazing artists. It took me a long time because, as you can imagine, that there are fifty of them and they're all busy. But we are getting there!

People ask me, "Why don't you publish a book on your collection with images or a catalogue?" It doesn't feel right at the moment. What feels right is to engage in such a project with new contributions from artists. This can be a conceptual way of exposing my collection too.

CS: I think it's a fantastic idea! Hopefully you will still do a catalogue with your collection in retrospect. Let me continue with another question. Do you enjoy visiting other private collections?

VN: Absolutely. I cherish it. It's not for picking ideas or seeing what artists are included. It's rather to see the specific point of view of a private collector and how the collector lives with the works. It's very fascinating to get into a domestic environment where contemporary works are displayed and where people do compromises every day to exhibit art and to live with art. I think those compromises are the most interesting part of a collection. This is what makes a private collection different from a public display of art in an institution.

CS: Do you ever get negative feedback or, let me say, "constructive criticism" on artworks in your collection because of their content or on the way you have

displayed them?

VN: No. I mean, *Madame Blavatsky* [work by Goshka Macuga, 2007] probably got a few comments! And a few other works. Never negative though. I don't think I have works that are aesthetically or visually challenging or offending. But people get offended by strange things. You never know!

You get comments all the time. Most of the time they're really interesting and fun comments about us living with *Madame Blavatsky* or the gentleman there [pointing at *The Gentleman* by Francis Upritchard, 2008]. Most of the time from children as well.

CS: What do you think are the responsibilities of a collector?

VN: It is definitely to give back. My responsibility is to share my art collection with people. This is why I host a lot of dinners here for art. I put people in touch and I want people to be exposed to what I'm exposed to every day. It's about being a patron and giving support to art institutions. Anybody can do it. With a little, you can support a lot and make a big difference. Also, I'm not talking about only patronage with institutions but also with artists. I support special projects by artists. They ask me for my support and it really takes little. You would be amazed how little it takes.

Also, I'm responsible for my artworks to travel and to be loaned to institutions. There are young artists that are at a moment in their career where they will need support and visibility. They need to be seen. In addition, I support artists with my

enthusiasm, with my nurturing, which is very personal. Some people are not naturally inclined to this, but I am. It's the role of a kind of a mother. It's about nurturing and giving emotional support.

So my responsibilities are: loaning works, supporting artists and institutions, and putting people in touch. I like introducing artists to artists, artists to galleries, to curators, and to other collectors. I like that. Not because I want to promote my art, but I think art is about communication. And if you can't see it and it doesn't go out, then there is something missing.

CS: How about the responsibilities of a collector in terms of the caretaker role of the artworks?

VN: When you start collecting, you think, "Okay, yeah, a few pieces here and there. Hang it on the wall and..." Then years pass by and you realize that you have the duty, the responsibility towards all these pieces. And it takes a lot of effort, a lot of energy, and also funds, of course. You have to take care of these pieces. You have to protect them from everything that can go wrong. Obviously in reasonable ways. Artworks also age, and you should respect that an artwork can be forty or fifty years old or more. But, still, as a collector you have a responsibility. As the collection grows beyond the walls of your home, you realize that.

Artist's biography

Goshka Macuga is an artist based in London. Macuga studied at Wojciech Gerson School of Art, Warsaw; Central Saint Martins School of Art, London; and Goldsmiths College, London. She was nominated for the Turner Prize in 2008. Macuga is represented by Kate MacGarry in London; Rüdiger Schöttle in Munich, and Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York.

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Collectorspace is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that aims to activate critical discussions on art collecting, and to create reference points for new generations of art collectors. Through its exhibition program, publications, and off-site events, Collectorspace presents different collecting practices and points of view on collecting.
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