

**collectorspace
presents:**

Aarons Collection

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presents:

*And
Introducing
Ryan
McNamara
Ryan McNamara*

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Introduction

Haro Cumbusyan
and Özge Ersoy

Visiting museum shows and biennials, looking at curators' choices, we understand that contemporary art has moved beyond the object. But how does one collect what is ephemeral and temporal when collecting is associated with accumulating tangible assets often used as store of value? It was this question that got us to look for collectors who had crossed this mental barrier. One of our prolific advisors, Defne Ayas, introduced us to Ryan McNamara's artistic practice and suggested that we talk to Phil and Shelley Aarons who were keen supporters of his work.

"Performance is a moment in time. You have to be there at that moment. If you're there you see it, if you are not you miss it—maybe you'll catch the next one," Shelley told us in our first conversation in New York. We decided to exhibit a performance by Ryan McNamara that is based on his personal archive, titled *And Introducing Ryan McNamara*. This archive consists of old photographs, prints, tickets, t-shirts, sculptures, and props from previous performances, which he saved

since his childhood and which are now entrusted to the Aarons' care. The work is only activated when the audience and the artist are present and engaged with the pieces in the archive. When the work is not performed, it is stored in boxes that reside at the Aarons' apartment in Manhattan.

As an artist who explores different ways of engaging with audiences, Ryan wanted to send out a personal invitation rather than a press release, reflecting the participatory nature of his work:

*Hello,
Recently, collectors Phil and Shelley Aarons asked me to stage my piece And Introducing Ryan McNamara at collectorspace. On January 17th, 18th, and 20th, I will be in the project space, equipped with photos, videos, and memorabilia dating from my birth to April 2010, waiting to familiarize others with my early years. I'll give you a tour, talk about things that matter (or have mattered) to me; hopefully, if all goes as planned, you'll reciprocate.
See you soon,
Ryan*

Ryan joined us in Istanbul and performed his work all day for three consecutive

days. Not having any scripted choreography, he engaged with every visitor who was willing to spend time with him to talk about his past, and more importantly, what he remembered through the objects that were scattered in our exhibition space. In this publication, artist İz Öztat and researcher Mehtap Öztürk Yağcı depart from their respective experiences with Ryan in Istanbul. İz compares the performed narrative she witnessed with the documentation of the archive, i.e. the catalogue of the items on display, which was published in 2010—"the official memory" in her words. In a personal account, Mehtap writes about what she experienced when she met Ryan, and what she remembered when she got back home, interpreting that transient nature of the live performance as well as the idiosyncratic way of opening the archive to the public.

It was the Aarons who helped us to delve into the question of how one collects moments of art and grows with them. Those moments will certainly pass, possibly recur, but rarely without change. In this particular economy of time and attention, "the Aarons Collection embodies art as a creative investment, rather than a financial one," as writer Kate Sutton puts it in

her essay for this publication. This collection is home to many works that prioritize the immaterial, ephemeral, and decaying over the tangible and the permanent. This commitment to support artistic production without worrying about material ownership is also visible in the Aarons' active involvement with various arts organizations in New York, including MoMA PS1, New Museum, Printed Matter, Inc., the High Line, and Creative Time, among others.

We are deeply indebted to the contributors to this publication. Of course, we would like to express our gratitude to Ryan who triggered all of the questions above, and Phil and Shelley for being extremely generous with us. After seeing Ryan's work, it is impossible not to echo Shelley's "Not everything that's excellent should be permanent."

Things that will have to matter

İz Öztat

And Introducing Ryan McNamara transparently tells its own story in the form of letters addressed to the audience each time it is staged. The work comes into existence in 2010 when gallerist Elizabeth Dee asks artist Ryan McNamara to do “something to introduce [him] to the gallery.” In response, the artist announces the performance with a letter addressed to “Dear Friend” and informs of his availability in the gallery for five days, “equipped with photos, videos, and memorabilia, waiting to acquaint [himself] with others.” Printed in 2010, a catalogue historicizes the performance with installation view photographs and explanatory texts of two hundred and one traces from Ryan’s life that become “documents” as they constitute an archive, according to the artist.

181. *Black Eye*, 2009, performance still. When Ryan asks his friend Miriam how she feels, she mentions feeling like having a black eye so that people would be nicer to her. Being familiar with theatrical make-up from his earlier work, Ryan

proposes a performance for her to purchase. For the rest of their lives, Miriam can ask Ryan to give her a black eye. *Black Eye* foreshadows the destiny of *And Introducing Ryan McNamara*, which is placed in the collection of Phil and Shelley Aarons: it acts as an archive of all the material exhibited in 2010 and a performance that the artist will realize when asked, as long as he is alive.

Upon an invitation in 2013, "collectors Phil and Shelley Aarons asked [Ryan] to stage [his] piece *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* at collectorspace." Again, the artist announces the performance with a letter, offering a tour to "talk about things that matter (or have mattered) to [him]." This time, he is more specific in positioning the documents as "dating from [his] birth to April 2010, waiting to familiarize others with [his] early years." The nature and the destiny of the work demand that the artist keep speaking about the "early years." As the gap widens between April 2010 and the iterations of the performance, Ryan is forced to exclude more and more of his recent past and keeps telling stories that he might not even want to voice anymore. Or does he start telling new stories in relation to the same archive?

Number 3 in the catalogue is a photograph of Ryan's grandparents sitting at a diner. Dating from 2004, it reads: "The strange thing is that

I promise this diner had a framed Cindy Sherman on the wall that I had never seen before, I'm not kidding. I have a photo of it somewhere." When I point to a photograph and ask about it, Ryan says, "There are fake things in here. It's an image I had on my desktop and had no use for." As the artist constructs his narrative on the archive, the presented images become suspicious evidence. The oral interpretation starts to challenge the authority of the documents that constitute the archive. As remembering—also an act of imagining—comes into play, do I keep believing the narrator and in the information that he provides, which cannot be proven with the documents? Or, do I begin to relate differently to an archive that lends itself to the performative and the active interpretation of its author as an "ongoing work"?

The experience of Ryan's work is based on the same assumption as all autobiographical accounts—the author/artist, narrator and the hero(ine) of the work are all the same subject. With image 147 from 2008, Ryan introduces a man, "who calls himself Gerry with a G, 38B, which describes the size of the bra he wears. He has no desire to be a woman; he just wants breasts. On special occasions, such as gay pride he changed his name (and bra size) to Gerry with the G, 38D." Ryan scans the walls and decides to speak about a photograph where

he wears a red velvet dress at age five. He introduces his first persona, Ryanna. If the author has multiple personalities and the subjects he introduces are in flux—Gerry moving between G, 38B and G, 38D—who is speaking to me and about whom? Could I make sense of a personal archive if I cannot identify its owner?

The more I talk to Ryan, the more volatile his stories become. Confronted by an unstable subject, I shift my focus and go back to the letter that introduces the work to find the lines where he invites me, or the audience. Ryan writes, “hopefully, if all goes as planned, you’ll reciprocate.” And here, I step into one of the strongest currents in Ryan’s flow. Most of his performance-based works can only be realized when both the artist and the audience are present and engaged. When I meet Ryan as an interpreter of his archive, Ryan is also there to meet me. What kind of stories does his archive trigger in me? How is the work transformed with my participation?

I don’t know if the conversations triggered by the documents feed back into Ryan’s narratives but I remember one work that has occupied my thinking since I listened to it. I can’t recall if it was a work that Ryan would rather not speak about. I look closely at an obscure photograph where Ryan wears a black mask that covers most of his face. He stands behind a shield covered

by the image of a young man—probably Ryan himself—staring directly at the viewer. I try to make sense of it for a while. He finally tells the story invited by the performance still of *Riot Gear* (2004). Ryan identifies with Paul Robeson, a civil rights activist and performer with communist ties, whose 1949 concert at Peekskill was attacked for promoting un-American ideals. For those whose “thoughts are met with resistance on a daily basis,” Ryan designs a riot gear of reassuring soft materials to “hold the internal riot in while protecting it from the external riot its exposure can incite.” For the performance, he strolls through Peekskill wearing this riot gear. Now, each time I walk through Taksim Square and pass by collectorspace, Ryan’s story comes back to haunt me. I try to recognize all the internal riots that I pass by on a daily basis.

Collectors Phil and Shelley Aarons, once the only audience, are now part of the work, as they will always be involved in the work’s story. In a video interview, Phil Aarons says, “We really approach collecting as not just about the objects but very much about the people who are creating those objects. We are very interested in learning about the artists and their process.” In the next shot, Ryan walks into the room and goes through the boxes in which part of his life is wrapped. What brings him there? Is it the performance he is

committed to stage as long as he is alive or is it his willingness to allow the work influence his life?

And Introducing Ryan McNamara surrounds the archive with two kinds of narratives: the written narrative, which accompanies the work in the form of a catalogue, and the performed narrative that is present with the archive each time it is exhibited as long as the artist is alive. Since the artist doesn't want any of the performances in relation to the archive to be documented, the "official memory" of the archive is fixed at the moment when it was first launched with the catalogue. If viewed in 2118, nothing of the performative interpretations will figure into the reading of the archive, as they will be lost with the artist and the people, who participated in the live performances.

In an interview, when asked about his approach to documenting performances, Ryan poses his own question in return: "How much do you want to reveal about that experience, when there's no way you're ever going to have that experience again?"¹ His answer is precisely what he does with *And Introducing Ryan McNamara*—taking the documentation of earlier performances and making a completely new piece out of them. He moves away from the narrative of the actual performance as he reworks the documentation in a new piece. Following Ryan's logic, the archive will still be full of

endless interpretations in 2118, as there will not be any documentation of the performances that can be taken as the essential interpretations of the archive.

Near the end of our time together, Ryan mentions being very much surprised with the destiny of *And Introducing Ryan McNamara*—the piece becoming part of a collection and now bringing him to Istanbul. But by now, I know that he leaves lots of room for coincidences and conjures wonders. And there, I get one last story! While writing *Sussudio*, Phil Collins uses the word “*Sussudio*” as a stand-in until he could come up with a real word. Ryan and artist Mary Kay Zeeb name their ongoing performance collaboration after the song and write, “It’s the thing you put there to save a place for the thing you’re searching for but then it becomes that thing.” Well, maybe this is what happens at times with *And Introducing Ryan McNamara*. Ryan puts together a personal archive as a way to introduce himself and performs the documents to multiply the narratives. And it is precisely these multiple narratives that turn into the work itself—they become that thing.

1 Danny Kopel, “Speaking with Ryan McNamara,” *ArtWrit*, June 2011, <http://www.artwrit.com/article/ohi-ryan-mcnamara>.

Experience

«*And Introducing Ryan McNamara*»

“Thank you guys for coming, it’s very nice,” Ryan said. “It’s such a slow Sunday so you guys are my first tour. You are fresh.” He laughed and added, “a lot of people are going to come after brunch.” After this warm welcome, he began to explain how the performance was going to work: “Basically I am choosing some photos to talk about, but what I find really exciting is when people are curious about something. Just point at something and I’ll tell you the story. You can ask me questions.” And this was how our tour or the performance started as well as my recording/memory of it.

Troubled by our inexperience in taking part in a performance, Ryan broke our bashful silence by pointing at one of the photographs: “Here is the early days. I grew up in Arizona, which is a pretty conservative and boring place. I’m very happy about it actually, because it meant I had to find things on my own. You know, it’s also because I was going crazy.” Since I already knew that *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* was Ryan talking about his past, what I expected was an artist talking about his past like Hollywood stories, considering that most of the artists who are

“popular” nowadays are establishing themselves as “celebrities.” However, what I encountered was an artist who confronted his past with all its simplicities and with sincerity, including the memories that made him blush or laugh in his narrative. It would be easy to describe the work as “talking about his life,” but the more I spent time with Ryan, the more I believed that the performance was rather about remembering with his mind and body and witnessing unfilled gaps of memory.

The space was full of “things” including photographs, concert tickets, masks, prints, and t-shirts that once belonged to Ryan. Being in the middle of all this stuff and hearing Ryan tell memories from his past without stopping, made me think that he was both the author and the hero of a story about himself “becoming an artist.” However, both the nonlinear construction of his past which is not supposed to follow a chronological order and the spontaneous dialogue between Ryan and the audience made me realize that he was curating his past rather than trying to create himself as a persona in the eyes of the audience. He demystified himself as an artist and became a narrator by appearing in front of the audience and putting his life in conversation. *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* was neither a construction of Ryan’s resume that consists of all the success he had as an artist

until that point in time nor a story of a "celebrity." It was simply the experience of a conversation when you are traveling alone and have plenty of time to talk to the stranger sitting near you. The fact that you don't know each other makes you less interested in whether the story that s/he is telling you is fiction or not and you take the sincerity of the story for granted.

Putting aside our initial skepticism towards Ryan's stories and seeing that he is sincere, the experience became more interactive and turned into a back and forth conversation as time passed. Next time I looked at my watch, I realized it had been an hour since I walked into the space. "I feel like we have done all. Thank you guys for coming. This was fabulous," he said while turning to the recently arrived visitors, "Hi, my name is Ryan. How many minutes do you have? A four-minute tour? Good. So basically just to start, I am American..." I left the room, fascinated with his rapid switch to another group of viewers and the continuous repetition of his memories to each visitor, both on a mental and a physical level. When I played the audio recording, I once again realized that Ryan challenged the limits of his body as his voice had gotten hoarse over time as well as his remembering things, filling in new gaps in his memory while he forgot some of the previous ones. My battery was dead

after nearly three hours of recording with Ryan still talking.

Research

And Introducing Ryan McNamara was initially realized in Elizabeth Dee in New York in April 2010 when Ryan took on the request of dealer Elizabeth Dee, which was to introduce himself to the gallery, too literally. He filled the gallery with his personal archive including photos, videos, and different kind of memorabilia from his birth to April 2010 and offered visitors to give customized tours of his life according to their time of availability or their curiosity. After the exhibition, New York collectors Phil and Shelley Aarons acquired the work. The components of the installation were numbered, packed, and boxed according to their order in the exhibition; Ryan's promise to give tours of his life was also included in the work itself. Nearly three years after the exhibition, *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* was shown at collectorspace with the same props and Ryan was there to give tour of his life for three days. But what does it mean to rethink *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* in collectorspace in Istanbul after three years, knowing that it is now a part of a private collection?

Re-performing *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* in collectorspace after its first realization in Elizabeth Dee suggests a different reading of

the performance in terms of the objectives of both spaces as well as their physical qualities. On the one hand, when Elizabeth Dee located in the heart of Chelsea's commercial art scene hosts the performance, even if it is unintentionally, it becomes a "sellable" item. On the other hand, at collectorspace, a not-for-profit space, the emphasis is on the performance itself. While placing the residues that belongs to his past at Elizabeth Dee seems to charge every item with a commercial value, within the framework of the performance itself, they are simply objects without Ryan's presence. Ryan being there all the time helps the audience understand the performance as a whole rather than just thinking that each piece hanging on the wall is an artwork. Looking through the window of collectorspace and seeing Ryan's archive scattered on the walls, the audience first treats each item as an individual artwork. Without the presence of the artist, the archive seems to be either personal belongings of the artist himself or an archival research project conducted by the space about the artist. In terms of the physical qualities of the spaces, when you enter collectorspace, the vertical walls of the space disrupted the tendency to look for a timeline or an order to follow within Ryan's archive compared to his presentation at Elizabeth Dee where he used the

horizontal walls of the gallery, which in effect created a more chronological presentation. However, still the museum-like presentation does not make you feel comfortable as a visitor to walk alone since the artist is as present when you are there and you are not actually in your comfort zone. You have to become a performer as well. Overall, even if Ryan's performance is a challenging piece in the context of a gallery, the performance is still estranged itself from its intimacy within the wide commercial space of the gallery whereas within the intimate space of collectorspace, the performance creates the impression of a visit to the artist's studio in which you are learning more about the artist and thus listening.

And Introducing Ryan McNamara is not a piece to look at but a piece to listen to and talk about—the work is activated only if Ryan and an audience are present. And if Ryan's work is more about the artist rather than the "artwork" itself, then what does it mean to acquire *And Introducing Ryan McNamara*? When the Aarons acquired *And Introducing Ryan McNamara*, they signed a contract saying that Ryan will be giving tours with a few weeks' notice. In that sense Aarons' collection becomes like a storage unit for Ryan's archival materials and a stimulator to make him remember. When Ryan first realized *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* three

years ago in April 2010, he brought together the items he collected until that time. In a way, he set a particular past for himself until April 2010, which he has to encounter and remember every time he realizes the performance. Three years later, doing the "same" performance at collectorspace, Ryan looks at the same items one more time from a different time and place, he performs a different kind of remembering through his clues. *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* becomes a small gesture about Ryan remembering Ryan. Nothing was and is going to be the same except the things scattered on the wall. As the time goes by *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* is going to be different each time with Ryan forgetting, remembering, cutting, and pasting.

Home Diary

"After all who is Ryan McNamara?"

But what do I remember about Ryan now?: "Ryan McNamara is an artist who is interested in performance and was influenced by *Interview* magazine that he ordered because it was the biggest magazine at the store. He visited LA and saw exhibitions and finalized his visit by doing a lot of shopping. He acquires some images from his computer that were saved from the Internet but seemed to be on his

computer for ages. He was gothic once upon a time and took a series of photographs in which he depicted death of Princess Diana, Nicole Brown Simpson, and a 6-year-old beauty queen who was murdered. His mother had a job that was related to drug users and she also took part in several photographs by Ryan." These are few of the things I remember from my tour with Ryan at collectospace though I am not sure if I remember them correctly.

And here are some of the things I later figured out: "His Instagram name is msryanmcnamara though he is not an eager, active user. He participated in Performa 13 and got the prize. He is not working with Elizabeth Dee any more. He is really into dancing and actually did a piece in MoMA PS1 related to that." And suddenly I realized that all the information I gathered through the Internet was related to Ryan McNamara as "the artist." Even this quick Google research made the performance more meaningful in the sense of "knowing" Ryan himself.

Remembering, when I first arrived at the exhibition, I was fascinated by the archive of his life until April 2010 and he told me smiling that it was all about him. Now, writing this after *And Introducing Ryan McNamara*, I realize that it is all about remembering who he is. It is about forgetting, adding, interpreting, and finally remembering him in your customized way. Whether it is

acquiring the pieces of the performance that he gathered as collectors Phil and Shelley Aarons did, or whether it is being part of the performance itself, it is all about collecting pieces of his past in your own way and performing them to remember it the way you want, whenever you want.





In Search of the Miraculous

Kate Sutton

When artist Ryan McNamara was first approached about gallery representation, he faced an existential conundrum: Galleries exist to sell art objects. McNamara, meanwhile, had primarily made a name for himself through his performances, with a series of commissions for everyone ranging from MoMA PS1, to the Art Production Fund, to Louis Vuitton. McNamara had an enviable record, particularly for someone who had developed without the support of a gallery, but how do you sell an experience? Or, more pointedly, how do you buy one? What does it mean to “collect” performance?

Over the last few decades, performance has pushed to the forefront of the ever-more-Instagram-able art world, with institutions like the Tate Modern and the Whitney Museum designing and maintaining separate spaces specifically for the credibility-building, attendance-bolstering programs. Marina Abramović and Tino Sehgal have proven that performance can pack an entire museum with “work” and visitors. And yet, as

performance art begins to permeate pop culture, it is still unclear how something so temporal, so explicitly ephemeral, is expected to behave within a museum, let alone in a private collection. What would those who would buy such a work actually own? How would they take care of it? Could it be re-sold? Does its value grow? What are the legal ramifications of owning something that, in the most ontological sense, might not exist?

In a gentle nod towards this conundrum, the title of McNamara's first project at New York's Elizabeth Dee riffed on television credits. After all, the artist reasoned, when a gallery signs a "performance artist," they are more invested in the artist, than his or her modifier. Accordingly, *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* put the artist on display, via his entire archive—ranging from childhood snapshots, to old t-shirts, and first art-works. Having considered it a conceptual gesture at heart, McNamara responded to news that the work had been sold first with panic ("How am I going to explain this to my mother?!") and then curiosity ("Who would buy my baby pictures?")

Enter Phil and Shelley Fox Aarons. The duo is a rare breed indeed. A real-estate developer and a psychiatrist, respectively, the couple met in high school, where they were bound by a mutual regard for creativity. The son of a photographer,

Phil studied art history, while Shelley dabbled in studio practice. As Phil recalls, they would spend their afternoons gallery-going, making the most of New York's considerable resources. As perusing evolved into purchasing, the pair began to build up one of the city's most impressive collections of contemporary art, with contributions from artists ranging from David Wojnarowicz to Tom Sachs, Guillermo Kuitca to Carol Bove. Perhaps even more impressive, however, are the relationships they have forged with artists along the way.

This is not a cookie-cutter collection, assembled from the pages of auction catalogues or PDFs from art advisories. The Aarons Collection embodies art as a creative investment, rather than a financial one. Investing for them is strictly personal; rather than flipping portfolios of the Next Big Things, they are more interested in identifying artists they believe in, then helping to nurture their talents—whether that means taking on less buyer-friendly works, initiating much-needed commissions, or just sharing some frequent flyer miles. With this kind of attitude, it makes sense why the Aarons would prefer the term “art philanthropists” to “collectors.” It's a significant shift; as Phil explains, “We don't see ourselves really buying pieces so much as stepping in as patrons for these artists.”

In some cases, “patron” is still a modest word for it. They are simultaneous enablers, cheerleaders, and co-conspirators. Take for instance the case of a young self-published magazine illustrator who went by the moniker of “asianpunkboy.” He had garnered a respectable following in the zine world, but was hankering to work on a larger scale. Recognizing a talent when he saw one, Phil commissioned a book from the artist. Over the next few months, Phil would receive a series of dubious updates on how the work was evolving, enlarging, and changing shape altogether. When the “book” finally arrived, it looked more like a fur-lined, mirrored coffin. Inside was a complicated arrangement of variously-shaped boxes, each containing a work. This would mark the start of Terence Koh’s career as a contemporary artist.

In a recent interview, Shelley names one of Phil’s favorite works as Bas Jan Ader’s *In Search of the Miraculous*, 1973. While that particular piece has some dire implications, the title itself offers a readymade summary of the Aarons’ strategy for acquisition (that is, if they can even be said to have one.) Their collection includes over five hundred works by what Linda Yablonsky called “the young and nervy”—artists like Hernan Bas, Simon Fujiwara, Uri Aran, Leigh Ledare, Aleksandra Mir, and Aaron Young, to name a few. As Phil tells

it, these artists all exhibit an “immediacy, clarity, and urgency,” that signaled to the Aarons that they couldn’t pass this work by. “We’re not collectors, we’re shoppers,” Shelley has been quoted as saying. Phil elaborates: “We don’t feel as if we’re building a definitive collection; we’re buying stuff we like.”

As demonstrated by their acquisition of *And Introducing Ryan McNamara*, what the Aarons seem to “like” is art that isn’t interested in behaving like Art. The collection is saturated with a wry sense of humor around contemporary practice and its etiquette. Witness Tom Sachs’s Chanel-branded hand gun, Rirkrit Tiravanija’s reflective ping pong table, or the Klaus Weber fountain, which replaces the standard issue aspirational assembly of waterboys and cherubs with casts of the artists and his friends, all in various states of excretion (sweating, spitting, urinating, etc.). Another draw for the collectors is the so-called “performative aspect,” the idea that many of these works require a kind of activation, either by the artist or the audience. As Shelley explains—in direct contrast to the reigning ethos of consumerist accumulation and market speculation—“Not everything that’s excellent should be permanent.” Take, for instance, another one of Koh’s works in the collection, a chocolate-covered Michael Jackson figurine, intended to decay over time (in effect, a rather cruel

mimicry of the musician's purported skin condition). "Honestly, we're much more interested in the process, than the objects," Shelley admits.

This does not mean the couple does not have a tremendous reverence for archives. ("Real archives, fake archives..." Shelley jokes.)

The son of a librarian, Phil grew up with a true passion for the printed word, considering book-making as just one of the many outlets for an artist's practice—albeit one whose very format with its seriality and unmediated address to its audience—clashes with many of the tenets the commercial art world holds dear, ordained as it is to guide the unique object into the hands of the esteemed collector. Ever an advocate for the "art underdogs," Phil has amassed over 10,000 books, journals, and self-published magazines, applying a systematic approach opposite the "shopping" strategy for the art collection.

Phil's pet passion has given way to several other larger curatorial and archival projects, including the 2009 exhibition and catalogue, *In Numbers: Serial Publications by Artists Since 1955*, which compiled examples of serial art works, starting with Wallace Berman's *Semina*, through postcards by Eleanor Antin and Martha Rosler, to Maurizio Cattelan and Paola Mantin's *Permanent Food*, to fresh contributions by Matt Keegan and the LTTR collective. Another initiative

is *Queer Zines*, a roving historical survey partially drawn from Phil's extensive collection of queer zines, a genre whose rich history is often relegated to the margins or discounted as fetish fodder due to its highly-charged subject matter (in other words, "the young and nervy" of the publishing world).

Selections of Phil's holdings have been put on display within the NY Art Book Fairs of Printed Matter, Inc., a non-profit organization founded in the 1970s by Sol LeWitt and Lucy R. Lippard as a vehicle to support, promote, and distribute artist-made publications. In addition to being one of Printed Matter's most enthusiastic customers, Phil currently serves as President of the Board, but Printed Matter isn't the only institution that the Aarons support. Shelley holds the position of Secretary on the Board of Trustees at the New Museum, while Phil also sits on the boards of Creative Time and MoMA PS1 (where he is Vice-Chairman of the Board of Directors.) Regardless of these allegiances, their involvement extends across institutional borders. For instance, the Aarons have helped New York's Museum of Modern Art to secure a copy of Christian Marclay's *Crossfire*, 2007, (a four-channel installation which locks its audience in the crossfire between images of figures shooting guns at the camera) and provided the resources for the Dia to publish

a Robert Smithson catalogue. In a recent interview with curator Simon Castets, the pair relate how they visited a Henrik Olesen exhibition at Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst in Zurich and requested a catalogue, only to find out that the institution had no plan to create one. Not satisfied with that answer, the Aarons stepped in to help make a publication happen.

If, as they claim, the Aarons are “more supporters, than collectors,” their support comes in all sizes, down to the Tom Sachs bedroom-set where they sleep when in their Miami apartment. “We like art to be part of the fabric of our lives,” Shelley shrugs. Phil adds, “If there’s a line between passion and obsession, we may be teetering on the edge.” If they are on the edge, then they’re keeping good company, as their collection attests.

Conversation with Phil and Shelley Aarons

collectorspace: How did you start collecting?

Phil Aarons: My initial involvement in art came through my father. He was trained as a scientist but was a serious amateur photographer with a body of work that was exhibited in our home town of Boston. My mother, who was a librarian, was also an important influence. I did not have any talent for art but I was an art history major in college with an interest not only in painting and sculpture but also in the history of architecture and city planning.

Shelley Aarons: I did make art when I was younger. I didn't continue with it past high-school but I was always interested in beauty, the unusual, and people who see the world in a different way than that which is not the norm—I always found the norm boring. I think artists help you see things in a different way.

PA: I think we have made art an important part of our relationship and a lot of the things we enjoy doing together. We met in high school and have been together since then, which is now a while ago. Art has been something that's a shared passion. When I was an art history major, we would devote most Friday afternoons to simply wandering around looking at art galleries in New York. At the time, there were significant art galleries on Madison Avenue. SoHo

hadn't been invented yet. We had a routine but had no thought that we would be buying or collecting. We never asked for any of the prices.

SA: We didn't know anyone who bought art. We treated the galleries like museums, as most people do to the dismay of the gallery.

collectorspace: Do you have different interests in art that you pursue?

PA: We do it together and I would say it's still remarkable how frequently we agree. We don't disagree on artists.

SA: Someone might be more interested than the other occasionally but there's a tremendous overlap in what appeals to us, fortunately. It's not a source of conflict.

PA: We approach it as something that's not just about objects but very much about the people who create those objects.

SA: Honestly, we are much more interested in the process than the objects.

collectorspace: You don't really consider yourselves "art collectors," is that right?

PA: We don't. We consider ourselves supporters of artists and the arts. We are both involved institutionally. Shelley is the secretary of the Board of the New Museum. I'm on the board of MoMA PS1, Creative Time, and Printed Matter, Inc.. We spend a remarkable amount of our time on supporting the institutions that are supporting new art in the case of the New Museum or PS1. Creative Time and Printed Matter are interested in art in formats that are democratic, inexpensive, and easily accessible.

SA: We are trying to infiltrate society and place art everywhere, if possible. And we do that in every way we can.

collectorspace: Would you say that you are interested in art that is marginal or off the grid?

PA: I'm not sure I would define the artworks we have as marginal.

SA: But some things had been marginalized and we try to take them out of the margins and perhaps expose people in the mainstream to something they hadn't thought about.

PA: Things that are considered significant by either the market or those who define the art market today are less important to us. We don't feel as though things need to be validated by others. We provide our own validation. I think it's important to reach beyond what is ordinarily seen, what is ordinarily put out for the public to look at and try to find people who are doing things that are interesting but are not easily shown, people who are looking for venues that are not easy to find to display their art in unusual contexts. Those are the things that we gravitate towards in a significant way. And as a consequence we love to support exhibitions, we love to support publications, we love to support artist who are doing things that is not necessarily part of the traditional gallery/museum context.

collectorspace: At collectorspace, we will exhibit Ryan McNamara's work *And Introducing Ryan McNamara* from your collection. This is also not a work that would be part of the traditional gallery/museum context, would you agree?

PA: We are big admirers of Ryan McNamara and we saw most of his performances. The acquisition of performance is a difficult concept for people to wrap their heads around and as much as we would like to buy Ryan and have him live with us forever, that might

feel confining! So we got interested in the idea of preserving his archive. I have always been interested in books and archives.

SA: We have other artists' archives as well as many faux archives.

PA: We have an interest in this genre, and when this idea was suggested, we jumped at it without...

SA: ... even knowing what we were getting.

PA: It sounded great. And the fact that it came in boxes was even better.

collectorspace: How does performance art fit into your interests as a whole?

SA: A lot of the artists that we're drawn to have a performative element in their practice. And I guess it's, you know, theatrical.

PA: It's living, it has more of the immediacy. The art we like is art that we feel as though speaks to us in a direct way that really vibrates like this Eric Orr painting over there that seems to be alive. So if you move from a painting or a work that seems to be alive to a work that actually is alive...

SA: Performance is a moment in time. You have to be there at that moment—maybe you see it, maybe you don't. Maybe you'll catch the next one. It's ephemeral. That appeals to us. We don't think everything should be permanent.

We also collect fragments of performances. There is a Tom Sachs piece over there by the window—it's a fragment of a performance titled *Nutsy's* that was funded by the Bowen Foundation. Part of it was a huge race car track for radio-operated race cars and that artwork was part of tests of asphalt surfaces for the roadway for the radio cars. It's an object in its own right but it is also a fragment of

a performance. In the installation, the artist interacted with the artwork, and I like to do it too. Another work by the same artist is the bedroom set that he designed for our apartment in Miami. We like art to be part of the fabric of our lives, not like an object that's separate. And performance is like that.

collectorspace: Are you interested in sharing the artworks you have in your collection with the public? For instance, do you loan artworks to museums?

SA: We have loaned many works to different institutions in different contexts and we mostly do visit the works wherever they end up.

PA: Last week we went to Brussels to see an exhibition of a photographer we admire, Leigh Ledare. We love the opportunity to see the work of artists in different contexts, to get a better understanding of the breadth of their practice. One of the fun things about loaning works is you get to see them in a different context, repurposed by someone else. When they're in your bedroom, they're in your bedroom and Shelley and I place them in a place that's appealing. But then when they're removed and put into a survey or a group show, someone else is looking at something that you've seen many, many times before, but they're seeing it differently and with a different context for it. And I find that particularly fascinating.

collectorspace: Aside from your involvement in institutions, you also support projects such as the High Line in New York.

PA: The High Line really is a better testament to Shelley's statement that what we like to do is get involved. I was approached by Robert Hammond who turned out to be a college friend of

someone who works with me and he said that he had a crazy idea to save the High Line. From the very beginning, we provided financial support, advice, and a million other things, but it was not really anything we did that made the difference, other than the fact that we supported someone.

SA: You said things at the margins—the High Line had been marginalized. No one saw its utilitarian value and people thought it should be torn down. Our friends, Robert and Joshua, saw that. It wasn't our vision. Again, we helped someone realize an impossible dream and we feel really great about that. And now it's an amazing amenity for New York.

PA: But I think maybe most significantly, once they'd achieved what they wanted to achieve and once we believed we'd done what we really could do, they moved to another stage, I dropped off. I mean, I'm still on the board and he still calls for advice, but we're not interested in running a park. We're not interested in the end result, we're interested in the process. It's about how interesting the process was to get the High Line built, and that's what excites me and both of us and that draws us to the same interests among artists: how do we help young artists create the vision they see in their own minds.

collectorspace: How do you do research and discover art works? Do you have trusted sources for this?

SA: That happens by happenstance. We will pursue things doggedly. But it's not the same as setting out to research it. We're not looking for forgotten people or the next great thing or...

PA: ... for who's next or what's happening next. Nothing like that. It happens

because we're engaged in other things. We read magazines way too frequently. But I wouldn't say I've ever gone on a specific hunt for something. Finding Terence Koh's Zines in *V Magazine* was an unfortunate admission that I was reading *V Magazine*!

collectorspace: Phil, you also have a collection of artist's publications that is separate from the contemporary art collection. Could you tell us about the book aspect of your collecting practice?

PA: I've always been fascinated by books as an alternative vehicle for the display and promotion of an artist's practice. And I draw very broad parameters around that collection concept. I'm interested in books that are made by artists, I'm interested in books about artists, I'm interested in exhibition catalogues of artists' exhibitions, I'm interested in the history of exhibitions themselves. So I have a breadth of interests that results in thousands and thousands of books. To me, they're all part of a broader view that we shouldn't be limiting art to one set of things, that we shouldn't be prioritizing painting, sculpture, video or performance, that we need to accept artistic expression in its absolute broadest concept.

You'll see that when we look at some things in Ryan's archive. There are banners from prior political campaigns for example. If an artist is interested in keeping that as something that was significant either in his life or ultimately for his practice, then I want to save that as part of my appreciation of that artistic practice. As Shelley said, we don't want to narrow or categorize things. We want the broadest possible vision as art being a part of our lives and artists as being part of life generally.

collectorspace: How do you choose artists? And what advice do you have for other people interested in collecting art?

PA: Follow your heart. I think that most collectors we respect would say exactly that. Buy with your eyes, not with your ears.

SA: We also support a lot of curators. It's not just about artists. There are a lot of very interesting young curators whose programs we like to support because we want to help give voice to their voice. For instance, when Jay Sanders was named curator of the Whitney Biennial, as a young person who had been working at a gallery, we helped fund that Whitney Biennial to support Jay and his vision, to see what he would do. And he did a beautiful job. There are many other curators that we consider dear friends and whose programs we support, and our support is not only for objects because they're not creating objects; they're creating exhibitions that we think are putting ideas out in a compelling way that people need to see.

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About the Artist

Ryan McNamara (b. 1979, Phoenix, AZ) lives and works in New York. His most recent project is *MEEM 4 Miami: A Story Ballet About the Internet*. Commissioned by Art Basel, it ran on December 2–4, 2014 at the Grand Theater in Miami Beach. In 2013, he won Performa’s Malcolm McLaren Award for the first iteration of *MEEM: A Story Ballet About the Internet*. In July 2014, his commission for the High Line, *Misty Malarky Ying Yang*, reenvisioned Jimmy Carter’s maligned “Malaise Speech” as a traveling dance spectacular.

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collectorspace is a nonprofit organization that brings private art collections to public view, and promotes critical discussions and writing on contemporary art collecting practices. collectorspace opened its first exhibition space in Istanbul in September 2011.

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