

Investigating John Boskovich's *Boskostudio* as a private and public collection: domestic space as a public gallery.

In the final years of his short life John Boskovich pulled back from the public eye and began to lead a largely private and reserved life. In the years between 1996 and 2006, when he died aged 49, he had turned his home/studio into a large installation- *Boskostudio*. There were multiple rooms with the interlinking theme being that they existed as a vessel for his collection of work. *Boskostudio* was rarely on show to the public, and mainly existed for his eyes only, but in 2019 part of it was re-interpreted and shown to the public at *O-Town House* in Los Angeles as *Psycho Salon* with 'arrangements echoing the original setup'¹. In this change in space and newfound public access, the collections meaning changed too. Originally a domestic space, a space private to Boskovich's eyes, a space where he primarily spent his time- *Boskostudio* wasn't that anymore. In this essay I will delve into the idea of a private collection being reappropriated as a place for public viewing.

Boskovich, born 1956, was a conceptual artist, academic, and filmmaker with a hugely prolific amount of work. Boskovich was heavily affected by the AIDs crisis- which crept into his artwork, and in 1995 his boyfriend Stephen Earabino was killed by the disease, as were many of his friends and peers. A year after Earabino's death, Boskovich moved to 335 N. Orange Drive, in Fairfax, Los Angeles; and began the conception of his *Boskostudio*. Boskovich lived and worked among *Boskostudio* for a decade, and it treads the line between collection and domestic space, between what's on show and what is comfortable. David Rimanelli, a visitor of his house pointed out that there was a 'casual intimacy presupposed there between comfy

¹ Andrew Berardini. (2020). CLOSE-UP: INSIDE OUT ANDREW BERARDINI ON JOHN BOSKOVICH'S BOSKOSTUDIO, 1996-2006. *ARTFORUM*. VOL. 58 (7), 1.

and bizarre, hospitality and estrangement'², and Boskovich himself described the space as 'Victorian Bizarre'³. Even though whilst Boskovich was alive *Boskostudio* wasn't for the public eye, he used writing extensively in his work, in the way an exhibiting artist would perhaps label their work to make it easier for an audience to understand. Rimanelli said 'there is something to read at every turn; even if you refuse to read the texts, the texts glare at you nonetheless', it brings to question just how Boskovich saw the *Boskostudio*. The way he showed off his objects and made them presentable to a strangers eye is reminiscent of collectors who would keep their objects labelled and safe in a polished cabinet in their home. Although most of the contents of *Boskostudio* were his own work beside the practical furniture, he used found-objects and photography as a running theme in his practice; therefore *Boskostudio* could be viewed as a collection of memories and souvenirs.



Figure 1

² David Rimanelli. (1997). The mirror has two faces. *Interior Design*. VOL. 68 (12), 1.

³ David Rimanelli. (1997). The mirror has two faces. *Interior Design*. VOL. 68 (12), 1.

A collection says a lot about who the collector is and their experience, this is most apparent in *Rude Awakening Series*, a collection of polaroid photographs of mundane things in Boskovich's life paired with quotes taken from a self-help booklet that was given to a friend of his dying from AIDs. The book is full of affirmations that Boskovich thought to be inappropriate and distasteful to be given to a dying man. The photos tie in with the physical work in *Boskostudio*, there are visual links between the physical objects in the space and the photographs – for instance, the used bottle of honey in *Rude Awakening Series: Lurking, in Seclusion (After Rehab)*, 1997 also appears in *Self Portrait Sculpture, Honey Bear*, 1993. This collection of photographs when shown in the privacy of Boskovich's own home could be read as souvenirs of his own memory and his life- and this very much changes when shown in *Psycho Salon* as there are no points of reference and context to his private life already instilled in the viewers minds. Michael Haldrup says in *Souvenirs: Magical Objects in Everyday Life*, that it is a generally agreed on concept that souvenirs are 'material mementos, touchstones of memory, that enable narratives of distant times and places to be re-told and re-lived in'⁴. This re-enforces the idea that for something to be a souvenir to a viewer it must strike a personal chord. Boskovich and the people he knew and allowed into his home could look at this collection of work and recognise the past narratives they represent. Haldrup goes on to say that souvenirs 'may acquire new meanings and significances (...) when they move through the times and spaces of the people they live with, carrying with them a "complex and changing social life of their own"'⁵- this is certainly the case with the *Rude Awakening Series*.

⁴ Michael Haldrup. (2017). Souvenirs: Magical objects in everyday life. *Emotion, Space and Society*. VOL. 22, 53.

⁵ Michael Haldrup. (2017). Souvenirs: Magical objects in everyday life. *Emotion, Space and Society*. VOL. 22, 53.



Figure 2

It could be argued that in this case the line between souvenir and collection is blurred, *Psycho salon* is trying to mimic his real home. The objects aren't being moved into a white, airy, sterile gallery- at O-Town house there was an emphasis on keeping the space true to *Boskostudio* and keeping it as domestic a space as possible. Although Berardini said that 'in their transference to galleries, artists' homes can't help but lose a lick of their vitality'⁶, the work hasn't been taken out of context, and likely could still connect to the viewers on an emotional level. While a souvenir says a lot about where a person has been and what exterior they want to exude to people, a collection is more telling of what a person is actually like, it shows their genuine interests. Walter Benjamin explains in *Unpacking My Library* that when showing a collection to someone it may seem 'such a man is speaking to you, and on closer scrutiny he proves to be only speaking about himself'⁷. He explains that what is more telling

⁶ Andrew Berardini. (2020). CLOSE-UP: INSIDE OUT ANDREW BERARDINI ON JOHN BOSKOVICH'S BOSKOSTUDIO, 1996–2006. *ARTFORUM*. VOL. 58 (7), 1.

⁷ Walter Benjamin. (2019). *Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting*. In: Hannah Arendt *Illuminations*. USA: HMH Books. 59.

than the collection itself is ‘the relationship of a book collector to his possessions, into collecting rather than a collection.’ Of course, Boskovich wasn’t a book collector but I think this explains the idea that an important aspect to a collection is the act of collecting and the time taken to curate one. Much of Boskovich’s collection in *Boskotudio* were objects that he had repurposed and given new meaning to by placement and adding literature to it. On top of collecting objects and photographs, he collected words too- often quoting mantras from Alcoholics Anonymous’ twelve step programme, and from the self-help book he had taken from his dying friend; as well as the work of Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath, T.S Lewis, and other writers who had influenced him in his life.



Figure 3

Using O-Town House in Los Angeles as a location to show *Psycho Salon* was an interesting choice, due to the galleries 'domestic architecture'⁸ which amplified the 'home-like qualities'⁹ of the installation. The exhibition was hosted in one of Franklin Harpers' Granada buildings which were designed to be spaces to both work in and inhabit. Something to note about *Psycho Salon* is that in replicating the space that Boskovich lived in, there was a mix of objects that had previously been displayed in exhibitions and objects that had not. Work that had been shown in other exhibitions now had a change of meaning, being shown in a context of his life's work and the space he existed in. Boskovich played a unique role in this as he essentially curated this exhibition before he died but not with the intentions of any of it being seen, blurring the line between a public and private collection. A private collection is much more intimate than a public one, it lacks the polished aspect that something intended for strangers to see might have. Nilo Goldfarb explains that 'Boskovich never attempted to dress up a gallery as a domestic space, and his early work deliberately addressed the separation between the artwork on display in a gallery and the artist's private life.'¹⁰ Showing *Psycho Salon* to the public may have had some ethical problems- Boskovich couldn't have consented to show the public this aspect of his life, and he was a very private person during his life. He viewed the 'entire project as a happening confined to his private life'¹¹ and it 'allowed Boskovich to embrace solipsistic self enclosure by making himself the works' primary audience.'¹² It seems that the idea that the collection was only to be seen by him allowed him to feel comfortable in exploring the themes he did. Benjamin said 'every passion borders on

⁸ Nilo Goldfarb. (2020). The Irredeemable Individual. *X-TRA*. 23 (1), 1.

⁹ Nilo Goldfarb. (2020). The Irredeemable Individual. *X-TRA*. 23 (1), 1.

¹⁰ Nilo Goldfarb. (2020). The Irredeemable Individual. *X-TRA*. 23 (1), 1.

¹¹ Nilo Goldfarb. (2020). The Irredeemable Individual. *X-TRA*. 23 (1), 1.

¹² Nilo Goldfarb. (2020). The Irredeemable Individual. *X-TRA*. 23 (1), 1.

chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories'¹³. Everything shown in the collection is so incredibly specific to Boskovich, the literature, the souvenirs acquired, the art he made. Looking around at the space is probably the closest you could ever get to entering his mind. What may seem chaotic to us probably made perfect sense to Boskovich.



Figure 4

As said previously in this essay, Boskovich used writing in his work profusely, and had accumulated quite the collection of words. It's almost as if he had taken things he had seen and heard in his lifetime- whether that be from the literature he had read, or phrases he had passed by- and applied it into his work. It was used to compliment found and modified objects- for instance his *Hare Krishna Lamps, 1997* where he had repurposed 3 Krishna ornamental pieces and attached them to lamps, then on the bases placed different quotes from T.S Elliot texts. However, he also used writing as the main part of his work- for instance

¹³ Walter Benjamin. (2019). Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting. In: Hannah Arendt *Illuminations*. USA: HMH Books. 60.

in *Clean & Sober/Sober N' Crazy*, 1997- an example of some of his work where he seemingly directly addresses the person viewing the work humorously.

While a lot of the work shown has a level of humour to it, in stark contrast some of his more personal work is utterly heart breaking. *Feel It Motherfuckers. Only Unclaimed Item from the Stephen Earabino Estate*, 1997, is an electric fan inside a Plexiglass box. It was the only thing left of his lovers belongings after he died. Everything had been disposed of either by Earabino's family or the government, as is what happened to most who died of AIDs in the United States in that time period. Many of Boskovich's possessions had also been thrown out with Earabino's things. In the plexiglass there are holes cut out as if to imply that the electric fan could still be used. In a sense it creates this idea of continual life, of Earabino still breathing. This was Boskovich's only souvenir of his relationship with Earabino. The fan, being worth nothing originally, has been given new meaning. Boskovich also created this piece with the intent of showing it to the public, so he was willing to show it as something not just private to him. He put it in his collection to carry on the memory of Earabino, but without seeing the writing describing what the fan is and what it meant to Boskovich a passer by might think nothing of it. This again shows how essential writing is to Boskovich's work. This piece is a great example of the contrast between a public and private collection- Boskovich inherently knew what this fan meant to him, but in showing it to the public it becomes open to public critique and misunderstanding. Benjamin said 'for a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object'¹⁴, when looking at the fan, it would've reminded Boskovich of the apartment it used to inhabit, and the memories associated with that and Earabino. Boskovich then got to create the

¹⁴ Walter Benjamin. (2019). *Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting*. In: Hannah Arendt *Illuminations*. USA: HMH Books. 60.

future for it and allow it to have some significance in his life to come and to others who came to view it.

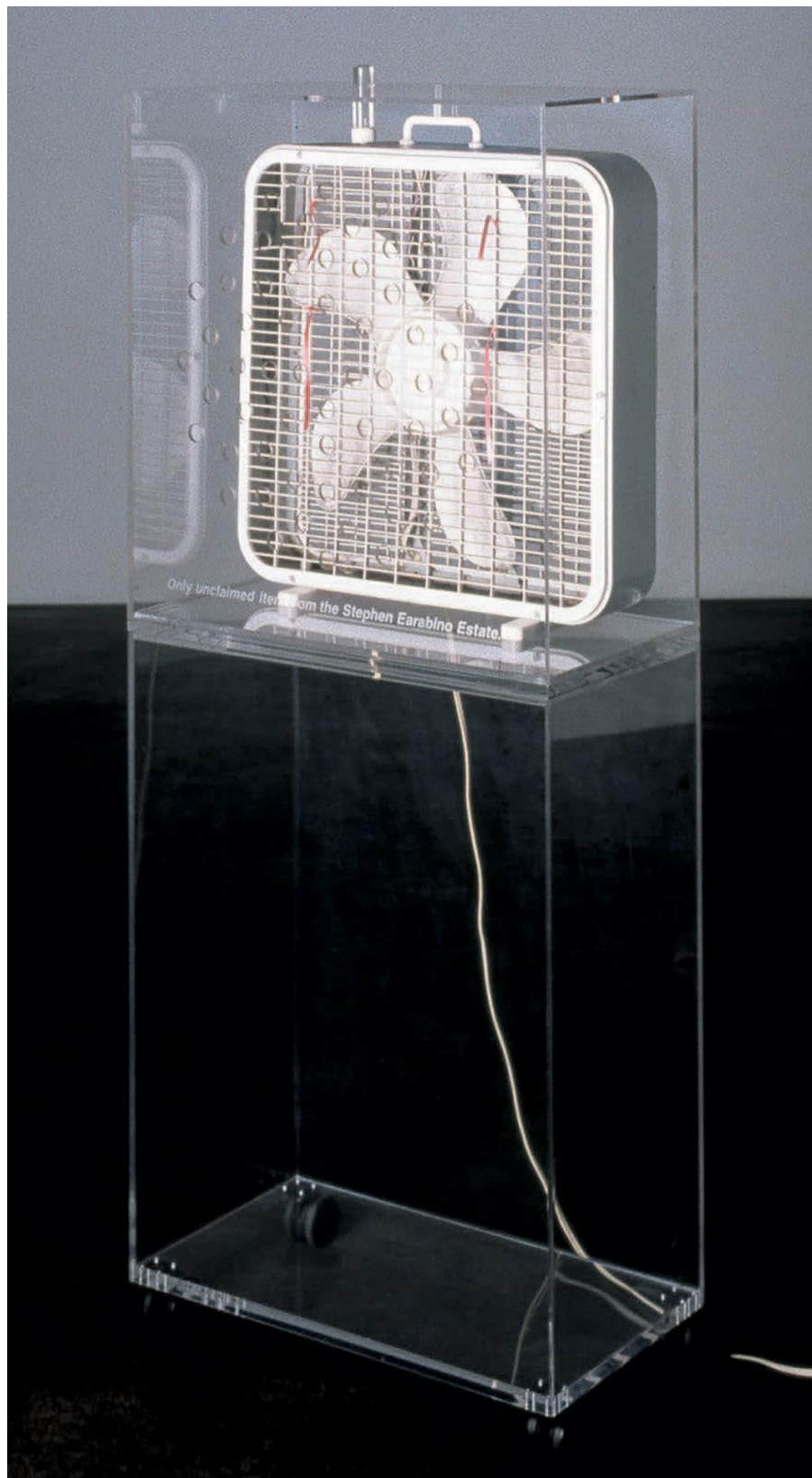


Figure 5

In conclusion, the reappropriation of *Boskostudio* as *Psycho Salon* at O-Town House changed the meaning of the private collection to an extent, putting the collection into a new context outside of Boskovich's domestic space. However, due to the efforts to mimic the space and create a sense of homeliness, even going as far as choosing a space with domestic architecture; as well as Boskovich's work being reliant on writing to provide context to strangers, new life is breathed into Boskovich's private collection and it transitions into a public collection without difficulty.

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Image References:

Figure 1: John Boskovich, *Rude Awakening Series: Lurking, in Seclusion (After Rehab)*, 1997

Figure 2: *Prince Chambers*, originally published in David Rimanelli's *The Mirror Has Two Faces*, *Interior Design* (Vol. 68, Issue 12), Oct. 1997

Figure 3: *Psycho Salon at O-Town House*, taken from *Contemporary Art Daily*

Figure 4: *Clean & Sober/Sober N' Crazy*, 1997

Figure 5: *Feel It Motherfuckers. Only Unclaimed Item from the Stephen Earabino Estate*, 1997

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