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HERMAN DALED (1930–2020)

Benjamin H. D. Buchloh on Herman Daled: Collector of Utopias (Works on Paper)



Joachim Olender, *La collection qui n'existait pas* (The Collection That Doesn't Exist), 2014, HD video, color, sound, 93 minutes.
Herman Daled.

TO CHALLENGE THE CONVENTIONS and criteria of the collectible object (painterly pretenses, skills, singularity, rarity, commodity status, and exchange value, among others) was one of Conceptualism's most radical aims, enacted by linguistic, discursive, institutional, and political critiques formulated between 1968 and 1978. To financially support and collect those practices was one of the sublimely paradoxical achievements of Herman Daled and his wife, Nicole Daled-Verstraeten. Only Gertrude and Leo Stein and Walter and Louise Arensberg could be considered as predecessors in a lineage of twentieth-century collectors distinguished by their intense philosophical and poetic proximity to artists and their projects. According to Sol LeWitt, Daled, a successful radiologist based in Brussels, looked like Dick Tracy when he acquired LeWitt's foundational 1968 manuscript *Sentences on Conceptual Art* in 1973 to support the founding of Serge July's newspaper *Libération*. His annual visits to the offices of New York's post-studio artists, their galleries, and Max's Kansas City triggered mutually formative encounters. On one visit Daled, who died this past November at the age of ninety, bought Dan Graham's entire 1971 exhibition at John Gibson Gallery, including one of Conceptualism's key projects, *Homes for America*, 1966–67 (repeating a gesture of acquisitive generosity from the previous year, when, in Berlin, he had purchased all three works in an early Lawrence Weiner show).

But his very first acquisition, in 1966, was an abandoned blue dress on a coat hanger, one sleeve tethered to a shopping bag adorned with eggshells and the stenciled inscription *FROMAGE / CHALET* (CHEESE / CASTLE). Titled *Maria*, it was a blasphemous *Ave* of sorts, an icon named after the wife of an impoverished poet who, not long before, had abandoned poetry to join the world of the visual. Marcel Broodthaers, the second-most important Marcel of the twentieth century, would become Daled's closest friend and cicerone through the newly emerging world of international Conceptual conspiracies to dislodge the powers of the museum and the market. Daled later cited Broodthaers as having encouraged fellow artists across generations and continents, saying, "You can drink there, eat there, smoke there, and what's more, they buy!" in praise of the Daleds' exceptional hospitality. Welcoming not only artists but also, increasingly, the expanded social field of curators, critics, dealers, *amis* and *amies*, the couple hosted parties so raucous that even the most sacred site of any collector's home, the glass coffee table, was smashed, not under the weight of monographs but by drunken bodies celebrating the performance of Gilbert and George in 1974.

But Broodthaers's own hospitality as a self-appointed director of a museum proved even more consequential when—with Daled's support—he founded the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section XIXème Siècle* in Brussels in September 1968, inviting artists (like Daniel Buren), museum directors (like Johannes Cladders), critics, and collectors to witness the first museum fiction to operate as a factual reversal of cultural hierarchies. The project continued in numerous sequels in European institutions. When it neared its end in 1972, Daled even performed as the artist's clownish collaborator, joining him to draw outlines of the future *Section Documentaire* in the sand at the De Haan/Le Coq beach, watching as the museum's plans were washed away by the oncoming tide (as well as by recognition and success).

Daled fostered a praxis of reciprocity between the collector and the epistemic and aesthetic challenges posed by the most consequential Conceptual artists. This becomes strikingly evident in other acts that, in the late 1960s, must have appeared as adventurous and odd as the artistic practices themselves. For instance, Daled and Daled-Verstraeten decided to buy the same work by Niele Toroni twice within the space of two years, but paying a considerably higher price the second time, thus profiling the speculative impulse itself as integral to the act of collecting. Equally if not more puzzling was Daled's decision to buy one Daniel Buren work per month for a year, forgoing all other art acquisitions for those twelve months (Broodthaers's work being the sole permitted exception). This performative deconstruction of the act of collecting not only dismantled the myth of a presumably exceptional spiritual encounter between the artist's unique object and the collector's uniquely discerning subjectivity, but also suggested that the work to which he and Nicole were drawn, with its structures of serial and sequential repetition, logically corresponded to the artist-collector relationship as a system of repeatable economic exchanges, and vice versa. The degree to which Daled was willing to wager his own fortunes for the sake of a radically new assembly of culturally mediated social relations became blatantly evident when, in 1973, in a stroke of seemingly mad sacrifice, he traded an early and exquisite painting by the greatest of the allegorists of painting, Cy Twombly, against a work carrying the subtitle *For All Those Who Have Lived and Died: On Kawara's truly foundational One Million Years (Past)*, 1970–71. Daled's economically calamitous transaction signaled not only his deep commitment to another eminent figure of Conceptualism but also a manifest resistance to the ever more apparent fact that the hierarchical orders of painting and its skills and genres, iconography and expressive individuality, would soon enough be resurgent, fueled by new speculations in substitutional subject matters, or matters of presumed subjectivity.

In moments of emergency, Daled would also engage in singular acts of spontaneous solidarity, intervening in the manner of an activist, as when he acquired one of Hans Haacke's most controversial works, made in response to the censorship of the artist's first retrospective exhibition at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Most critics had falsely accused him of having insulted museum trustees, when in fact in his documentation *Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, A Real-Time Social System as of May 1, 1971*, he had only charted the real-estate holdings of New York slumlords totally unrelated to the museum; in his subsequent *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees*, 1974, Haacke had indeed traced some of the trustees' infinitely more complex economic possessions, namely the copper mines in Chile, which at that time had just served as a pretext to legitimize an American military intervention to depose and murder its democratically elected president, Salvador Allende.

Another example of Daled's activist dimension would be the fact that he was probably the first and only collector to adopt *The Artist's Reserved Rights Transfer and Sale Agreement*, which the art dealer and publisher Seth Siegelaub and the lawyer Robert Projansky had formulated and first published in 1971 in New York as a poster. This crucial project—possibly the most consequential and pragmatically political document in the history of Conceptual art—attempted to regulate once and for all the relationships between artists and collectors, contesting the convention that a collector's ownership of a work of art would legitimately exclude the producer from any control concerning future exhibitions or publications of the work, let alone deny the producer even a minimal share in its often dramatically increasing resale value. In 1971, Daled engaged

the French lawyer Michel Claura to produce a French translation and published it even before the contract was made widely available in the catalogue of Documenta 5 in 1972.



Joachim Olender, *La collection qui n'existait pas* (The Collection That Doesn't Exist), 2014, HD video, color, sound, 93 minutes.
Herman Daled's home, Hotel Wolfers, Brussels.

Daled endorsed all the challenges with which artists of the 1968 generation confronted traditional forms of artistic production and cultural reception. Their projects of a new linguistic and discursive mode of art production and of a radically altered institutional public sphere of communicative exchange between subjects stood in utter opposition to the rapidly disappearing sphere of public social life and public subjectivity that post-World War II media empires had almost entirely abandoned by the '60s. These were only some of the strategies that these artists had deployed. To withdraw any kind of traditional aesthetic gratification was another one. Once stripped of the last residues of the mythical object as sublime commodity and exposed to radiant transparency, what manners and materials could a collector still claim as his belongings?

Daled, significantly, adopted the very principles of 1968 to govern his historical identity as a "collector." He never exhibited his collection until 2010,* and most of his "possessions" were simply tracked in a notebook and stored at his final home, an almost eerily empty house built in the late '30s by Henry van de Velde. Never tiring of emphasizing his commitment to Conceptual practices in opposition to the collective forms of desublimation inflicted by the ideological state apparatus of the culture industries, he equally resisted conventional aesthetic pleasures as obsolete and privileged forms of sublimation delivered by the more traditional painterly or sculptural practices. Daled reduced and eventually concluded his collecting activities altogether when these traditional disciplines returned with a vengeance by the end of the '70s.

Daleth, also spelled *daled*, is the fourth letter of several Semitic alphabets, including the Phoenician, the Aramaic, the Hebrew, the Syriac, and the Arabic. The letter is based on a glyph dating to the Middle Bronze Age, probably called *dalt*, or “door” (in Modern Hebrew “door” is *delet*). Herman Daled lived to honor his name precisely by opening social, economic, cultural, and aesthetic doors to enable and enact imaginary social and cultural relations freed from the controls of economic power and institutional and discursive hierarchies, an authentically utopian project (mostly works on paper).

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* See Patrizia Dander and Ulrich Wilmes, eds., *Daled Collection: A Bit of Matter and a Little Bit More* (Munich: Haus der Kunst; Cologne: Walther König, 2010). I am indebted to this excellent catalogue for its assistance in verifying numerous historical details and facts.