

Ariadne's Thread
by Laura Gasparini

In *The Infinity of Lists* Umberto Eco explains the descriptive models employed by writers, painters and poets throughout history. The diversity of such models is immense, but they have always fascinated mankind, giving rise to some stupendous literary and figurative works. Eco sees the poetics stemming from them as archetypes that have always gone hand in hand with mankind's imagination.

Eco starts with the second book of Homer's *Iliad*, focusing on the model of the list and the catalogue of ships used by the author to describe the enormous Greek army that terrified the Trojans. Homer opts for an infinite list, creating a descriptive style that has a beginning, but no end to, in this case, the countless number of parts to the Greek fleet. The inescapable impossibility of completing a list with so many elements forces the author to use the open-ended list. This appeals to individual perception and imagination because it refers to countless and incalculable elements, projecting itself towards the infinite. Eco argues that a list describing a set of objects, images or words can be listed either in linear or labyrinth form.

The type of open-ended list indicated above is what Andrea Ferrari turns to for his photographic documentary of Giulia C.'s collection, which is kept in her house in the centre of a metropolis. The apartment is the space for her solitary life. Any object that passed into her life immediately became part of her emotional world.

She was a pharmacist and an amateur photographer. Her collection of objects and images is unique not only for the somewhat unusual objects she used to collect, but also for the way in which they were arranged in drawers and in a multitude of containers. The collection is not merely confined to objects, but embraces the photos she took as well as postcards, drawings, sketches and even her wealth of journals and notebooks. The layout of the objects and the arrangement criteria are like marks left by Giulia that help make her collection unique. It is a dense, unequivocal set of signs, with a strong aesthetic appeal. Sometimes Giulia created patchworks of images with handwritten pages; sometimes she used decorations or lace as though suggesting a specific meaning that remains a mystery to us, just out of our grasp.

Her aesthetic sensitivity is not only expressed through the compositions of objects, but also through drawings that can be geometric or end in squiggles that merge into a form of imaginary writing found in her universe.

The collection includes handwritten lists on bits of paper, old envelopes and even the back sides of photographic paper. These lists referred to objects she purchased, perhaps among them fabrics, clothes or accessories. However, there are also lists covering what Giulia did, like trips, journeys and shopping.

Walking into Giulia's flat, Andrea Ferrari found himself plunged into her world. He opened drawers and boxes, discovering her journals where he found confirmation that Giulia wanted to leave a trace of herself. This left him with a need to document her collection. In so doing, he adopted the archaeologist's method – investigating, studying, measuring, re-assembling and changing the layout of objects to find new meanings and to decipher Giulia's language and world. He entered into a conversation with her. He discovered that the collection – the meaning of that set of objects – became a mirror for Giulia's life and

universe. It is a reflection of her life. Hence, her collection is a sort of threshold marking the boundaries between her imagination and reality. At times, these borders are so blurred that they merge, but at other times, they are mirrored or symmetrical images.

As he learnt more about her collection, Ferrari came to understand this mechanism. Like a mirror reflecting images, he decided to walk into it, helped by Ariadne's thread – in his case, photography – which marks a path to find the way back. In his essay *Unpacking my Library, A Talk on Collecting* Walter Benjamin wrote: "Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories."

As he opened drawers, boxes and different containers or flicked through her journals and letters, he realised he was the one person who could unveil Giulia's obsession to leave some trace of herself.

Over time, arranging objects in boxes using entirely personal criteria became a habit. This turns the act of taking pictures of these objects into a profoundly meaningful act. It was about finding, discovering, seeing, understanding, indicating, re-arranging and finally composing the objects and images until a common element infused with Giulia's sensitivity emerged. It was the enigma of her seeing and feeling in a world full of silence and solitude. Not only did she take photos, but she drew, wrote and kept a journal.

In reading her journals, Ferrari discovered that her writing, at the end of a note or a page, would become a drawing – a graphical composition or hieroglyphic – just as the photographic image becomes an object. The Surrealists were completely au fait with this concept of exploring from all angles, seeing it as one of the tenets of their poetics.

Ferrari also discovered that Giulia tried to impose a rational side to her collection through an *inventory*. This is not a copybook or some sort of register, but rather detailed descriptions of the collection penned on the many envelopes containing the photos she took, on the lids of boxes and on the covers of her journals. Here, the natural reference is to Jean Baudrillard's *The System of Objects*. He explains how our homes, the objects that surround us and their arrangement are but the image of our culture and our way of being. He also tells us that objects, through their presence, create a specific relationship in people's lives. Baudrillard maintains that decoupling objects from their function bestows on them an emotional value that speaks more about us and not just about the society that produced them.

But does Ferrari really wish just to tell us about the universe of this Milanese pharmacist? Or has Giulia C.'s collection of objects, in revealing itself, become a pretext, a fatal coincidence between them and his own childhood memories? The answer once again can be found in Benjamin's essay: "...children can accomplish the renewal of existence in a hundred unfailing ways. Among children, collecting is only *one* process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures – the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names."

Using the language of photography, Andrea Ferrari takes a seemingly cold and detached approach to tell us how Giulia C.'s objects projected him into his past. He does this by adopting a dual form comprised of an open-ended list – the objects are presented one after the other, seeking values and consonances between them – and the finite form, namely the book. A book is harmonious and symmetrical, with connected images. There are cross-references to impressions and poetical figures, but essentially, unlike the open-ended form, it aims for completeness and an exhaustive tale: Andrea's story.