

# I Am My Own Curator

When this art collector dies, his West Village apartment will be rebuilt in a North Dakota museum. Meanwhile, he lives among his artifacts.

By SAM KNIGHT

**B**ARTON LIDICE BENES will always be at home.

Mr. Benes, an artist and a collector, has spent much of the last 35 years filling his West Village apartment with a maddening and morbid array of things (dead snakes, a frog purse, one of Hitler's spoons) and, in a manner of speaking, he will never leave.

When Mr. Benes, who is H.I.V.-positive, dies, his home and life's work will be taken apart and reconstructed — piece by unique piece — 1,500 miles away at the North Dakota Museum of Art in Grand Forks. He will be included in the exhibition, his ashes placed in a pillow on the bed with a view of the television set. As a favor, Mr. Benes has requested that the TV play episodes of "Law and Order." "The reruns will go forever," he explained.

Mr. Benes, who is a perky 62, made the deal five years ago. At that point, his health was what he described as "a bit iffy," and Laurel Reuter, the founder of the North Dakota Museum and the curator of many of his shows there and elsewhere, happened to be in town. Like many collectors thinking about the long term, Mr. Benes worried about what might happen to his possessions once he was gone. More immediately, he was disturbed by what he had seen after the deaths of many of his friends who succumbed to AIDS during the 1980's and 90's.

"They would leave their apartments and all their stuff, and you would see the family come in and dump it, or this one takes this and this one takes that," said Mr. Benes, who keeps a small pile of ceramic shards mounted with photographs of his dead friends on his dining room table. "It was awful."

But since he made the deal with the North Dakota Museum, and with the help of the 13 pills he takes each day, Mr. Benes has become stronger, and prospects of the apartment handover have receded. Like many people who have lived with H.I.V. as it has become a more manageable disease, Mr. Benes has unexpectedly been given his life back. "Like the joke," he said. "The doctor says: 'I've got some good news, and I've got some bad news. The good news is you're going to live. The bad news is you've got to get a job.'"

Mr. Benes's recovery has not prompted any second thoughts about the deal; on the contrary, it has given him extra incentive to add to his collection. "It's why I keep buying things," he said the other day, peering into a cabinet dominated by an orange Cameroonian feather headdress. "I know I'll have it forever."

It feels quite natural to talk about death with Mr. Benes, whose art and collecting habits embrace every sort of mortality. Over the years, he has made works out of cremation ashes and his own H.I.V.-infected blood. More recently, he has taken to constructing endless racks of tiny and sometimes notorious artifacts — a bat skeleton, a piece of Saddam Hussein's palace, a lion's claw — and selling them in galleries around the world.

Death, in fact, seems to be strangely welcome in the low-lit apartment in Westbeth where Mr. Benes has lived since 1970. He calls it his tomb, and the first thing you see when you come in is the looming black head of a dead bull. On the



#### CROWDED WALLS

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walls are voodoo dolls from Benin, a hunter's jacket hanging with bones from the Congo, and African mask after African mask, stretching ghoulish and wide-mouthed to the ceiling.

In the endless drawers and cubbyholes that line his apartment, Mr. Benes stores thousands of items — monkey skulls, a blackened human toe found on the Williamsburg Bridge — and relics, both Christian and celebrity-inspired. His worldly possessions include a thread from a ballet shoe worn by Mikhail Baryshnikov and a ring with a glass centerpiece retrieved after the car crash that killed Princess Diana. Everything is labeled on white tags in his loopy handwriting.

Mr. Benes started what he calls "this whole binge" on a trip to West Africa in 1971. Since then he has made contact with anthropologists and archaeologists around the world and persuaded them to send him things. Bob Brier, a famous Egyptologist and a professor at Long Island University, has supplied Mr. Benes with

countless items, among them the femur of a Roman soldier and a precious, bright slab of hieroglyphs to go next to the dining table.

While waiting for calls from his collecting contacts, Mr. Benes also patrols the more esoteric corners of eBay. "I ended up paying \$35 for that; I was furious," he said, pointing at a horse's hoof on a shelf. Indicating an obscure object next to it, he added: "I don't know what that is, that hair thing. It looks like a kind of fetish. No one bid against me for that."

Some things arrive in the mail. "Everybody has something they don't want to throw out," Mr. Benes said, "and yet they don't know what to do with it." For these objects, his apartment serves as a repository, a lunatic's Library of Congress. The most recent item that came looking for a home was an earplug that had fallen from the ear from a Secret Service agent guarding President Bush on a visit to Florida. Mr. Benes dutifully filed it in a drawer labeled "Politics."

**N**ONE of which, however, quite suggests North Dakota. The only object Mr. Benes has from the Flickertail State is a stuffed rooster that sits on the floor on the way to the bathroom. But his relationship with the city's museum dates from the 1980's, and the good receptions he has enjoyed for his exhibitions there have given Mr. Benes hope for eternity. "I fell in love with the place and the people," he said. "They're so real."

Ms. Reuter, the museum's director, continues to be excited at the prospect of Mr. Benes and his possessions' joining the place. "It's going to be our first period room," she said. "It could be a wonderful thing. And it's not too big."

And even she is hoping that Mr. Benes lives for a while longer. "We still have to raise the money to build the room," she explained. "He can't die right now."



Photographs by Chester Higgins Jr./The New York Times

