

2016

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Recommended Citation

Conley, K. (2016). The Surrealist Collection: Ghosts in the Laboratory. David Hopkins (Ed.), *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism* (pp. 304-318). Chichester, Malden & Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/asbookchapters/7>

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The Surrealist Collection: Ghosts in the Laboratory

Katharine Conley

Surrealism was forged by poets and artists who intentionally surrounded themselves with objects of philosophical significance to them, objects whose arrangement refracted back to them elements of their own beliefs. André Breton, author of the manifestoes of Surrealism, was the movement's exemplary collector and his practice of collection yielded the movement's mystery-laden backdrop to the development of the principles of Surrealism just as his apartment on the rue Fontaine in Paris provided the setting for gatherings of the group's meetings (Figure 18.1).

Breton's collection served as a laboratory out of which the group's collective thoughts and experiences were forged, which he faithfully recorded and commented upon throughout his life, beginning with his years in the Dada movement (Eburne 2011; Shelton 2011, 212). From the first object he acquired as a teenager with prize money for good results at school, an Easter Island statuette he later reproduced in *Nadja* (1928), to the painting André Dérain gave him and his wife Simone as a wedding present in 1920, Breton's collection created a careful and intentional environment that was essential to his thought and work and crucial to his theories of the object so fundamental to surrealist theory (Jouffroy 1955; Breton 1960). His objects offer a prismatic perspective on Surrealism's aesthetics, politics, and the ghostly survival of repressed spiritualism in the enduring practice of automatism. As an ensemble, Breton's collection constitutes his most accomplished form of material automatic writing and offers insight into the development of the surrealist movement and its legacy through *Breton's Wall*, what is left of the collection now on display at the Pompidou Center, and the website dedicated to his study, *Atelier André Breton*.

The facets of the prismatic view of Surrealism afforded by the surrealist collection as epitomized by Breton's study are unified through the perspective of surrealist ghostliness, the aspect of Surrealism rooted in the haunted history of the movement as having emerged from World War I, on the one hand, and in the poetics of the establishing experiments with self-imposed automatic trances that led Breton to give the group's activities a new name in 1922 (Conley 2013a). It was in Breton's apartment that the first experiments with automatism took place that fall, after René Crevel reported having been told by a medium that he had spiritualist talent. The result was a "magic *dictation*," according to Breton, at which his fellow dadaists Crevel and Robert Desnos were particularly adept, and which prompted him for the first time to identify the new automatic practice as



FIGURE 18.1 *André Breton in his studio, 42, rue Fontaine. June 1965. Sabine Weiss.*

surrealism, describing the words spoken while in a dream state or self-induced trance as “fallen from the ‘mouth of shadows’” (Breton 1996, 91, translation modified). The setting for these sessions was a room filled with art and sculptures adjacent to his study-studio, with large windows overlooking the Boulevard Clichy and its flashing lights.

At one of the earliest sessions on September 25, 1922, Francis Picabia challenged Desnos to produce one-line punning poems in the style of the poems Marcel Duchamp had published that fall in *Littérature*, the journal Breton and Louis Aragon were editing. Desnos did so while in a trance, as he was the most adept of the group at putting himself to sleep and speaking extemporaneously, and his punning lines contained within them ghosts of other phrases inherent to the puns themselves (Conley 2010a). When Desnos published these one-line poems in *Littérature*, he chose for his title the punning pseudonym Rose Sélavy (*Eros, c’est la vie*) with which Duchamp had signed his poems in the earlier issues. The ghostliness inherent to these poems, wherein rhyme subsumes metaphor, as in “*Le temps est un aigle agile dans un temple*” (Time is an agile eagle in a temple), dictates that the pun is not nonsense much of the time because, for example, eagles *are* agile and in the industrial world time *is* like a temple, a holy order followed by those with jobs and schedules. The eerie reality of these poems is such that hidden within manifest nonsense is latent sense in an echo of the belief that automatic poems mirror secrets in the human mind and that there is knowledge and sensibility buried within every human being’s unconscious. This was the pivotal point of automatic practice, as Breton explained 11 years later in “The Automatic Message” when he declared: “I say that every man and

every woman deserves to be convinced of their ability to tap into this language at will, which has nothing supernatural about it and which, for each and every one of us, is *the* vehicle of revelation” (Breton 1999a, 138).

Ghostliness manifests itself in visual surrealism through visual puns whereby one thing is also another thing. This punning doubleness provides a key to interpreting the surrealist objects found in Breton’s collection, which, like puns, simultaneously contain manifest and repressed lives, like human beings with conscious and unconscious psyches. In the case of a punning poem, the repressed life is the rational sense that may be intuited out of the nonsense pun. In the case of an object that most of the time was a found object that had had a previous function, the repressed life was constituted by the previous, now dormant, function.

Breton’s admired functional objects repurposed as art, beginning with Duchamp’s *readymades* – ordinary things like a bottle drying rack made for use in a café and a urinal intended for men’s rooms and then displayed in museums. For Breton, such objects with former lives shared a psychological function with human beings and contained latent or unconscious forces linked to their former use underlying their manifest appearance and undermining their apparent insensibility and lack of sentience. This double life of the object meant that each one could be understood to function like the puns that launched the movement poetically in those sessions from 1922 that became known as “the period of sleeps.” The repressed life of the surrealist object’s previous use served as its psychic key akin to the psychological keys with which Freud proposed to unlock the mysteries of the inner lives of human beings, stored in the details of their ordinary lives and the remnants of their dreams.

Ghostliness was also implicit in Breton’s theorization of objects, paralleling the rise of the object as a privileged site of exploration in the early 1930s, most notably in his definitive essay “Crisis of the Object” (Breton 1936). What distinguishes his chosen objects from “those that surround us” is a simple “shift in role,” he explains, triggering a “*total revolution of the object*” based on the “action of turning it away from its original function, renaming it, and signing it,” thus transforming its original name, function, and identity into “*latencies*” (Breton 1936, my translation). The object’s latencies linked to a previous identity anthropomorphize it; it stands in for a human unconscious, granting the object the psychological function Breton ascribed to all desired objects imbued with emotions projected onto them by the desiring gaze. The object’s previous life constitutes a kind of ghost that holds within it an energy detectable to the receptive surrealist, a power that Breton identifies as “*champs de force*” (forces).

In 1922, Breton’s collection would have been rudimentary in comparison with the one he created after his return to Paris from New York after World War II and left at his death in 1966, but his taste for combining things purchased and found, of both Western and non-Western origin, of significant or little value, would already have been in place in the 1920s. This setting and aesthetic would contextualize the surrealist movement at its outset, when the young men involved in it, along with a couple of women companions and friends, came together to make a new movement out of Dada. They were profoundly inspired by the psychoanalytic discoveries of Freud – which were only slowly being translated into French – and the legacy of spiritualism, which Breton was quick to repress, refuting “the spiritualist viewpoint” and any possibility of communication between “the living and the dead,” despite the contradictory title of the essay in which he made this claim, “The Mediums Enter” (Breton 1996, 92).

As an initial approach to unlocking the unconscious, Freud had been attracted to hypnosis, a practice stemming from magnetic somnambulism popular in occult circles in

the mid-nineteenth century. It is not surprising that the surrealists, too, who had been inspired by Freud's theories to explore the secrets of the unconscious mind embedded in automatic poetry and art, would also have been attracted to spiritualist goals and methods, even if these appeared to contradict the group's intellectual approach (Borch-Jacobsen 1989). Surrealism maintained a mediumistic desire to defy chronological time through surrealist automatic practice, in which the aim was to get into direct contact with one's own unconscious rather than dead spirits as was spiritualism's persistent goal. Breton's evolving theories about the object and his lifelong interest in objects nonetheless reveal the persistent legacy of spiritualism in his thinking. For even though they espoused popular art, from the Paris advertising "posters which shout out loud" from Guillaume Apollinaire's 1911 poem "Zone" to the serial films of Louis Feuillade, the surrealists shared Arthur Rimbaud's aspirational imperative to "change life," and hoped that their ideas would have a philosophical and lasting political impact on French culture (Rimbaud 1966, translation modified). They did not wish to be associated with a movement that, by the 1920s, had acquired the aura of superstition and had lost its claim to the sort of intellectual legitimacy it had had in the nineteenth century and to which the surrealists aspired. Spiritualism, then, became an influential precedent that they persistently denied.

Although the surrealists generally did not believe in ghosts, their theories of the object persisted in seeing ghosts in things in an intimate and personal way.¹ Things were personal for the surrealists because of their experience of World War I and their having come of age in a time when spiritualism was both popular and still perceived as legitimate and scientific (Chéroux and Fischer 2005). The war had made them uncannily aware that they, too, would become things when they died, things that had once been alive, hence their enduring fascination with things that had a ghostly quality from having had previous lives, things that embodied surrealist ghostliness in a material way. The objects with which Breton surrounded himself had ghostly aspects through their multiple lives, functions, and identities, and they always had a psychological function for him. He shared with them a relationship of "reciprocity" (Berthet 2008, 39). His collection, for example, featured a mediumistic drawing by Victor Hugo, a wash overwritten with the word for dawn, *aube*, which was particularly meaningful for Breton because that word was also the name of his daughter (Atelier 2013).² Explicitly ghostly mediumistic works were juxtaposed with non-Western objects, mostly from Oceania and North America, found objects, at once natural and manmade, and art by himself and his friends. Each of these categories may be understood as facets of the prismatic perspective on Surrealism contained in Breton's study.

Precedents for Breton's collection existed in the apartments of Apollinaire, his mentor in the final year of World War I, and Freud, his scientific-philosophical guide. In a retrospective piece for the radio in 1952, Breton evoked his friendship with Apollinaire in 1917–1918 with details about his regular visits to Apollinaire's apartment, the warm welcome he received there, and their daily outings together (Breton 2008). It was at Apollinaire's request in 1917 that Breton wrote "Guillaume Apollinaire," first published in October 1918, within a month of Apollinaire's premature death (Breton 1988, 1232). Apollinaire's apartment exemplified the modernist taste for African and Polynesian objects, which became widely available in the European market at the turn of the twentieth century as a result of colonialism. These things, crowded within his apartment, also found their way into Apollinaire's poetry. In "Zone," for example, the poem's speaker redefines poetry as modern through the affirmation of its inspiration from everyday language, including advertising, as noted earlier, and at the poem's conclusion, he goes home after a night spent walking the streets of Paris to his Guinean "fetish" sculptures, seeing the dawn not as an awakening but as a distinctly non-European blood sacrifice, *Soleil cou*

coupé, “The sun a severed neck” (Apollinaire 1972, 116–117; 126–127). Apollinaire’s dawn nonetheless constitutes a rebirth, into a new, more global era. In homage, Breton took the word “surrealism” from Apollinaire, who had coined it in another context in 1917, to name the new movement.

Freud’s legendary collection migrated in World War II from Vienna to London, where he took his family in flight from Nazi persecution. Now on display in his Hampstead house, Freud’s collection epitomizes a modernist admiration for classical Greece, Rome, and Egypt. He collected funerary objects of all sorts, from statues to vases, and displayed them on his shelves, in glass cabinets, and arranged them on his desk so that he might see them while he listened to his patients and as he transposed their cases into his theory of psychoanalysis. His terracotta Sphinx, for example, may readily be linked to his crucial theory of family relationships based on the story of Oedipus, and his favorite statue of Athena in the middle of his desk may be understood as linked, through her shield, to his thoughts about the Medusa (Gamwell and Wells 1989, 110–111; Burke 2006, 26–27). Breton, too, responds intellectually to the objects in his study and their many facets combine and emerge in his writing as though he had been working in a laboratory.

Breton was naturally attracted to mediumistic or spiritualist works, despite his disavowal of spiritualism itself. His admiration for art produced by the mentally ill or in spiritualist circumstances directly contradicted his insistence that there was no similarity between spiritualism and Surrealism. Nonetheless, he was clearly highly sensitive to the presence of unknown yet real “forces” within objects and in everyday life, again partly because of his experience of World War I. During the war he had worked as a medical auxiliary in Paris, watching over patients with shell-shock. He would also have been familiar with one of Apollinaire’s last poems from 1918, “The Pretty Red-Head,” which sought to explain how the war had transformed the perspective of the stunned soldiers who had witnessed it, by describing how even detonations could be seen as strangely beautiful, like illuminated flowers shedding light on “strange countries” that existed only in the imagination: “vast and strange domains / Where mystery in flower spreads out for those who would pluck it / There you may find new fires colors you have never seen before / A thousand imponderable phantasms / Still awaiting reality” (Apollinaire 1980, 345). Not surprisingly it was Max Ernst, a veteran who served on the German side, who brought the art of the mentally ill to the attention of the Paris group in 1922, when he showed them his copy of Hans Prinzhorn’s *Artistry of the Mentally Ill*, which contributed to Breton’s lifelong interest in works created by the mentally ill (MacGregor 1989, 279).

In 1929 Breton purchased two boxes at an exhibition of works by the mentally ill that he reproduced in *The Surrealist Revolution*. One of the two, itself a recycled container used as a frame, is filled with meticulously arranged things, all of which clearly had had a previous function: nails, buttons, hooks, handles, metal rings, a bird-shaped bottle opener, pen nibs, and half a pair of scissors (Cardinal 1992, 100). The box is haunted by its past histories of use and handling in a way that paralleled the haunted psyches of the young men who founded the movement in the immediate aftermath of the war – young men haunted by their dead, whether or not they had seen battle first-hand.

The contradiction between Breton’s rejection of spiritualism and his attraction to mediumistic art became most glaringly evident in his reassessment of surrealist automatism in 1933. In “The Automatic Message,” paradoxically illustrated with mediumistic art in the luxurious art journal *Minotaure*, he contested the claim made by several of the artists that the inspiration for their work came from outside of themselves and yet at the same time he clearly admired the results of their efforts, based on a form of automatism that predated his own version (Cardinal 2000; Conley 2006). By the 1950s, with the series of

articles on spiritualist-inspired art he later published in the 1966 edition of *Surrealism and Painting*, Breton tacitly reversed his previous rejection of spiritualism through his open embrace of spiritualist-inspired automatic work, as legitimate companions to surrealism in the domain of psychic exploration (Breton 2002).

In contrast to Breton's ambivalent relationship to spiritualism, other surrealists like Leonora Carrington willingly embraced the occult in the paintings and sculptures which she kept in her house as part of her "collection." Her perspective was accepted, even facilitated, by Breton and the movement, because of the gendered assumption that women – who predominated as mediums within French spiritualism – were more prone to second sight than men and therefore more naturally conversant with non-scientific approaches to psychic phenomena. Carrington included a miasmic apparition resembling a spiritualist ectoplasm in her well-known self-portrait, *The Inn at the Dawn Horse* (1938). She routinely equated everyday household activities like cooking with magic. Breton, who had professed a strong interest in alchemy in the "Second Manifesto" (1929), became overtly drawn to the occult himself after his return to France from New York in the postwar period when he published *L'Art Magique* (1957).

A look back at Breton's collection from the perspective of Carrington's work in which ordinary domestic activities are portrayed as magical – with her kitchen as the centerpiece of several of her paintings – shows how Carrington materialized some of his most prized ideas, particularly about objects. Carrington's hybrid creatures remind the reader and viewer that, far from being oppositional, as in Breton's emphasis on the surrealist image as founded on the "juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities" in the first "Manifesto of Surrealism," humans and animals actually are versions of the same thing, they are both living, feeling creatures (Breton 1972, 20). She routinely created hybrid creatures in her short stories, such as the talking horses in "The House of Fear" and "Uncle Sam Carrington" and the boy who develops the head of a horse in "Little Francis," or the wooden rocking horse in "The Oval Lady" who, at the story's conclusion, cries out in human-like fear and pain (Carrington 1988; Conley 2013b).

Carrington further develops a material version of Breton's idea of the desirability of resolving "old antinomies" expressed in the opening of the "Second Manifesto" with visually hybrid beings in her paintings. In Carrington's work, the Bretonian concept of a reconciliation of opposites, the co-existence of two different kinds of beings – human and animal, human and object – is presented naturalistically as a routine part of everyday reality. Not only are the animals in her paintings finely drawn so as to suggest intelligence, she also anthropomorphizes objects, such as a human head attached to a dining chair in *The House Opposite* (1945) or a teapot with legs and arms in *Are you really Syrious?* (1953). In this way, in the works she created in Mexico, she visually extends Breton's idea that objects have interior lives linked to their ties to human beings and their history of functionality. Carrington's creatures are often visibly one thing *and* another, one thing and its ghost, attesting to the incorporation into her work of Breton's contention that realities co-exist. Her repeated use of cooking in stories and paintings, as an everyday version of the proto-science of alchemy, admired by Breton in the "Second Manifesto," materializes how one substance transforms via heat into another. This interest culminates in her novel *The Hearing Trumpet* (1974) with a scene in which the protagonist jumps into a cauldron stirred by an old crone she recognizes as herself, only to discover the secret to eternal life because the cauldron turns out to be the mythical (and long lost) Holy Grail (Carrington 1996). This ability of a person to transform him or herself through a ritual as simple as cooking prismatically reflects back on Breton's fascination with other kinds of transformations considered part of everyday culture in non-European religious traditions.

He focuses on what he calls *transformisme* in his 1950 essay on Pacific Northwest Coast transformation masks, which he collected in New York in the 1940s, for example. A Yup'ik mask from his collection (now at the Quai Branly Museum) simultaneously evokes through simple stylization more than one life form at a time, a human face and that of a seal (Breton 1999b; *Masterpieces* 2006, 86–87; Conley 2013c). Whereas Breton returned to Paris with several of these masks and hung them as prized possessions in his apartment, Carrington remained in the Americas and never returned to Europe (Gracq and Ehrmann 2003).

Carrington's transformational cooking images in paintings, short stories, and her novel, lend body to Breton's more abstract study of masks. In his essay of 1950, he describes how wearing a mask during a ritual allows the wearer to simultaneously be him or herself and another self – usually an animal alter-ego represented by the mask – and as a result, to commune in a selfless way with the ambient surrounding world in a state of mind devoid of rational consciousness, thereby approaching the automatic states to which he aspired at the outset of the movement. Citing a study of masks by Georges Buraud, Breton explains in his essay that the powers invested in a mask will be enhanced by the wearer's unconscious mind during the ritual through an unconscious connection with the surrounding world. Through the mask, an individual is psychically connected to the world around him or her in a reciprocal relation (Buraud 1948; Breton 2002; Conley 2013c). These masks were key objects in Breton's post-World War II collection.

From his very first purchase, Breton prized objects from Oceania and preferred them to objects from Africa, which had been in vogue in the previous generation, with, for example, Apollinaire, Pablo Picasso, and Tristan Tzara (Conley 2010b; Dagen 2013, 123–124). Breton viewed Oceanic art as more poetic and therefore more surrealist. He understood it as capturing the dualism of manifest and latent qualities inherent to all objects that appealed to him. In his view, Oceanic works combine “*external* appearances of man and animal” together with “the expression of the greatest effort ever to account for the interpenetration of mind and matter”; he sees in this mode of expression a parallel with the effort “to overcome the dualism of perception and representation” (Breton 1995, 171–172). Oceanic objects had psychic power for him, like the ghostly power he identified in the found and used objects he purchased at Paris flea markets, which had had ceremonial functions before winding up in Europe or the United States.

With his mixing of things from contemporary Paris with objects from distant islands and shores, Breton contributed to the creation of a global aesthetic that by the late twentieth century had become a norm, distinguished from the organization by category and time-period more common to nineteenth- and most twentieth-century museums. In fact, the mix of objects in Breton's collection resembled more the original baroque Cabinets of Curiosities than they did standardized modern museums. Like those Renaissance collections which gave rise to the modern museum, Breton's collection was intended to inspire awe, to represent a twentieth-century version of the late medieval marvelous – with psychological forces replacing religious intervention – and to reveal Breton the collector as a modern-day navigator like his forbears, seeking to create “a mirror of the world” within his study (Conley 2012; Flahutez 2013, my translation).

In his essay collection *Mad Love* (1937), Breton specifically compares the surrealists to navigators discovering a new world with the statement: “it is to the recreation of this particular state of mind that surrealism has always aspired,” referring to that moment “at the forefront of discovery” when, “for the first navigators, a new land was in sight” and they set their feet on shore “convinced” they had witnessed “a phenomenon, hitherto unknown” linked to “*chance*” (Breton 1987, 25). Like the baroque explorers in the Age of Discovery who brought back booty for early European collectors, Breton's ambition

for his collection was expansive; he appreciated the way his collection, like those of the baroque collectors, offered him “a precise mechanism for transforming knowledge into power” (Findlen 1994, 23). Breton wanted his collection to span the entire world, as the map the surrealists created in 1929 indicated (Figure 18.2). This map, first published in the Belgian journal *Variétés*, emphasizes the parts of the world that intrigued the surrealists and from which the objects they admired came, such as the Pacific Northwest Coast, New Guinea, and Easter Island. These areas are exaggerated in size on the map, while Europe and Africa appear shrunken. With their map of the world and Breton’s metaphor for automatic discovery based on baroque navigators, Breton and the European surrealists could be seen as expanding their horizons on a horizontal plane to the opposite side of the world. They sought to see the globe in a way that mirrored back to them the worlds contained within their imaginations. Their goal was to know the world through an understanding of commonalities between human psyches across geographic space as expressed through artistry – drawings, carvings, and objects, some of which had been created to serve a spiritual function (Carpenter and Schuster 1996).

Just as the surrealists transposed spiritualism’s belief in ghosts onto a psychological understanding of psychic phenomena like automatic writing, they understood objects created for spiritual ends as having psychological force that could be analyzed scientifically in accordance with Freud. In this way, these objects were a crucial part of the laboratory that was Breton’s study. He and the surrealists were also aware of Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss’s sociological analysis of religious phenomena based on ethnographic studies of intense group participation in an “effervescent social environment” resulting in religious feeling (Durkheim 1915, 250). Breton’s understanding of religious feeling as effervescent and based on psychic forces generated by the experience of individuals working together allowed him to see a commonality between objects made for such non-Western ceremonies – like the tiki figure made to house a spirit from the Marquesas



FIGURE 18.2 *The Surrealist Map of the World*, *Variétés* (Brussels), June 1929.

Islands he once owned, now in the Menil Collection in Houston – and the objects the surrealists made for themselves as a result of their commitment to the collective group. When they started to make surrealist objects, publish photographs of them, and write essays about them in the early 1930s in their second journal, *Surrealism in the Service of the Revolution*, the idea of their receptivity to each other as having a significant influence on the end product was an important factor. This position was influenced by their leftist politics and encouraged by Breton's call to the group to recommit to collective action in 1929, the same year and in the same issue of the same journal in which they produced their idiosyncratic map of the world (Conley 2003, 55–58).

The recognition of similarities between objects from vastly different origins was rooted in the surrealists' understanding of automatism and its principles, which they saw as universal, anchored in the human psychic split between conscious and unconscious life. In their collective work the surrealists aspired to acquire the ability to illuminate the mysterious forces within their own unconscious minds, partly through a refracted glimpse of similar phenomena they recognized in the carvings and paintings that came from the Americas and the Pacific Islands (Tythacott 2003, 173; Browne 2011, 254). This desire to see works they found or had made *together* with non-Western objects was first made public in the week-long Surrealist Exhibition of Objects at the Charles Ratton Gallery in May 1936, for which Breton wrote "Crisis of the Object," and which also included Oceanic masks from Breton's and Paul Eluard's personal collections (Cowling 1978; Tythacott 2003, 40). Even if they misunderstood the way these objects had been valued by those who made them, based on their misapprehension that in non-Western culture such objects were viewed as merely utilitarian and meant to be discarded after use, they still wanted to learn from group practices that combined art and psychic energy (Leiris 1933; McEvilley 1984). Their desire to learn about other cultures, which came to fruition in, for example, Wolfgang Paalen's journal *Dyn*, which concentrated on the cultures of the Pacific Northwest, contrasted with their strong desire to acquire the fruits of those cultures, which they considered beautiful, even though they opposed the concept of colonialism (Mileaf 2001; Dagen 2013). Fundamentally, they lacked self-consciousness about the "contradiction" of their position, which could be understood as a form of intellectual colonialization (Tythacott 2003; Conley 2015). They failed to view the repurposing of things created for a practical spiritual purpose as works of art as at odds with the anti-colonialist views they had espoused when writing in support of the rebels of Morocco's Rif Valley in 1925 (*Tracts* 1980).³

When Antonin Artaud wrote about the "gods sleeping" in Western museums, brought to France originally as booty by soldiers and anthropologists alike, he was referring to the kinds of sculptures and masks that attracted Breton. These things acquired what Artaud called a "quasi animal life" in reference to the way close-ups in films can conjure a liveliness in things through technological "sorcery" akin to the alchemical transformations that interested Breton and the surrealists in the late 1920s. The surrealists revelled in unearthing old science and old beliefs discarded in post-Enlightenment Europe, which they believed contained secrets yet to be unlocked about humankind (Adamowicz 1995, 91). Objects with double lives, essentially objects that had been repurposed, were fundamental to Breton's understanding of what he called *transformisme* in his analysis of Pacific Northwest Coast transformation masks. His interest in the inner lives of objects led him to think about beings beyond human ken. In "The Prolegomena to a Third Manifesto or Not," written in New York in 1942 when his sense of vulnerability was at its most intense because of his self-imposed exile during World War II, he wonders about the future of humanity. His focus has shifted from a horizontal perspective on the world as reflected in

the surrealist map from 1929 to a vertical sense of humankind as interconnected with galactic space – an expansion of scale from the world to the universe. Isolated from Paris where his friends Desnos, Aragon, Eluard, and Picasso struggled under German occupation, he pondered that “Man may not be the central focus of the universe,” and imagined there might be other sentient creatures smaller or larger than we are, the “great transparent ones” of which we are not yet aware (Breton 1972).

This stance of humility in relation to mankind’s place in the universe was corroborated in the laboratory of his study by the things in his collection that elicited and refracted back to him the physical “sensation” he describes in the first chapter of *Mad Love*. He describes how he knows that a thing or a place has true authenticity when it gives him “the feeling of a feathery wind brushing across [his] temples” and produces “a real shiver,” a response he describes having at once to things and to natural phenomena, such as landscapes like the Great Barrier Reef in Australia (Breton 1987, 8–13). This humility before the power of objects from around the world was refracted back to him from his collection, which included found natural objects as well as manmade ones, such as the stones he picked up along the river bed of the Lot on walks near his country house at St. Cirq-la-Popie. Other things whose powerful “forces” he felt included the woman’s glove in brass he found in a market and kept on his desk and the odd measuring tool he reproduced in *Nadja* that appealed to him because of its mysterious, yet precise, previous function. His accidental finds were often primed by his intentional search for the intervention of chance, or “objective chance,” as he explains in *Mad Love*. This intervention is more likely to occur when wandering with sympathetic companions, whereby a sort of harmonic resonance born out of “*shared preoccupations*” takes place; he uses the example of a trip to the Paris flea market on a sunny day in 1934 with Alberto Giacometti to illustrate his point: “These two discoveries that Giacometti and I made *together*, respond not just to some desire on the part of one of us, but rather to a desire of one of us with which the other, because of particular circumstances, is associated” (Breton 1987, 32).

Breton also made objects himself. One of his *poèmes-objet* (object-poems) hung in his living room and had been fabricated in 1937 in honor of his second wife Jacqueline Lamba. A framed box, this object is haunted by his personal history and desires, composed of collaged things – a card, a ribbon, a playing card (the Queen of Spades) – put together automatically, starting with an inscribed “resplendent card” pasted at the top left-hand corner as a point of departure (Figure 18.3). He then writes: “Resplendent card of my life / I’ve understood / I’ve caressed the lost child / In the garden of the clock / There in the blue train was / A woman with hair of fishhooks” (Ades 1997, 15, my translation). The composition suggests that Lamba, like the card, is dazzling and has helped him to recover his lost inner child – symbolized by “the garden of the clock.” Desire, love, and automatic insight help him recognize his good fortune in having met her, as he poetically explains in *Mad Love*, published the same year. He evokes a romantic assignation on *le train bleu*, the luxury night train with dark blue sleeping cars that ran through Paris between Calais and the Mediterranean in the 1920s and 1930s, conflating erotic desire and the movement that propels the object-poem forward. He is the fish – the Pisces, as he often reminds his readers – at the root of the “fish” fatally “hooked” on the “fishhook” hair of his Queen of Spades to whom he makes this offering. Furthermore, she and he share alternate water identities – in his version of the co-existence of realities that Carrington was to make so tangible – because, to support herself as a painter, when they first met Lamba was performing as a nymph in a nightclub act, which Breton commemorated in a photograph in *Mad Love* by Rogi André showing her eerily suspended in a water tank.



FIGURE 18.3 André Breton, *Untitled*, January 18, 1937-2, Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection, Art Institute of Chicago. © 2015 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris.

This poetic object, around the corner from his study proper, hung on a wall with North American masks and Kachina dolls from Arizona. It fitted into his composition of objects based on juxtaposition throughout the apartment, according to a larger sort of material automatic writing, that he arranged and rearranged on a regular basis (Monod-Fontaine 1991; Blachère 1996, 148–149). Works by his friends were also prominently featured. A collaged work by Jean Arp, *Woman* (1927), hung across from his desk; on the steps leading from his study to the sitting room hung Picabia's painting *The Lovers (After the Rain)* (1925), now at the Pompidou Center, as well as Salvador Dalí's *William Tell* (1930), separated by a mask of *Queen Victoria* made from pieces of found wood and collaged together by outsider artist Pascal-Désir Maisonneuve. Works by Breton's friends include Man Ray's *Impossibility, Dancer/Danger* from 1920, positioned in front of his large windows like a sentient witness to his activities. A glass-boxed object with the name of a human being, *Dancer/Danger* features a double name combining a human with a force (dancer/danger) linked by the visual slippage between the letter "c" in *dancer* which, when smudged, looks like the "g" in *danger* (Gracq and Ehrmann 2003).

Breton's collection constitutes the embodiment of his greatest ambition to "change life," to refer again to Rimbaud, by changing the way succeeding generations would think

about aesthetics – globally, ethically – despite his blind spot about the access colonialism gave him to the non-Western things he loved (Leclercq 2010).⁴ His drive to learn about the histories of things from geographic locations fundamentally foreign to a man born in nineteenth-century France sets the stage for a twenty-first century desire to understand the world wholistically, beyond the old divisions of Western and non-Western, global north and south. Breton’s idealism about creating a collection that would reflect the globe – in interior and exterior terms – was reflected in his study and in what remains of it on display today as *Breton’s Wall* at the Pompidou Center in Paris, after a great portion of it was auctioned off in 2003. Like his baroque forbears, who created the first Western collections out of a desire to incorporate their knowledge of the world into their personal spaces and to evoke the feelings of awe and respect for the marvelous that accompanied their Age of Discovery, Breton felt awe and respect for his laboratory of things. His evolving understanding of the world in terms of politics, economics, religion, and anthropology was reflected in his collection and refracted back to him by it.

Breton’s unique addition was the expansion of this baroque worldview to the unconscious. He and the surrealists remained stalwartly committed to understanding human psychology and the psychic dimension of the world surrounding them, even as they lived through two world wars, voluntary exile, the loss of friends in both conflagrations, followed by dramatic postwar changes, from rapid decolonization to the student protests of the late 1960s. Breton may have died in 1966, but the title of one of his early automatic poems, “*Plutôt la vie*” (choose life), was scrawled in graffiti on a Paris wall in May 1968 and his early defiant rebelliousness was admired by the generations that succeeded him (Mahon 2005).⁵

As we look back on the surrealist practice of collecting through an examination of the photographic and cinematic documents that remain of Breton’s study and what is left of his collection and style of collecting at the Pompidou Center, the Quai Branly Museum, and, in the United States, in the “Witnesses” room at the Menil Collection in Houston, all of which contain objects he once owned, we can see the slow evolution of aesthetics over the course of the twentieth century towards the global aesthetic that has become the norm today. As the taste for travel has grown exponentially, traveling has increasingly become an activity that results not just in seeing new places but in bringing back souvenirs, material memories. The interconnectivity the contemporary collector can feel with correspondents all over the world through technology is anticipated in the experience Breton sought in his study. In terms of the survival of Breton’s collection, his sense of being surrounded by disparate things is best preserved at the Menil Collection. For unlike the Pompidou Center’s *Breton’s Wall*, where the objects are seen through a vitrine in an artful recreation of the wall behind Breton’s desk, the Menil’s “Witnesses” room allows the visitor to circulate amongst many of the objects with only the smallest, most fragile things displayed behind a glass wall.

The feeling of being surrounded by ghosts in the Menil’s “Witnesses” room through the memory-laden nature of so many formerly sacred statues, rocks, and masks predominates, a feeling that is particularly true of the Northwest Coast shark transformation mask, which can morph into a human face with the pull of a string (Conley 2012). Both the “Witnesses” room at the Menil and *Breton’s Wall* at the Pompidou Center emphasize the surrealist notion of the co-existence of realities theorized by Breton in the “Second Manifesto” that was already embedded in Desnos’s punning poems. The surrealist collection serves as a prismatic, material, environmental, and yet persistently ephemeral manifestation of what it was like to *live* surrealism. It stands as the best and most comprehensive affirmation of the reality known to all those who came in contact with the surrealist

movement in the twentieth century – that Surrealism was a way of life: material and real, mental and physical, a way of thinking and being, a way of walking down the street. Breton lived this reality with his eagle eye for things that were hauntingly alive, with which he surrounded himself.

Notes

- 1 One exception to this rule was Desnos's claim to have been visited nightly by an actual ghost for 6 weeks in 1926–1927, recorded in his "Journal of an Apparition" (Desnos 1999).
- 2 When I was invited to visit Breton's apartment in July 1992 by his widow Elisa at the behest of his daughter Aube, this wash by Hugo was visible from Breton's desk. It is now part of the exhibit of what is left of Breton's collection at the Pompidou Center displayed as *Breton's Wall*.
- 3 An exception may be found in a letter Michel Leiris wrote home from the Trocadéro Museum of Ethnography-sponsored trip across the French colonies in central Africa spanning the distance between Dakar on the west coast of Senegal to Djibouti in East Africa and featuring the acquisition of ethnographic knowledge and objects for the new version of the Trocadéro that opened in 1937 as the Museum of Man. Leiris complains about his discomfort with the acquisition of booty through coercive methods (Leiris 1996, 204, note; Rentzou 2013).
- 4 Aube Breton Elleouët extended this trend in 2003 when she returned a headdress in her father's collection to the Kwakwaka'wakw people in Alert Bay, British Columbia (Mauzé 2011, 267).
- 5 This photograph is captured in a photograph by Edouard Boubat with the title *Plutôt la vie, Paris, mai 1968*. It has been sold as a postcard by Nouvelles Images (www.nouvellesimages.com). I have spoken with participants in May 1968 about what they were reading and Breton was one of the poets they identified.

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