

4-2017

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Recommended Citation

Conley, Katharine, Collecting Ghostly Things: André Breton and Joseph Cornell (2017). *Modernism/Modernity*, 24(2), 263-282.

<https://www.doi.org/10.1353/mod.2017.0021>

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Collecting Ghostly Things: André Breton and Joseph Cornell

Katharine Conley

The collection André Breton left behind at his death in 1966 was unified by ghostliness, surrealism's hauntedness, which grew out of the early experiments with automatic trances in Breton's apartment in 1922–23 and was later embodied in the surrealist propensity to see qualities of life in things, that, having been used and handled, were believed to have led former lives (fig. 1).¹ Breton identified intimately with the ghostliness he found in things because he believed the objects he loved housed hidden impulses, memories akin to the dream traces human beings carry in their unconscious minds. Breton's collection served as his laboratory, both in Paris and later in New York, where he lived in exile during World War II; it was the aesthetic theater within which he staged his most significant contributions to twentieth-century thought.² His collected objects embodied and facilitated his belief in the importance of discovery and revelation. Joseph Cornell's miniature "collections," which his many boxes may be called as well, intrinsically display this shared characteristic of ghostliness, the haunting of the visible by the invisible. The objects Cornell prized and the manner in which he arranged them demonstrate a parallel worldview of things as ghostly companions capable of capturing and bringing to the surface hidden thoughts and feelings. This similarity between Breton's and Cornell's staging of objects has not received attention in Cornell scholarship before now. I will show here how compatible these two approaches to collecting were—on macro- and micro-levels—and how both collections were guided by ghostliness in a way that underscores their shared desire, typical of surrealism, to illuminate and understand the human condition.

MODERNISM / *modernity*
VOLUME TWENTY FOUR,
NUMBER TWO,
PP 263–282. © 2017
JOHNS HOPKINS
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Fig. 1. Sabine Weiss, *André Breton, 42 rue Fontaine*, June 1955. Courtesy of Sabine Weiss.

Cornell saw ghosts in things, much like Breton, who, in his seminal essay on surrealist objects, made clear the surrealist desire to see through the manifest content of objects to the “latencies” within, as he explained using the Freudian terms with which he launched the movement.³ But whereas Breton crowded his study with eclectic things from around the world, which included art by his friends, masks and statues from Oceania and the Pacific Northwest, as well as found and natural objects of both high and negligible value, Cornell collected smaller things, such as bouncing balls, bottles, old toys, corks, pipes, stamps, and maps, grouping them with care into the shadow-box displays he made, pairing them with found images that referred to the skies and stars, including human “stars” like movie stars, ballerinas, and Medici princes and princesses. Cornell transformed cigar boxes, valises, carrying cases, and medicine chests into personalized collections that resembled Breton’s, but on a smaller scale.

Using non-Freudian terminology appropriate to Cornell, Anna Dezeuze notes how Cornell dramatized “the complex negotiations of public and private meaning through everyday objects”; hers is an argument that I expand here to include Breton’s similar approach.⁴ For Breton, “private meaning” always had an explicitly psychological dimension, even when he transitioned from the predominantly Freudian perspective that shaped the first decade of the surrealist movement to a more ethnographic focus, partly in response to his own collection and collecting practices. Breton’s collection, which crowded and surrounded his desk, helped shape the surrealist movement in a way that James Clifford appropriately identifies with structural anthropology and its concern with “the human spirit’s ‘deep’ shared springs of creativity.”⁵ As Clifford explains in his foundational essay on surrealism and collecting in *The Predicament of Culture*: “Surrealism’s subject was an international and elemental humanity, ‘anthropological’ in scope. Its object was Man” (243). What I seek to show here is the extent to which this view of surrealism so accurately summarized by Clifford emerged directly as a result of collecting over a lifetime, from Breton’s growing tendency to think *through* his own objects, which over time came from increasingly distant parts of the globe.

Cornell never saw Breton’s apartment in Paris because he never left the United States. Nonetheless, his signature boxes, assembled into what he called “poetic theaters,” shared the ambition, seen in Breton’s private collection, to represent the world. The hospitable salon in Breton’s apartment, furnished with a divan and comfortable chairs, filled with light from large windows overlooking the Boulevard Clichy, was profusely arrayed with paintings, sculptures, and objects hanging on the walls. By 1966, these included a collection of Hopi Kachina dolls collected in the United States along with a Yup’ik mask now in the collection of the Quai Branly Museum, an object-poem made by Breton himself in honor of his second wife, Jacqueline Lamba, and paintings by Salvador Dalí and Georges Rouault. A few steps led up to his study, dominated by a massive desk facing the doorway, with more large studio windows overlooking the boulevard to the left, and bookshelves lining the walls across from the desk. Objects of all sorts crowded the top of the desk and the shelves behind the desk chair as well

266 as the wall facing the windows: a Pacific Northwest shaman box; a brass glove found at a flea market; Oceanic statuettes; objects made by friends such as Man Ray, Alberto Giacometti, and Valentine Hugo; objects made by self-taught artists in European mental institutions; a small oil painting by Henri Rousseau; and butterflies encased in glass. Transformation masks from the Pacific Northwest Coast hung alongside masks of Breton's own face and that of his friend Paul Eluard.

When Breton's packed studio is considered in light of two desires expressed in *Nadja* (1928)—the wish to live in a glass house and the wish that life might unfold like an open book whose pages could function like swinging doors revealing ever-fresh viewpoints on the self—certain aspects of his collection become even more apparent: the transparency of the internal connection Breton seeks to share with the objects he prizes, some of which had originally been collected on ethnographic expeditions; his desire to achieve a kind of mutual understanding with them; and his wish that they exist in an open, flexible space.⁶ The desire for space—internal and external—to be open and transparent may be understood even more forcefully in light of *Nadja*'s spiral structure, based on the swinging door, which, each time it swings open, reveals a new perspective on the narrative in progress (Conley, *Automatic Woman*, 113–14). In his catalog essay for an exhibition of Oceanic objects from 1948, Breton comments that these objects have the ability to transport him in his imagination to the places where they were made. “I often need to come back to them,” he writes, “to watch them as I am waking up, to take them in my hands, to talk to them, to escort them back to their place of origin so as to reconcile myself to where I am.”⁷

Breton had an expansive, world-encompassing vision for his collection. Contained within one small Parisian apartment, his collected objects spanned the globe from the Arctic to the Pacific Islands, including the North American continent and Europe. He sought to see, while sitting at his desk, the human psychic realities that these objects from around the world expressed and that his gaze and imagination connected. Within the intimate, everyday space in which Breton worked, he sought to map the world and to correlate his discoveries about human nature and psychology with that external geography in a way that might fuse past and present, memory and experience, into one, synchronous whole.⁸

Breton reputedly arranged and re-arranged the things around him on a regular basis, according to the principle of juxtaposition intrinsic to collage, which Clifford has identified as key to understanding the surrealist aesthetic and sensibility.⁹ Breton's arrangements were not determined by received notions of classification. Instead, they followed the dada and surrealist principle of collage, which for Clifford paralleled the juxtaposition of objects typical of ethnographic study. “Ethnography cut with surrealism emerges as the theory and practice of juxtaposition,” explains Clifford (*Predicament of Culture*, 147). Breton believed that through juxtapositions he could most effectively tease out his objects' most sentient and mysterious (ghostly) qualities and appreciate what they whispered to him; he viewed these interactions as “encounters,” as though he were communing with actual beings: their poetic value lay in their ability to make him experience “the most exalting glimpse of the possible.”¹⁰ Breton's collection embodied a

process Clifford describes as an “accumulation” that “unfolds in a pedagogical, edifying manner,” and that, for the collector, is essential, “as essential,” he writes, citing Jean Baudrillard, “as dreams” (*Predicament of Culture*, 219–20).¹¹

For the major, although brief, surrealist exhibition of objects at the Charles Ratton gallery in Paris in May 1936, Breton wrote an essay, “Crisis of the Object,” in which he asserts that objects, like humans, contain “forces” or “latencies” equivalent to human psychological energy, especially when they have been associated with previous practical or spiritual functions, previous lives that remain repressed when they adopt new incarnations as part of an aesthetic collection.¹² Marcel Duchamp’s “readymade” *Bottlerack* (1914), for instance, no longer serves the practical purpose of holding bottles to dry in a kitchen; instead it takes on the aspect of an exotic headdress when displayed in the vitrine of Ratton’s gallery, juxtaposed, as it was, with Eskimo masks from Ratton’s collection, themselves repurposed sacred objects, hanging on the walls (fig. 2).¹³ The object’s former life has been repressed and become dynamic; it is now a “latency” in Breton’s Freudian terminology: both Duchamp’s *Bottlerack* and the masks are now capable of functioning in the suggestive and symbolic way that dreams do within the human psyche.¹⁴



▲
Fig. 2. Man Ray, *Vitrine at the Surrealist Exhibition*, 1936. © CNAC/MNAM/Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resources, NY.

268 **Loft: From Ballerinas to Soap Bubbles**

Like Breton, Cornell was drawn to things that had been previously owned. His “poetic theaters” are pervaded by the ghostliness that emerges when juxtaposed things reveal hidden qualities through careful reordering. Cornell described these “theaters” as “[s]hadow boxes become poetic theatres or settings wherein are metamorphosed the elements of a childhood pastime.”¹⁵ His boxes join objects found by chance with salvaged pictures intentionally collected and arranged. They conjure three-dimensional worlds in which fragments of everyday things, from pasted images to dime-store jewels, create a parallel, otherworldly universe imbued with nostalgia. Cornell’s “shadow boxes” summon ghostly shapes and images in the mind’s eye of the viewer. He materialized ghostly memories in the present much as Breton processed the mythic past in his study.

This ability to make past events present is perhaps best illustrated by the boxes in honor of the ballet Cornell created in the 1940s. Both *Taglioni’s Jewel Case* (1940) and *Homage to the Romantic Ballet* (1942) are dedicated to the Romantic ballerina Marie Taglioni, the first dancer to rise up on her toes in point shoes (fig. 3). These magical boxes contain glass ice cubes of the sort Taglioni herself was reputed to keep in her jewel case, together with a description of an incident Taglioni recalled in one of her letters, which Cornell had acquired “from a London autograph dealer”:¹⁶

On a moonlight night in the winter of 1835 the / carriage of Marie TAGLIONI was halted by a Russian highwayman, and that enchanting creature commanded to dance for this audience of one / upon a panther’s skin spread over the snow beneath the stars. From this actuality arose the legend that to keep alive the memory / of this adventure so precious to her, TAGLIONI formed the habit of placing a piece of artificial ice in her jewel casket or dressing table / where, melting among the sparkling stones, there was evoked a hint of the atmosphere of the starlit heavens over the ice-covered landscape. (quoted in Waldman, *Cornell, Master of Dreams*, 58)

The combination of text and object here parallels the dual love of word and image in the surrealist imagination, also evident in the object-poems Breton himself made in the 1930s and 1940s. As a tangible framing device that can literally, physically, be shut, Cornell’s box collapses the two categories of text and image into one united form of communication.¹⁷

The 1940 *Taglioni’s Jewel Case* has an imitation diamond necklace that sparkles like the imitation ice Taglioni kept in her jewel case, whereas the 1942 *Homage to the Romantic Ballet* has a mirror that lines the bottom interior of the box, across which many “particles of broken glass and simulated gems are scattered,” while two larger simulated gems hang from a tack on the left interior wall.¹⁸ This interior is covered by a sheet of blue glass under a sheet of colorless glass, emphasizing the layers of reflection involved in looking at the gems, the ice, and the starry night sky, all of which pale in comparison with the dazzle of the star-dancer’s performance, which for Cornell remains lost and unrepeatable. This box, with its juxtaposition of dime-store jewels and ice behind glass, evokes “aspects of art that can and cannot be possessed,” as Ellen



▲
Fig. 3. Joseph Cornell, *Homage to the Romantic Ballet*, 1942. Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Levy explains (*Criminal Ingenuity*, 124). It translates “an interiorized ‘refuge for art’” into “a kinship with the museum vitrine and the department-store window,” thereby allowing the everyday viewer a glimpse into Cornell’s private imaginary world, as though it were on display (123). *Taglioni’s Jewel Case* epitomizes Cornell’s capture of ephemera in a format that allows him literally to hold onto and contain it for his own private delectation and to display it. Cornell’s portable glassed boxes, as Levy helps the viewer see, are at once obviously commercialized because of the cheap objects within them, which imitate artistic craftsmanship, but at the same time decommercialized through their participation in a new form of art that is ghostly because it is haunted by “dimestore alchemy.”¹⁹

Marie Taglioni, the daughter of Filippo Taglioni—one of the first masters of the Romantic ballet, who in 1832 choreographed *La Sylphide* for his daughter—floated as effortlessly on the stage as the soap bubbles that captured Cornell’s imagination. Cornell was throughout his life a devoted fan of the ballet and of ballerinas, both from the past, like Taglioni, and from his own day. Cornell acknowledges Taglioni’s importance to the history of ballet by creating these boxes in her honor; he also fixes his homage firmly

270 within the tradition of surrealist object-making insofar as the prefabricated glass ice cubes in the boxes are literal renderings of an everyday ephemeral object that allow the viewer to understand the thrilling chill Cornell felt when learning about Marie Taglioni's memory of the winter night she danced for the highwayman. The dancer embodies ghostliness because she surrounds herself in an invisible aura of movements that disappear into thin air as she moves through time and space. Like Taglioni's own talismanic use of the glass ice cube, Cornell's cube reminds us how the illusion that is dance helps us transcend artistically the mundane experience of our everyday lives in a form that recalls Breton's quest for "exalting" things. Taglioni's jewel box makes a jewel out of memory because it facilitates Cornell's artistic desire to see the passage of ghosts in things and, by association, to allow his viewers to see them too.²⁰ His boxes open up a secret interior world to public view, a microcosmic version of the openness, flexibility, and transparency Breton referenced in his search for a self inhabiting a glass house, a metaphor for the opening of "interior" space, itself represented by the talismanic reality of his study to his own self-consciousness.

Cornell's shadow boxes reflect how he was a collector of dreams and dream images, like Breton, just as his approach, through collaged imagery and fragments, shared Breton's poetic ideal of imagery based on surprising juxtapositions.²¹ Cornell's artistic practice was reputedly inspired by having seen Max Ernst's surrealist collages at Julien Levy's gallery in New York City. Cornell was particularly taken with Ernst's collage novel *La Femme sans têtes* (*The Hundred Headless Woman*, 1929) because of Ernst's use of nineteenth-century engravings as primary source material (Ades, "Transcendental Surrealism," 16). Levy ran the gallery that was the first to show surrealist work in New York City and edited the first English-language anthology of surrealism destined for an American public, simply entitled *Surrealism* (1936). Once Levy had seen Cornell's collages, he included them in a "landmark exhibition" that launched surrealism in New York in 1932, a group show again entitled simply *Surréalisme* (Waldman, *Cornell, Master of Dreams*, 20).²² Late in life, Cornell stated that surrealism constituted a "revelation world" for him (Blair, *Cornell's Vision of Spiritual Order*, 17).

Seven years younger than Breton (1896–1966), Cornell (1903–72) spent his life in New York and never visited Paris. But clearly surrealism touched and inspired him, even if he disclaimed having ever "been an official surrealist" in a letter to Alfred Barr sent in reaction to the major exhibition Barr organized at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936, "Fantastic Art, Dada and Surrealism."²³ "I do not share in the subconscious and dream theories of the surrealists," Cornell wrote in that letter. Nonetheless, he admitted his "fervent" admiration for "much of their work," particularly that of Duchamp, a key player in New York dada and an advisor and friend to Breton in New York during World War II. Duchamp was famous for his "readymades," ordinary mass-produced objects like the *Bottlerack* repurposed as art through the artist's creative appropriation of an ordinary thing transformed into a *new* extraordinary thing. Cornell agreed to have his work included in Barr's exhibition, thus launching an extended artistic dialogue between the reclusive American and the European artists and thinkers whose work he admired. His trademark box, *Untitled, Soap Bubble Set*, the first in a series, was included



▲ Fig. 4. Joseph Cornell, *Soap Bubble Set*, 1936. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. Purchased through the gift of Henry and Walter Keney. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph by Allen Phillips/Wadsworth Atheneum.

in the surrealist section of the exhibition, even though the catalog described the box as “American constructivist” (Ades, “Transcendental Surrealism, 20) (fig. 4). A black and white reproduction of that work was also added as part of the appendix to Levy’s anthology, published in 1936 in conjunction with the exhibition.²⁴ In the anthology’s introduction, Levy describes Cornell as “one of the very few Americans at the present time who fully and creatively understands the surrealist viewpoint.”²⁵

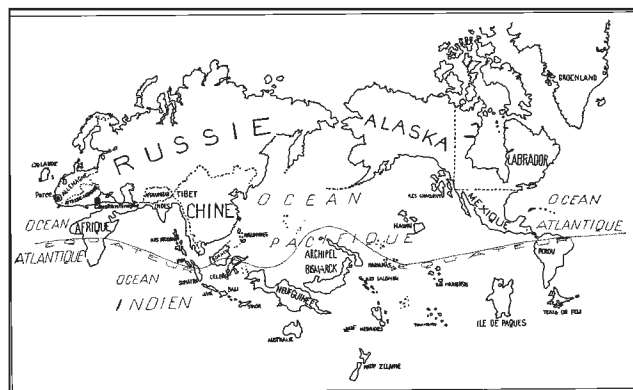
Although distant from the surrealists in many respects, including politics and perhaps especially religious faith—Cornell was a dedicated Christian Scientist, while most surrealists were atheists—Cornell shared aesthetic principles with Breton, including a love of objects as intermediaries and forces with strong psychological connections

272 to everyday environments. Like the surrealists, he admired and practiced collage as a fundamental approach to making art. He thus embraced the importance of the definition of the surrealist image Breton put forth in the first “Manifesto of Surrealism”: the “*juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities*” (*Manifestoes*, 20, emphasis in original). Cornell’s fascination with found scraps, objects, and images that could be assembled according to the juxtapositions that defined collage brought him close to the surrealists as did his appreciation for the aesthetics of ordinary things and images taken from popular culture. While his repressed sexuality (identified as “queer” by Dezeuze) may have put him at odds with heteronormative surrealists like Breton, the erotic romanticism of some of his pieces, particularly those dedicated to dancers and movie stars, arguably harmonized with the surrealists’ appreciation of unconscious erotic drives and desires.²⁶

Years later, Cornell referred to Breton’s 1923 automatic poem “The Sunflower” in his diaries and letters as if in so doing he was offering a coded reference to the sort of freely imagined work he admired and which the surrealists encouraged through their practice of automatism.²⁷ In November 1967, he wrote in his diary: “down in the cellar again the nebulous nature of the influence of *Surrealism* . . . exposure to Surrealism’s philosophy relative to, concern with, the ‘object’—a kind of happy marriage with my life-long preoccupation with things” (*Joseph Cornell’s Theater*, 387). For Cornell, the “happy marriage” of the surrealist emphasis on dream experience and the power of objects to his own worldview resonated powerfully, whether or not he ever saw himself fully as a “surrealist.”

Earthly and Constellated Worlds

The most profound affinity between Cornell and Breton lay in their shared obsession with collecting. Whereas Breton was a collector of finished works of art and objects, Cornell was a collector of components of works of art that remained to be created. However, if one sees Breton’s collection as itself an artistic entity made of rotating and moveable pieces, then their “collections” may be understood as more closely parallel than they might initially seem or than they have been viewed until now. While Breton’s collection manifested itself in comparatively large and heavy things kept in his apartment and concentrated in his study—things that he nonetheless moved around and rearranged throughout his life—Cornell’s collections were relatively small and contained within boxes that were themselves portable. Referring to Dawn Ades’s insight that Cornell’s boxes “come alive” only with the spectator’s intervention, Dezeuze insists upon the significance Cornell’s invitations to the viewer to open his boxes and move objects within them, just as he himself deconstructed toys, specifically in *La Favorite* (1948) and in his *Dovecotes* series from the 1950s, featuring “small balls or blocks that move around noisily in each compartment when the work is shaken” (“Unpacking Cornell,” 236).²⁸ This “invitation” to rearrange components of a collection correlates to Breton’s own practice of changing the place of objects in his study.



▲
Fig. 5. Surrealist map of the world, published in *Variétés*, 1929.

On a macroscopic scale, Breton sought to encompass the world in his study, which was like the world reflected in the “surrealist map of the world” of 1929 that exaggerated geographic locations of aesthetic interest to him—such as Easter Island, Alaska, and the Pacific Northwest, from which many of his favorite objects came—at the expense of Europe and the United States, which seem shrunk in size (fig. 5). However staunchly Breton claimed an anticolonialist stance throughout his life, his collection is worldly, rooted in the history of the former colonies of European powers such as France and in their vexed political relationships with their previous rulers, particularly during the period of decolonization after World War II.²⁹ This transition facilitated collections like Breton’s, even as he sought to establish a purposefully global aesthetic.

However, on a microscopic scale, Cornell’s boxes transcend the worldliness in Breton’s study through their decidedly otherworldly quality, disconnected from world politics (although clearly connected to his own personal history). His boxes constitute portable, collaged collections, that nonetheless reach the stars, which for him conveyed “the historical constancy that astronomy represented,” as Kirsten Hoving explains (*Cornell and Astronomy*, 1). The boxes regularly refer to flight, transport, constellations, and human “stars” as distant from Cornell as the outer planets of the solar system. These stars share with ballerinas and with the birds, who also populate many of his boxes, a capacity to float and move in a way that contrasts with Breton’s weighted things. And yet, late in life, Breton wrote about the capacity of objects in his study to “transport” him to distant places in his imagination, linked to their countries of origin and their original function.³⁰ In Cornell’s boxes, references to hotels, maps, constellations, and postage stamps combine with birds to convey a parallel idea of transport, travel, and their link to reverie. It is clear that it was in his collecting practices that Cornell came closest to thinking like Breton.

Cornell and the surrealists were similarly fascinated with found and repurposed things of the sort that Breton prized in his study. A series of masks displayed on the shelf behind his desk in the 1960s, above a photographic portrait of his wife Elisa, for example, reinforced the link between the masks and actual human faces (fig. 6). These masks served as reminders to Breton, sitting at his desk in Paris, of the fact that they



▲ Fig. 6. Sabine Weiss, *Breton in his Studio*, June 1955. Courtesy of Sabine Weiss.



▲ Fig. 7. Gilles Ehrmann, *André Breton's Studio*, 2003. © Estate of Gilles Ehrmann/SAIF Paris/VAGA, New York, NY.

had been created for humans to wear in sacred dances in distant places, and that their purpose had been to access otherworldly spirits and draw them down into human interaction as he himself wished to tap the powers locked within his own unconscious mind through the automatic practice that characterized the ghostliness of the surrealist movement at its outset in 1922 (fig. 7).³¹

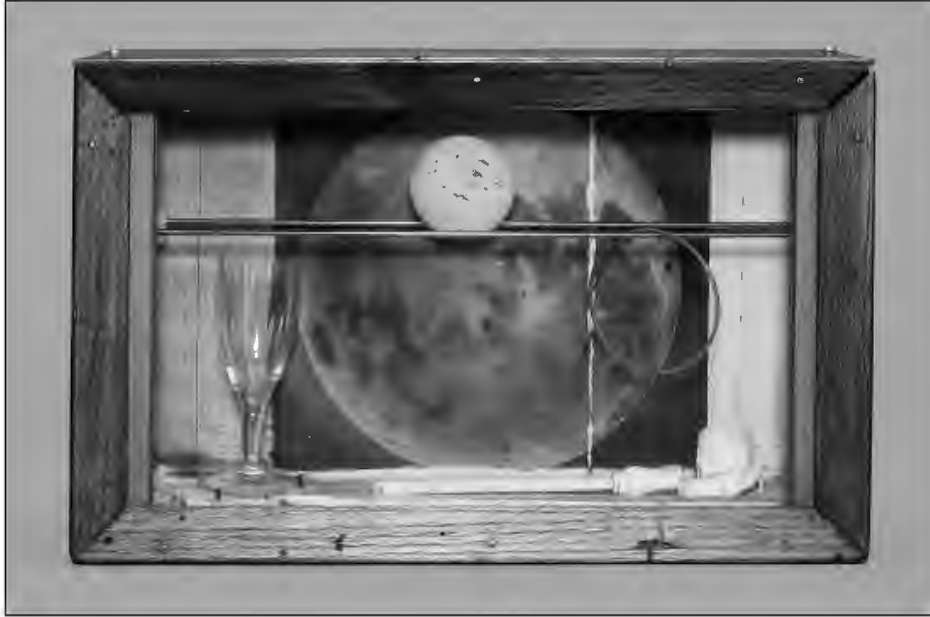
The box Cornell contributed to the Museum of Modern Art exhibition, *Untitled, Soap Bubble Set*, became the first of a series. Each box, beginning with the original one, contains common elements: a clay pipe, a glass, and an engraving. His first *Soap Bubble Set* follows the mode of American nineteenth-century trompe l'oeil painting. Just as Breton was sensitive to myths and objects particular to France, Cornell was partial to American traditions and objects.³² The American nineteenth-century painters he admired, trompe l'oeil masters like John Frederick Peto (1854–1907) and William Michael Harnett (1848–92), “treated ordinary, everyday objects” with reverence in a way that Cornell emulated and that also paralleled the pleasure the surrealists took in everyday things they found in Paris; moreover, Cornell would have been aware of the history of the soap bubble in seventeenth-century genre painting as “a metaphor for the transitory nature of life and the vanity of all earthly things,” according to Diane Waldman (*Cornell, Master of Dreams*, 28).³³

Pipes already had a special meaning in surrealism thanks to René Magritte’s *Treason of Images* (1929), which points out the obvious fact that although his work is a realistic painting of a pipe, “This is not a pipe” [Ceci n’est pas une pipe]. Magritte’s title shows illusion to be one of the effects of art, an idea Cornell repeats in his *Soap Bubble Sets* and then reinforces in a statement he wrote about them:

The fragile, shimmering globules become the shimmering but more enduring planets—a connotation of moon and tides—the association of water less subtle, as when driftwood pieces make up a proscenium to set off the dazzling white of sea-foam and billowy cloud crystallized [sic] in a pipe of fancy. (quoted in Waldman, *Cornell, Master of Dreams*, 28)

For Cornell, nature itself, in the shape of “driftwood pieces,” acts as a setting for art, “a proscenium” that “crystallizes” a scene through chance, which he then recaptures in ghost form with his pipes “of fancy.” Some of the natural details he put in his *Soap Bubble Sets* were picked up on the beach near Westhampton, New York, where his sister lived, including driftwood, shells, pebbles, and seaweed. With this habit of finding things on nature walks and incorporating them into his miniature collections, he was practicing a mode of collecting familiar to Breton, who also incorporated into his personal collection stones found along the Lot Valley riverbed near his weekend house in Saint-Cirq-Lapopie. Like Breton, Cornell also purchased things, including the many Dutch clay pipes he used for his constructions, possibly as a way of paying tribute to his own Dutch heritage.³⁴

In a 1957 version of *Untitled, Soap Bubble Set*, the clay pipe lying at the bottom of the box is flanked by a glass, whose transparency doubles the transparency of the glass case we look through to see into the box and also the transparency of the ghostly soap bubble. This bubble is itself a vaporous entity, which we can only imagine through the juxtaposition of the pipe with the glass that reflects the light and inside of which we might imagine the soap that yielded the disappeared bubble now suggested by the small yellow marble resting in the glass (fig. 8). Cornell’s bubbles evoke lapsed time and lost memories that have been recaptured in this evocative staging. Ghostly doublings then



▲ Fig. 8. Joseph Cornell, *Untitled, Soap Bubble Set*, 1957. Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

occur; the yellow marble is doubled by the yellow cork ball balanced on two metal rods in the upper portion of the box. This ball's shape is, in turn, doubled by the looming moon affixed to the back of the box. In case the idea of transport from the earth to the skies might not be clear enough from the doubling that shifts each globe from one reality to the next in a rising trajectory, Cornell affixed a postage stamp of a butterfly to the inside wall of the box, on top of tables of astronomical data (Ades, *Surrealist Art*, 82).

As we gaze into Cornell's box, we can envision the evaporated bubble's movement from glass to pipe and then to colorful ball as it floats upwards, eluding gravity until it is transformed into a heavenly body. In terms of Magritte's logic, this bubble, which is *not* a moon, nonetheless visually transforms itself metaphorically into a body *like* the moon in Cornell's alternate world through a form of visual rhyming, as it rises through the air above our heads, becoming slowly transmogrified into a ghost in the viewer's imagination, paradoxically captured forever in its evanescence. Whereas Breton and the European surrealists with their map of the world could be seen as imagining travel on a horizontal plane in relation to actual geographic locations, Cornell's trajectory was more vertical and evanescent, like the floating leaps of his beloved ballerinas on point, which only created the illusion of flight. His dream world was less tangible, although just as fanciful, as Breton's, whose metaphor for discovery harked back literally to the baroque navigators traveling from Europe to the Americas "[a]t the forefront of discovery" (*Mad Love*, 25). Both men used their collecting practices to display their personalized understanding of human knowledge in a manner directly parallel to the first European baroque collectors, who similarly understood their collections as a way of acquiring knowledge about the world. Paula Findlen summarizes the goal of those

early modern collectors whose vision resembled Breton's: "As a paradigm of knowledge, collecting stretched the parameters of the known to incorporate an expanding material culture."³⁵

Cornell's Museum and Breton's Studio

Museum (1945–48) reveals the method by which Cornell's boxes constitute micro-cosmic surrealist collections (fig. 9). It recalls an important earlier work, his *Cabinet of Natural History (Object)*, which was displayed alongside *Untitled, Soap Bubble Set* in the same large glass case at the Museum of Modern Art exhibit of 1936 with the joint title, *The Elements of Natural Philosophy* (fig. 10).³⁶ In this earlier work, *Cabinet of Natural History (Object)*, a carrying case for sample vials is propped open to reveal the illustration of a mountain glued onto the inside lid. To one side, an alternate illustration leans against *Untitled, Soap Bubble Set* within the large glass case. This alternate illustration of a stone building behind a gate opposes a man-made setting to the natural mountain landscape and suggests that a man-made "philosophy" capable of yielding the "wisdom" inherent to the study of this philosophy might be derived



▲
 Fig. 9. Joseph Cornell, *Museum*, 1945–48. The Menil Collection, Houston, TX. Bequest of Jermayne MacAgy. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph by Hickey-Robertson.



▲
 Fig. 10. Joseph Cornell, *Elements of Natural Philosophy*, 1936. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY. Photograph by George Platt Lynes. © Estate of George Platt Lynes.

from the “natural” specimens sealed within the bottles—and possibly gathered on the mountainside represented by the illustration on the inside of the carrying case lid. As Hoving explains, for this box Cornell was drawn to the seventeenth-century understanding of natural philosophy as “a search for general explanations, as shown through research and observation” (*Cornell and Astronomy*, 40). Within the large glass case, some of the bottles were taken out, as though a child had come along and left them scattered randomly before the curators had had a chance to seal the display, even though there is nothing random about Cornell’s careful work. This arrangement was clearly intended to suggest a playfulness and a desire for mobility and transformation within enclosure that echoes Cornell’s recurring theme of transport as seen in other boxes featuring bubbles, birds, and ballerinas, and stars.

With *Museum*, Cornell takes one of the governing principles of Breton’s collection, namely the desire to recreate the world in one room, and reduces it to a miniature scale. *Museum*—in the shape of an open box filled with small glass bottles, each of which is capable of holding and displaying even smaller things—is composed of moving parts. As an entity, *Museum* highlights the act and practice of collection itself as an overall aesthetic assemblage of smaller things, parts carefully chosen to constitute a synthetic whole, like a musical or olfactory composition of notes and scents as the

basis of symphonies and perfumes. Cornell had helped Duchamp construct his *Boîte en Valise* (1936–41) in New York in the early 1940s, a project Duchamp called his “portable museum,” inspired by the necessity of having to leave so much of his work behind when he left France during World War II (Blair, *Cornell’s Vision of Spiritual Order*, 41).³⁷ Duchamp wanted to be able to keep versions of his life’s work with him at all times. Having already begun his boxes by that time, Cornell was a fitting collaborator for Duchamp’s project. Cornell, too, wanted to hold his worlds within worlds at hand, in portable form.

Museum, by its title, refers etymologically to “a scholar’s study.”³⁸ Cornell was presumably referring to the mysterious contents of the bottles in the carrying case, but this title also echoes this work’s connection to Breton’s scholarly study, which likewise constituted a personal “museum” for him. Cornell clarifies that this version of the concept of “museum” includes: “Watchmaker’s Sweepings, Juggling Act, Souvenir of Monte Carlo, Chimney-sweeper’s relic, Thousand & One Nights, Mayan Feathers, White Landscape, From the Golden Temple of Dobayba (conquistador), Sailor’s Game, Venetian Map, Mouse Material.”³⁹ His list of elements in this fantastical personalized museum belies the traditional twentieth-century understanding of the museum as “a building . . . used as a repository for the preservation and exhibition of . . . fine and industrial art . . . [a]lso applied to the collection of objects itself” and instead conforms more to the concentrated organizing principle of Breton’s study, within which the entire world is encompassed and linked to the ambitious surrealist enterprise (*OED*, 1880).⁴⁰

When considered in tandem, Cornell’s and Breton’s “museums” make it possible to see how Cornell’s penchant for ephemera mirrors the principle underlying many of the choices made by Breton in selecting the objects within his “museum”: namely, surrealist ghostliness, which reflects the surrealist drive to tap resources embedded deeply in human consciousness as a way of understanding the human condition. This juxtaposition confirms the importance of collected, collaged, and assembled things as material, automatic expressions in which assembled objects substitute for words and phrases in order to articulate each poetic artist’s most human reality, namely the outward expression of the intensely personal human experience of living, thinking, and being in the world. Where for Cornell this is a centripetal, celestial experience, for Breton it was a centrifugal, global experience.

The desire to hold the world in one space—whether a room or a box—remains as impossible as the perfect archive: it is a fleeting yet gloriously ambitious desire that epitomizes surrealism’s inveterate idealism, on the one hand, and its rootedness in everyday reality, on the other. That reality, moreover, was based essentially on the movement of a human being as he or she negotiates a mortal life cycle surrounded by things, simultaneously solid and fragile, real and ghostly. Just as Breton’s study constituted in many ways his masterwork, which he created and recreated throughout his life, Cornell kept making new boxes on the same themes in a similar effort to capture and recapture the variety and evanescent nature of life. A Cornell box, like Breton’s study, reminds us, as viewers, of our own mortal lives, which are ever mobile and never static (*Mad Love*, 114).⁴¹ In portable formats Cornell ultimately might be seen as sharing

280 the goals Breton sought to achieve with his collection, namely to set up a world that could mirror back to the collector an external and enduring reflection of the worlds contained within his imagination: at once global and local, universal and personal, as tangible and ephemeral as a human being's mortal life and empowered to illuminate the secret of that life's innermost purpose.

Notes

I thank Jennifer Farrell for inviting me to give a version of this article at the Fralin Museum of Art, University of Virginia, as part of the "Joseph Cornell and Surrealism" symposium on March 29, 2014, organized in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name, co-curated by Sylvie Ramond, Chief Curator of Cultural Heritage, Museum of Fine Arts, Lyon, and Matthew Affron, Muriel and Philip Berman Curator of Modern Art, Philadelphia Museum of Art. I also thank Stephanie d'Alessandro for inviting me to give a talk based on an earlier version of this article at the Art Institute of Chicago on October 14, 2010. I thank Juliette Bianco and Katherine Hart of the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College, and Alyce Mahon and Richard Stamelman for their thoughtful reading of this material.

1. See Katharine Conley, *Surrealist Ghostliness* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

2. Krzysztof Fijalkowski also uses the word "laboratory" to describe Breton's studio in "André Breton: 42, rue Fontaine," in *The Surreal House*, ed. Jane Alison (London: Barbican Gallery, 2010), 299.

3. "Crisis of the Object" was published in a double number of the journal *Cahiers d'art* that served as the catalog for the exhibition before it was republished in Breton's book-length *Surrealism and Painting* in 1965. "Latencies" is my translation from the original French *latences* in "Crise de l'objet," *Cahiers d'art* 11, no. 6–10 (1936): 21–26, 24.

4. Anna Dezeuze, "Unpacking Joseph Cornell: Consumption and Play in the Work of Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and George Brecht," in *Joseph Cornell, Opening the Box*, ed. James Edwards and Stephanie L. Taylor (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 219–42, 242.

5. James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 243.

6. See Mary Ann Caws, "How to House the Surrealist Imagination?," in *The Surreal House*, 42–53; and André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 18. Howard translates *portes battantes* as "books left ajar, like doors"; I call them "swinging doors" (Katharine Conley, *Automatic Woman* [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996], 113).

7. André Breton, "Oceania," in *Free Rein*, trans. Michael Parmentier and Jacqueline d'Amboise (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 170–74.

8. See also my "Carrington's Kitchen," *Papers of Surrealism* 10 (2012): 1–18; and my "The Surrealist Collection: Ghosts in the Laboratory," in *Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. David Hopkins (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), 304–18.

9. See Isabelle Monod-Fontaine, "Le tour des objets," in *André Breton: La beauté convulsive*, ed. Agnès de la Beaumelle and Isabelle Monod-Fontaine (Paris: Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 1991), 64–68, 65.

10. André Breton, "'C'est à vous de parler, jeune voyant des choses,'" in *Œuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 4:854, my translation. See also Katharine Conley, "Value and Hidden Cost in André Breton's Surrealist Collection," *South Central Review* 32, no. 1 (2015): 8–22.

11. Clifford also acknowledges here the work of Susan Stewart, Phillip Fisher, Krzysztof Pomian, James Bunn, Daniel Defert, Johannes Fabian, and Rémy Saisselin.

12. In addition to "Crisis of the Object" published in *Cahiers d'art* and later reprinted in *Surrealism and Painting* in 1965, Breton published a short anticipatory review about "Objets surréalistes," *La Semaine de Paris*, May 22–26, 1936, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 2:1199–1202.

13. Elizabeth Cowling, "The Eskimos, the American Indians and the Surrealists," *Art History* 1, no. 4 (1978): 484–500, 488.

14. Such an analogy had in fact been suggested by Breton as early as the "Manifesto of Surrealism" of 1924, in which he compares the receptivity of the surrealist poet to the object that is the recording

instrument, when he states that true surrealists are human beings capable of transforming themselves into receptacles of “so many echoes,” “modest *recording instruments*,” at once animate and inanimate, a concept which, when understood in reverse, bestows sentience on things (André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972], 27–28 emphasis in original).

15. Waldman, *Master of Dreams*, 28.

16. Linda Roscoe Hartigan, “Joseph Cornell’s Dance of Duality,” in *Joseph Cornell, Shadowplay*, ed. Terry Ann R. Neff (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 12–34, 24.

17. See Ellen Levy, *Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery, and the Struggle Between the Arts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 124.

18. Dawn Ades, *Surrealist Art, The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Collection* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 1997), 45.

19. This is a reference to the title of Charles Simic’s admiring book on Cornell, *Dimestore Alchemy: The Art of Joseph Cornell* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011).

20. Cornell may very well also have seen Brassai’s photograph of crystals in the surrealist journal *Minotaure* from the 1930s, used by Breton as an illustration for his autobiographical statement about living in a glass house, later published in André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

21. Robert Motherwell stated in an interview that “the Surrealists had a very strong feeling for poetry, and from that point of view I looked at Cornell as a poet,” despite differences (quoted in Lindsay Blair, *Joseph Cornell’s Vision of Spiritual Order* [New York: Reaktion Books, 1998], 75).

22. The first exhibition of surrealist work in the United States took place in 1931 at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut. The flyer for this show may be found in Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, *Joseph Cornell: Navigating the Imagination* (Salem, MA: Peabody Essex Museum, 2007), 17.

23. Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway, The Life and Work of Joseph Cornell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 84. Kirsten Hoving explains that “Cornell’s denied identity as a Surrealist was probably more complicated. By the late 1930s when the artist was most directly associated with the movement, Surrealism was equated with Communism in the minds of many Americans. . . . Most likely it was the politicization of Surrealism in the 1930s that Cornell wished to avoid” (*Joseph Cornell and Astronomy: A Case for the Stars* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009], 19).

24. The other work by Cornell in the appendix is a collage from 1932, presumably included in Levy’s New York exhibition of that year.

25. Julien Levy, *Surrealism* (1936; rpt., New York: Da Capo Press, 1995), 28.

26. For Dezeuze, Cornell’s “queer aesthetic” answers Breton’s fascination with repressed impulses, what he calls *latencies* (“Unpacking Cornell,” 225).

27. Caws explains in her anthology of Cornell’s writings that he was partially sparked to recall Breton’s early automatic writing by the call for “an erotics of art” at the conclusion of Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation,” according to which emotion and imagination could trump rational and potentially rigid interpretations of art. See *Joseph Cornell’s Theater of the Mind*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 316–17, 332, 329–31, 349–50; and Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (New York: Picador, 1966), 14.

28. See Dawn Ades, “The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell,” in *Joseph Cornell*, ed. Kynaston McShine (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 15–41, 20. Catriona McAra argues that Cornell’s boxes were constructed in such a way that they could often be reassembled by their owners, each one “like an interactive, anti-chronological book” (“Prescription Narratives: Rereading Joseph Cornell’s *Pharmacy Series* as a ‘Modernist Antidote,’” in *The Apothecary’s Chest: Magic, Art and Medication*, ed. Konstantine Georganta, Fabienne Collignon and Anne-Marie Millim [Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009], 59–70, 66).

29. See again Conley, “Value and Hidden Cost.”

30. See Breton, “Oceania.”

31. In his 1950 *Neuf* article on Pacific Northwest Coast transformation masks, Breton explains how the act of wearing a transformation mask involves a charged emotional exchange, an *échange passionnel*, between the self with, and the self without, the mask, in a reciprocal relation, allowing

282 an individual to become psychically connected to alternate versions of the self as an animal and also to the surrounding world. See André Breton, “Amérique du Nord: Note sur les masques à transformation de la côte ouest,” *André Breton, 42, rue Fontaine, Arts primitifs*, ed. Jean-Michael Goutier (Paris: Calmels Cohen, 2003), 142–43. Breton cites Georges Buraud’s *Les Masques* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1948). Breton published another essay on masks ten years later, “Le phénix du masque” (in *Œuvres complètes*, 4:990–94).

32. Breton was partial to the medieval Burgundian myth of the fairy Mélusine as well as the gas masks used in northern France during World War I that could be found in the Paris flea market in the 1930s and that he knew from having served in the war.

33. Cornell bought “quantities of Dutch clay pipes” at the New York World’s Fair in the summer of 1939 (Linda Roscoe Hartigan, “Joseph Cornell, a Biography,” in *Joseph Cornell*, 91–119, 100). He also saw Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin’s *Soap Bubbles* (1734) there (Waldman, *Cornell, Master of Dreams*, 25).

34. Carter Ratcliff claims “Cornell intends his pipes . . . to evoke his Dutch forebears and thus [to] establish the firmest possible claim to his place in American history” (“Joseph Cornell Mechanic of the Ineffable,” in *Joseph Cornell*, 43–67, 43–44).

35. Paula Findlen, *Possessing Nature: Studies on the History of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 4. See also Katharine Conley, “What Makes a Collection Surrealist: Twentieth-Century Cabinets of Curiosity in Houston and Paris,” *Journal of Surrealism and the Americas* 6, no. 1 (2012): 1–23.

36. Waldman explains that this title refers to the nineteenth-century understanding of scientific theory “in terms of its religious and aesthetic import” (*Cornell, Master of Dreams*, 25).

37. See also Ecke Bonk, “Delay Included,” in *Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp . . . In Resonance*, ed. Anne D’Harmoncourt and Paul Winkler Houston (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art; Menil Collection, 1998), 95–111, 107. Deborah Solomon confirms that “Cornell was among the select who assembled Duchamp’s *Box in a Valise* in 1942” (*Utopia Parkway*, 135).

38. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* 1971, s.v. “museum.”

39. According to Waldman, legend has it that a chimney sweep is a lucky person, tying Cornell’s “museum” back to the surrealist principle of chance (*Cornell, Master of Dreams*, 51).

40. The contents of Cornell’s *Pharmacy* further confirm a surrealist combination of elements that emphasize the ephemeral nature of life as the apothecary bottles contain “cork, sand, feathers, dried leaves, copper wire, shells, butterflies, tin foil, and tulle” (Waldman, *Cornell, Master of Dreams*, 51).

41. This is what Mary Ann Caws calls Cornell’s ability to preserve in his boxes “la fraîcheur de l’invention” (“Joseph Cornell: l’invention de la boîte surréaliste,” *Erudite: Études françaises* 26, no. 3 [1990]: 79–86, 86).