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[1] Recycled Things in Surrealist Collections

A fascination with objects turned away from their original function lies at the root of surrealist thought. These fundamentally recycled things remained haunted by their previous uses, their former lives. The surrealists connected these objects with aspects of themselves, with the way humans can feel haunted by memories and dreams that lie dormant within them.¹ André Breton, author of the “Manifestoes of Surrealism,” called this life force recycled objects share with humans “force fields,” awaiting activation by the admiring gaze of surrealist thinkers.² Surrealists lived and worked with their things, going back to their first experiments with automatism conducted in Breton’s apartment, where they sat [2] surrounded by his collection. He already owned oddities discovered in Paris flea markets [3] when he first described the surrealist project as a quest for “revelation” through the “magic *dictation*” of automatism in 1922.³ The surrealists also prized objects that had had a ceremonial function in their culture of origin, which were available to them, thanks to French colonialism. They exaggerated those parts of the world from which the things they admired things came in their “surrealist map of the world” (1929). [4] When Breton declared « La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas » at the end of *Nadja* (1928), he was partly describing the physical charge he felt in response to objects he chose for his collection, a visceral, experiential feeling linked to knowing and to wonder, « le merveilleux », a feeling reminiscent of the awe his baroque forebears found essential in their selection of things for their collections.⁴

Breton explains in *Nadja* what sorts of objects attracted him at the flea market: [5] « j'y suis souvent, en quête de ces objets qu'on ne trouve nulle part ailleurs, démodés, fragmentés, inutilisables, presque incompréhensibles, pervers enfin au sens où je l'entends et où je l'aime ». ⁵ He liked things that had been discarded—things to which he could give new life. He valued them for their irrational appeal, rooted in his vision of beauty as “convulsive”: « Mouvement désordonné provoqué par certaines émotions, certains troubles ». ⁶ For example, Breton describes a home-made measuring tool with markings in Italian created to track population statistics. It became a recycled thing as soon as he brought it home. For Breton, it served as an idiosyncratic souvenir of an irrational impulse linked his desire to possess it. His recycled things served as reminders of this irrational sense of wonder transmuted into knowledge, through which “materiality [could be transformed] into meaning,” as Susan Stewart has observed. ⁷

Breton's visceral response to repurposed things is further illustrated in *Nadja* by the illogical panic he describes feeling when a woman offered him her bright blue glove one day at the « Centrale Surréaliste » and he realized that he did not want her to leave it behind. ⁸ When she took it away and then returned to the Centrale [6] with an oddly heavy bronze glove, he kept it as a reminder of that irrational fear, a moment that was « merveilleusement décisif » for him. ⁹ His reaction assumed « ses plus grandes, ses véritables proportions » only when she took her glove away. The bronze glove she brought him in return functioned as a recycled version of the glove she had kept, a material remnant of the disproportionate emotion it had provoked in him.

Eight years later, Breton and the surrealists mounted the week-long [7] Exhibition of Surrealist Objects in the Charles Ratton Gallery, which included [8] Marcel Duchamp's readymade *Bottlerack* from 1914, displayed [9] close to masks from Oceania, Alaska, and the Pacific Northwest Coast and Hopi katsina figures. Breton explained in a short newspaper article

how these objects together could release poetic energy that had been otherwise invisible, because hidden in plain sight: « de l'énergie poétique que l'on trouve un peu partout à l'état latent mais qu'il s'agissait une fois de plus de révéler. »¹⁰ Found objects were also included in the exhibition and in the special issue of *Cahiers d'art* published in conjunction with it, [10] which introduced Breton's major [11] theoretical essay on objects, « Crise de l'objet ».

[12] Duchamp's Readymades—the bottle dryer, shovel, and urinal—anticipated the surrealist fascination with ordinary things, [13] like the sewing machine wrapped in an army blanket by Man Ray that was displayed on the first page of the inaugural issue of *La Révolution surréaliste* in December 1924. *L'Enigme d'Isidore Ducasse* stood as a humorous tribute to the aesthetic rooted in chance expressed by Lautréamont in 1869 that the surrealists made famous: « beau . . . comme la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie ! »¹¹ In *L'Amour fou*, Breton confirms: « Les 'beau comme' de Lautréamont constituent le manifeste même de la poésie convulsive. »¹² Man Ray's recycled sewing machine on the first page of their first journal established surrealism as a movement that purveyed a new kind of art.¹³

Even more “recycled” than Duchamp's Readymades, Breton's collected objects kept getting repurposed by him as he handled and moved them about his studio.¹⁴ They allowed him to position himself within his collection as an “ordering subject,” the way baroque collectors saw themselves as ordering their “cabinets of wonder,” “cabinets of the world.”¹⁵ For Breton, as for his baroque forebears, collecting concretized knowledge. As he explained about his Oceanic objects: [14] « j'ai souvent besoin de revenir à eux, de m'éveiller en les regardant, de les prendre en mains, de leur parler, de les raccompagner vers les lieux d'où ils viennent pour me concilier ceux où je suis ».¹⁶ Breton's relationship to the objects he collected was linked to the power of

dreaming, as José Pierre notes: « Breton connaissait parfaitement et les "ready-mades" et les "constructions" de Picasso, soit, mais que l'on me *dise où est le rêve*, dans ces œuvres ? ». ¹⁷

[15] Oceanic objects discovered in antique shops or random objects found at flea markets reflect the lasting impact of the surrealist image as Breton defined it in the first “Manifesto” (after Pierre Reverdy). The « *rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées* » was literally illuminating for Breton: « C’est du rapprochement en quelque sorte fortuit des deux termes qu’a jailli une lumière particulière, *lumière de l’image* ». ¹⁸ The spark or « étincelle » that resulted from « la différence de potentiel entre les deux conducteurs » came from the displacement from one context to another, in the case of the recycled object. ¹⁹ Breton returned to the illuminating capacity of the surrealist image twenty-three years later in « Signe Ascendant », when he escalated the two “conductors”’ impact to the dimension of a rocket flare, a « fusée illuminante ». ²⁰ Breton had previously developed the importance of the image as analogy in 1936 with « Crise de l’objet », where he clarifies how the object materializes the surrealist image, a « volonté d’objectivation analogue » in which dissimilar qualities are juxtaposed formally by means of the analogy, creating a spark. ²¹ In « Signe Ascendant » he shows the object constituting « l’objectivation de l’activité du rêve, son passage dans la réalité ». ²² It is the illuminating flare linked to the charge experienced by the person who witnesses the object’s “convulsive” power that elevates it out of the everyday to the dream state.

In *L’Amour fou*, published a year after the Exhibition of Surrealist Objects, Breton explores his physical response to what he names the *trouvaille* for the first time. The « frisson » or « trouble » it triggered provoked a jolt that reminded him of erotic pleasure. ²³ [16] Breton opens the third chapter of *L’Amour fou* with the image of the “first navigators” at the moment of discovering a “new land,” suddenly struck by « l’enivrement de la *chance*. » ²⁴ Disregarding the

history of colonialism and the fact that the navigators were not “first” on the land, he describes how, « un très fin pinceau de feu dégage ou parfait comme rien autre le sens de la vie » at such moments « C’est à la récréation de cet état particulier de l’esprit que le surréalisme a toujours aspiré ». ²⁵ This evocation of navigators “dumbstruck” by their discovery, introduces Breton’s description of another trip to the flea market made this time in the company of Alberto Giacometti in 1934. [17] What they discovered—a World War One gas mask and a spoon sculpted with a Cinderella slipper handle—illustrated for Breton the power of the *trouvaille* to expand the universe: « Elle seule a le pouvoir d’agrandir l’univers, de le faire revenir partiellement sur son opacité. » ²⁶

Breton explains how both he and Giacometti found things they had been looking for without realizing it, thus demonstrating « le rôle catalyseur de la trouvaille ». ²⁷ He had awoken one morning to the automatic phrase « le cendrier Cendrillon », ²⁸ which made him receptive to the discovery of a spoon that embodied this idea, as a result of the synergistic energy he and Giacometti generated together. The sympathetic presence of his friend allowed him to find his « cendrier Cendrillon »--a spoon that could double as an ashtray and incorporated a slipper into its handle. For his part, Giacometti had been working on a sculpture that he had been struggling to complete. [18] With Breton at his side, he found a World War One gas mask, which provided the inspiration for the face of the kneeling figure that would become *L’Objet invisible*. ²⁹ These things worked the way dreams do [19]: « *La trouvaille d’objet remplit ici rigoureusement le même office que le rêve, en ce sens qu’elle libère l’individu de scrupules affectifs paralysants, le reconforte et lui fait comprendre que l’obstacle qu’il pouvait croire insurmontable est franchi.* » ³⁰ Like the « fusée illuminante », the « trouvaille » provides a fresh perspective.

In his introduction to the 1936 Exhibition of Surrealist Objects, Breton proposed the new category of « *objets-dieux* de certaines régions et de certains temps », which he wound up finding in abundance in the United States in the 1940s.³¹ By the end of 1941, he had written a new aesthetic statement, an addendum to « *Le surréalisme et la peinture* » (1926), for the first exhibition he co-organized with Marcel Duchamp in New York.³² He frames the « *Genèse et perspective artistique du surréalisme* » with the same notion of discovery he had deployed in *L'Amour fou* five years earlier. He again invokes the metaphor of navigators except, that in 1941, this notion had become autobiographical. After traveling by boat to Martinique and New York, he had set foot on several new lands. Whereas in 1937 he had concentrated on discovery as a metaphor for the fire-like intensity of wonder, in 1941 his focus was on the surprise inherent to the new context in which he found himself as a result of World War Two :³³ [20] « Comme Colomb, qui allait découvrir les Antilles, se croyait sur la route des Indes, au XXe siècle le peintre s'est trouvé en présence d'un nouveau monde avant de s'être avisé qu'il pouvait sortir de l'ancien. »³⁴ Breton refers here to the new lands found suddenly in the surrealist imagination, but he also anticipates the discovery of things that would prompt him to re-evaluate his own place in the world.

Within a year, Breton's view of the object's ability to "expand the universe" reached its apogee in the « *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non* ». He flirts in this essay with a new myth of "great transparent" beings beyond human comprehension.³⁵ He has moved beyond the consideration of objects as beings in 1936, as « *êtres-objets (ou objets-êtres ?)* », to the consideration of human beings as no longer the reference point for much of anything in 1942: « *L'homme n'est peut-être pas le centre, le point de mire de l'univers* » he muses.³⁶ He no longer presupposes Western man's domination over any kind of being.

Two years later, in 1943, along with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Max Ernst, Robert Lebel, and Isabelle Waldberg, Breton discovered the antiques store on Third Avenue run by Julius Carlebach and began to acquire extraordinary “being-objects” in the shape of masks from the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. Waldberg wrote her husband, Patrick in October: « Nous nous sommes jetés dans l’atmosphère poétique des masques eskimo, nous respirons l’Alaska et nous rêvons tlingit et nous nous aimons dans les totempoles haïda. »³⁷ Through Carlebach, Breton and his friends were given access to surplus masks from the National Museum of the American Indian, which were stored in the Heye Foundation warehouse in the Bronx.³⁸ For an exhibition at the Guimet museum back in Paris in 1959, Breton described his awe at what they discovered in that warehouse: masks that had « un pouvoir d’incantation ». ³⁹ **[21 : Here are Yup’ik masks from the Guimet exhibition that Breton had bought from New York]** Breton sees them as designed to disturb, as he explains in « Phénix du masque », written to accompany the 1959 exhibition: « Il est bien évident que le masque . . . tire toute sa vertu du trouble qu’il a été fait pour engendrer. »⁴⁰ He illustrated this essay with one specific Yup’ik mask **[22]** he brought back, describing in an interview in June 1946 in Paris: « Il y a là des masques esquimaux. . . . Voyez quelle justification ces objets apportent à la vision surréaliste, quel nouvel essor même ils peuvent lui prêter. Ce masque esquimau figure le cygne qui conduit vers le chasseur, au printemps, la baleine blanche (le cygne, ici réduit à la tête et au col, sort de la bouche de la baleine) . »⁴¹ **[23]** Masks like Breton’s were crafted in men’s community houses near the Bering Sea, built for important winter ceremonies. Colin Browne explains how these masks were created to transform “a dancer into a vessel capable of communication with the invisible world”; the men who made the masks were carving, painting, praying, and dancing “to restore harmony in the world.”⁴² These masks were normally destroyed after use in a final recycling.⁴³ **[24]**

Breton kept his swan mask over a daybed; an ideal location for seeing it as he woke up from a dream.

By the time Breton bought his mask (1943), **[25-here it is mask, w/drawing of it by Robert Lebel]** his experience of the war and displacement had opened him up to the unknown to a greater extent than before, as the “Prolegomena” demonstrates. He was more receptive to the function this mask could serve as a “vessel capable of communication with the invisible world,” as Browne puts it. Cultural Anthropologist Marie Mauzé sees in the surrealists’ admiration for Pacific Northwest Coast and Yup’ik masks an admiration for the capacity “to express the transformation of beings into others.”⁴⁴ Dreaming can provide access to such alternative states of mind, an analogy Pierre proposes again, in an essay on Alaskan masks: « j’irai même jusqu’à suggérer un parallèle entre le masque eskimo et *l’objet surréaliste*. D’ailleurs, ne prennent-ils pas également naissance dans le rêve ? »⁴⁵ The surrealist object, like a recycled thing, is found in order to be lived with on a daily basis. Within its new context it can appear to contain dreams of its own and also inspire the dreams of others.

Like the Yup’ik mask in Pierre’s eyes, the recycled object can trigger dreams and, as a consequence, may be understood as quintessential to the surrealist theory of the object. Surrealist-collected masks and recycled things anticipated Jane Bennett and Bruno Latour’s view of objects as having “a positive, productive power of their own” leading to a “vital materialism,” and as deserving “to be housed in our intellectual culture as fully-fledged social actors. Do they mediate our actions? No, they are us.”⁴⁶ This fellow feeling with recycled things for Breton and the surrealists reflected their growing humility with regard to Western culture in relation to other world cultures. The illuminating power of analogical thinking rooted in the surrealist image had not surprisingly turned into an “illuminating flare” by 1947. Reformulated as a « fusée

illuminante » Breton shows the capacity of image and the object to transport, through convulsive feeling, and allow a way to see the world in new ways. Partly through the collections within which they formulated their ideas, the surrealists grew to see the world as a shared space within which every thing is capable of generating shivers and dreams, of startling a person into greater awareness of what it means to be alive through a greater awareness of the lives of others.

Notes

¹ Thinking through Walter Benjamin and Hal Foster's work on the aura, Johanna Malt notes that the "auratic object has a certain power, but it is a power we have assigned by projecting human qualities on it." In Johanna Malt, *Obscure Object of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004) 136.

² André Breton, "Crise de l'objet," *Oeuvres complètes*, t. 4 (Paris: Gallimard-coll. la pléiade, 2008) 684. My translation.

³ "I expect nothing else to afford a greater revelation. I have never lost my conviction that nothing said or done is worthwhile outside obedience to that magic *dictation*." André Breton, "The Mediums Enter," *The Lost Steps*, trans. Mark Polizzotti (U of Nebraska P, 1996) 91. He writes of the « cette dictée magique » : « je n'attends encore de révélation que de lui ». André Breton, « Entrée des médiums », *Oeuvres complètes*, t. 1 (Paris: Gallimard-coll. la Pléiade, 1988) 275.

⁴ André Breton, "Nadja," *OC* 1, 753.

⁵ Breton, *OC* 1, 676.

⁶ <https://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/convulsion>

⁷ Susan Stewart, *On Longing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984) 140.

⁸ This was Lise Deharme. See Mark Polizzotti, *André Breton, Revolution of the Mind* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995) 230-31.

⁹ Breton, *OC* 1, 679.

¹⁰ André Breton, "Objets surrealists" in *La Semaine de Paris* (22-26 mai), in *OC*, t. 2, 1200.

¹¹ Comte de Lautréamont, Isidore Ducasse, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Corti, 1973) 327.

¹² Breton, *OC* 2, 679.

¹³ As Louise Tythacott argues, the surrealists "wryly shifted the art-historical boundaries separating 'art' from 'non-art' [i]n their attempt to create another art—another history of art—they regraded and revalued objects traditionally marginalized in the West. See Louise Tythacott, *Surrealism and the Exotic* (London: Routledge, 2003) 81

¹⁴ See Isabelle, Monod-Fontaine, "Le tour des objets," *André Breton: La beauté convulsive*, eds. Agnès de la Beaumelle and Isabelle Monod-Fontaine (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 64-68.

¹⁵ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1992) 82.

- ¹⁶ See Monod. André Breton, « Océanie », *Œuvres complètes*, t. 3 (Paris : Gallimard-coll. la Pléiade, 1999) 839.
- ¹⁷ José Pierre, *André Breton et la peinture* (Paris: L'Age d'Homme, 1987) 171.
- ¹⁸ Breton, *OC* 1, 324; Breton, *OC* 1, 337.
- ¹⁹ Breton, *OC* 1, 338.
- ²⁰ Breton, *OC* 3, « Signe ascendant », 766.
- ²¹ In « Crise de l'objet » in 1936, when Breton clarified how the object materializes the surrealist image as « l'objectivation de l'activité du rêve, son passage dans la réalité. Une volonté d'objectivation analogue, touchant cette fois l'activité inconsciente de veille, se fait jour à travers les « objets à fonctionnement symbolique » défini en 1931 par Salvador Dalí ».
- ²² Breton, *OC* 4, 684: « Une volonté d'objectivation analogue, touchant cette fois l'activité inconsciente de veille, se fait jour à travers les « objets à fonctionnement symbolique » défini en 1931 par Salvador Dalí ». Breton, *OC* 4, 684.
- ²³ André Breton, “L'Amour fou,” *Oeuvres complètes*, t. 2 (Paris: Gallimard-coll. la Pléiade, 1992) 678, 682. Breton, *OC* 2, 678, 682. « J'avoue sans la moindre confusion mon insensibilité profonde en présence des spectacles naturels et des œuvres d'art qui, d'emblée, ne me procurent pas un trouble physique caractérisé par la sensation d'une aigrette de vent aux tempes susceptible d'entraîner un véritable frisson. » Breton, *OC* 2, 678.
- ²⁴ Like most citizens of colonialist France, Breton did not question this « myth » of discovery of a land that had had a long history of habitation.
- ²⁵ André Breton, “L'Amour fou,” *OC* 2, 697.
- ²⁶ Breton, *OC* 2, 682.
- ²⁷ Breton, *OC* 2, 701. See also Malt, 78: “The found object may thus not seem to correspond to the overt initial fantasy, but it is recognizable when it is found.”
- ²⁸ Breton, *OC* 2, 701.
- ²⁹ Breton, *OC* 2, 698-705.
- ³⁰ Breton, *OC* 2, 700.
- ³¹ André Breton, « Exposition surréaliste d'objets, » *Oeuvres complètes*, t. 4 (Paris: Gallimard-coll. la Pléiade, 2008) 690-92.
- ³² The exhibition was mounted on the advice of Peggy Guggenheim and at Elsa Schiaparelli's initiative.
- ³³ « tout sentiment de durée aboli dans l'enivrement de la *chance*--, un très fin pinceau de feu dégage ou parfait comme rien autre le sens de la vie ». Breton, “L'Amour fou,” *OC* 2, 697.
- ³⁴ André Breton, « Genèse et perspective artistiques du surréalisme », *Œuvres complètes*, t. 4 (Paris: Gallimard-coll. la Pléiade, 2008) 411.
- ³⁵ André Breton, “Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non,” *Oeuvres complètes*, t. 3 (Paris: Gallimard-coll. la Pléiade, 1999) 14-15.
- ³⁶ Breton, *OC* 3, 14.
- ³⁷ Isabelle Waldberg letter in Patrick Waldberg, Isabelle Waldberg, *Un Amour acéphale, correspondance 1940-49* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1992) 105.
- ³⁸ Edmund Carpenter, “Introduction: Collecting Northwest Coast Art,” *Form and Function*, eds. Bill Holm and William Reid (Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1975) p. 10. Martica Sawin recounts from interviews with some of the surrealists themselves that they were able to buy the masks from Heye “for sums averaging \$16 a variety of masks, kachinas, and carved objects from all regions of North America” in *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994) p. 185. Patrick Wilken in his biography of

Lévi-Strauss rounds the sum up to \$50, probably based on Carpenter's report in *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (New York: Penguin Press, 2010) p. 135. Elizabeth's Cowling's confirms this report in "The Eskimos, the American Indians, and the Surrealists," *Art History* 1.4 (1978) p. 493.

³⁹ Breton, « Phénix du masque », *OC* 4, 992.

⁴⁰ Breton, *OC* 4, 992.

⁴¹ « Interview de Jean Duché », *OC* 3, 993.

⁴² Colin Browne, "Scavengers of paradise," in Dawn Ades, ed., *The Colour of my Dreams: The Surrealist Revolution in Art*, (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery-Douglas & McIntyre, 2011) 261.

⁴³ Ann Fienup-Riordan, *The Living Tradition of Yup'ik Masks* (Seattle: U of Washington P, 1996) 40-41.

⁴⁴ Marie Mauzé, "Surrealists and the New York Avant-Garde 1920-1960," *Native Art of the Northwest Coast, a History of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charlotte Townsend-Gault, Jennifer Kramer, and Ki-Ke-in (Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2013) 273.

⁴⁵ José Pierre, « L'art eskimo de l'Alaska au regard des surréalistes », *Masques Eskimo d'Alaska*, by Jean-Loup Boussetot, Bernard Abel, José Pierre, and Catherine Bihl (Paris : Editions Amez, 1991) 86.

⁴⁶ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter, A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010) 1, 99. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope* (Harvard UP, 1999) 214.