Surrealism and American Culture:
A Study of Surrealism’s Reception in America and its Resonances in
the Work of Joseph Cornell and the Poetry of Frank O’Hara and
John Ashbery

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Abstract

Recent studies of Surrealism’s American years focus on Surrealism’s role in the early years of Abstract Expressionism. The interest of the encounter lies in how the Surrealists’ emphasis on the social and psychic aspects of their principles evolved into forms that were meant as both an expression of and a refuge from conflict.

This thesis looks at how Surrealism was alternately embraced and resisted on the margins of the development of Abstract Expressionism. Chapter One sketches the embrace and critique of Surrealism through the pages of the periodical View (1940-47), that hosted Surrealist works and writings during the Surrealists’ stay in America: here I discuss how Surrealist concepts informed critical perspectives on the concept of culture rather than on artistic forms. Alongside View’s attempt to open up a Surrealist perspective on American culture, I also consider how cultural politics were synonymous with a critique, within the Surrealism of the period, of the value of the idea itself of culture. This involved a rethinking of the antinomies of Surrealist thought itself, staked as it was on a critique of the promises of modernity, and on a dual intent, totalising and destructive. Chapter Two looks back on Surrealism’s interwar period: my analysis shifts onto Surrealism’s approaches to the categories of subject and object, representation and reference. Surrealist principles are discussed as means that redeem as well as undermine these categories. This forms the basis for reading the role of Surrealism in the work of Joseph Cornell, and the poetry of Frank O’Hara and John Ashbery in the postwar period. Chapter Three examines the Surrealist influence on Cornell’s boxes and collages at the level of the relations between forms, objects and their contexts. In my exploration of Cornell’s disruption of subject/object relations, it transpires that, Cornell’s involvement with the object rests on his nostalgia for a substantive relation between the self and the world. In Chapter Four, I discuss how Frank O’Hara also both assimilates and reverses the Surrealist intent. I look at how, in O’Hara’s poems, the subject is subsumed by a culture where everything is reduced to the status of ‘things’. The Surrealist category of the object is a reminder of objects not yet completely separated from subjectivity, objects that still contain a tangible reality. This dialectic is then shown equally to inform Ashbery’s dialogue with Surrealism. Chapter Five looks at Ashbery’s Surrealist affinity in the light of his ambivalent attitude towards language and representation, as well as vision. As in Cornell and O’Hara, Ashbery’s approach to Surrealism rests on his nostalgia for substantive experiences and regret for the text’s
distance from reality. Not only criticised on the grounds of its historical and cultural specificity and its ties to the promises of modernity, Surrealism provides the terms for a reading of the paradoxes of postmodern culture against the grain. Not only anticipating the poststructuralist critique of substantive categories, the afterglow of Surrealism highlights postmodernism’s difficult relations to subjective experience, aesthetic practice and cultural politics.
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Abbreviations

John Ashbery

SP  *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1985)
TCO  *The Tennis Court Oath* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1962)
VN  *The Vermont Notebook* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1975)

André Breton

OCI  *Œuvres Complètes* vol. I, ed. by Marguerite Bonnet, Philippe Bernier, Étienne-Alain Hubert and José Pierre (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1988)
OCII *Œuvres Complètes* vol. II, ed. by Marguerite Bonnet, Philippe Bernier, Étienne-Alain Hubert and José Pierre (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1992)

Max Ernst


Frank O’Hara

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the reception and the resonances of Surrealism in America during and after the Second World War in contexts peripheral to the development of Abstract Expressionism; emphasis will be laid on how Surrealism was suggestive of critical perspectives on culture rather than on artistic forms. On the other hand, Abstract Expressionism's encounter with Surrealism was not only a matter of formal influence – 'a collective Surrealist arm extending the automatist brush to an outstretched American arm', as Martica Sawin has noted – but rather involved 'the whole system of interconnecting factors [...] the perception and promotion of the artwork as well as its production'.\(^1\) Surrealism, and in particular its automatist and biomorphic elements, 'opened the possibility that a few young Americans might indeed develop a new style that advanced beyond Europe's last avant-garde'.\(^2\)

That the rise of Abstract Expressionism was indicative of a wider cultural shift cannot be overstated. Serge Guilbaut has stressed that it can only be understood in relation to the 'transvaluation of social values' and the 'reevaluation of cultural signs' marking the postwar period.\(^3\) The decline of art's political affiliations, a rapid institutionalisation of the avant-garde and the rise of mass culture largely determined Abstract Expressionism's coming of age as an internationally dominant style. Clement Greenberg's criticism, where Abstract Expressionism was most strongly defended, exemplifies the crystallisation of 'a political apoliticism' in Serge Guilbaut's words.\(^4\) Disillusioned with socialist realism and the ideology of the Popular Front, anti-Stalinist intellectuals in the late 1930s and early 1940s set out to defend artistic autonomy and the bourgeois value of culture. Such is the thrust of Greenberg's famous 1939 essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' in *Partisan Review*, where he revised the links between art and society before the growing divide between high

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2 Sawin, p. 242.
4 Guilbaut, p. 2.
and mass culture. As an antidote to the appropriation of avant-garde techniques and high art for mass consumption, Greenberg argued that only by turning to its own development can art assume its independence from an alienating society. His views voiced a widespread disillusion with art’s political intent and social content as much as they were implicitly pessimistic towards the very notion of the ‘avant-garde’ culture that artists were supposed to preserve. Greenberg concluded his essay by stating the unresolvable contradiction whereby a potentially oppositional culture is sustained by the social realities it seeks to oppose:

Capitalism in decline finds that whatever of quality it is still capable of producing becomes almost invariably a threat to its own existence. [...] Today we no longer look toward socialism for a new culture – as inevitably as one will appear, once we do have socialism. [...] [but] simply for the preservation of whatever living culture we have right now.

In response to what emerges from his writing as an antagonistic and complementary relation between art and society, Greenberg sought categories exclusive to art’s internal aspects. Although pure art, in his terms, is devoid of extrinsic content, the development of forms and the critical consciousness that seeks to understand it are historical and socially-determined. This allowed Greenberg to trace an evolutionist history of art: the more painting frees itself from external subject-matter and from its resemblance to other media, the more it advances towards a higher understanding of itself. In this manner, in ‘Towards a Newer Laocoon’ the following year, he could claim that he ‘offered no other explanation for the present superiority of abstract art than its historical justification’.

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7 Greenberg, I, p. 22.


9 Greenberg, I, p. 37. In a postscript to his 1960 ‘Modernist Painting’ – where he had famously argued that ‘the latest abstract painting tries to fulfil the Impressionist insistence on the optical as the only sense that a completely and quintessentially pictorial art can invoke’ and ‘that visual art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience’ – he stressed that describing this development did not necessarily mean that he advocated what he described. Greenberg, *The Collected Essays*, IV: *Modernism with a Vengeance*,
That art’s growing self-sufficiency was the outcome of a historical process offset his essentially pessimistic view of the rise of mass culture. Such an implied pessimism and not only his purist tendencies informed his critique of Surrealism in 1944: ‘laudable’ as ‘the desire to change life on the spot, without waiting for the revolution, and to make art the affair of everybody’ might be, ‘it has led inevitably to a certain vulgarization of modern art.’ As ‘the Surrealist image’ can only provide ‘painting with new anecdotes to illustrate, just as current events supply new topics to the political cartoonist’, he doubted whether ‘hitherto untapped possibilities of the medium [needed to] be explored in order to accommodate the Surrealist image’.10

Greenberg’s criticism anticipated and evolved parallel to the need of a generation of American artists to turn art into a privileged refuge from the forces that seemed to drive the world into irreversible destruction. The abandoning of figuration in favour of the search for pure forms, the ambivalence towards the primitive, and the parallel attempt to relate subjectivity to principles of universality and authenticity, were also defenses against the impossibility of art to adequately comprehend historical reality. These concerns, as Ann Eden Gibson has argued, unified the magazines that presented the early work and theory of Abstract Expressionist artists in the mid and late 1940s.11

Generally, the American experiments with Surrealist techniques contradicted Greenberg’s views on Surrealist painting, while at the same time confirmed his insight about how the internal coherence of the artwork was progressively turned into the token of its universality. Robert Motherwell’s response to Surrealism in 1944 in the sixth issue of Wolfgang Paalen’s Dyn was telling in respect of the growing tendency to sustain the permanence of forms, while still seeing forms as the most heightened expression of history. His thinking that although ‘the Surrealists had the laudable aim of bringing the spiritual to everyone […] in a period as demoralized as our own, this could lead only to the demoralization of art’ is not dissimilar to Greenberg’s critique. Also, Motherwell was uneasy about the fact that, although the
Surrealists 'have been the most radical, romantic defenders of the individual ego [...] part of their program involves destruction'. Despite his scepticism towards Surrealism's 'Dada' tendencies, he was open to embrace 'automatism [...] [as] a plastic weapon with which to invent new forms'.\textsuperscript{12} Formal experiment and a 'destructive' perspective on culture appear antinomical to Motherwell who implies that 'new forms' are meant as antidotes, and not as devices staked on destruction.

At the same time as experiments in automatism and the principle of the unconscious evolved into techniques subsequently identified as Abstract Expressionist, Surrealism informed perspectives on diverse aspects of culture rather than on artistic forms, in contexts peripheral to the development of Abstract Expressionism. Such perspectives were presented in the periodical \textit{View} (September 1940-March 1947) that hosted Surrealist works and writings during the Surrealists' stay in America. \textit{View}'s interest lies precisely in its peripheral role: against Greenberg's views on the antagonistic relation between mass culture and the avant-garde on the one hand, and his unequivocal defense of abstract art on the other, \textit{View} addressed the emerging mainstream culture and the decline of political activism by attempting to situate art and criticism in a larger set of potentially oppositional practices.

Examining how Surrealism informed \textit{View}'s notion of 'avant-garde culture' will allow us to nuance conclusions about its seemingly conflicting loyalties to European art and American popular culture. Focusing on \textit{View}'s perspective on culture rather than art, will allow us to develop Dickran Tashjian's point that it was an 'ambiguous station between the avant-garde and fashion', the result of Charles Henri Ford's [\textit{View}'s main editor] 'gravitation toward the wealthy for their patronage and privilege' and of his 'prophetic' foresight that "even Paris from now on will always look toward New York".\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, it would nuance Ann Gibson's point that '[Parker] Tyler [\textit{View}'s associate editor] may well have followed the Greenbergian concept [...] for an avant-garde magazine: that it should be a partisan spokesman for a particular point of view. \textit{View} saw itself as a Surrealist magazine, as did VVV (June

\textsuperscript{13} Dickran Tashjian, \textit{A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde 1920-1950}
1942-February 1944), which admitted only those productions judged by Breton to be properly Surrealist'.14 Ann Gibson reads View’s Surrealist affinity in contrast to the eclecticism of the magazines that hosted the beginnings of Abstract Expressionism.

Yet eclecticism in the latter instance was more about presenting different artistic tendencies than about questioning their relation to other realms of culture.15 In relation to this, not long after View folded, Parker Tyler in his review of Possibilities in 1948 – edited by Robert Motherwell, Harold Rosenberg, John Cage and Pierre Chareau – noted how Possibilities represented the artistic avant-garde’s retreat into itself, torn between its radical intent and inevitable cooption by the mainstream: ‘wishing to transform the whole domain of the arts, it addresses itself primarily to the artist, the producer, not to the audience, the consumer. Therefore, it must be favoritist; [...] Otherwise it is simply luxury merchandise in esthetics.’16 The attempt to address these realities critically is what links, rather than opposes View to Surrealist thought. Therefore it is neither on the grounds of eclecticism that View was ‘not really a sufficient substitute for a surrealist magazine’ as Dawn Ades – conversely to Ann Gibson – has suggested.17 Instead, because of its eclectic guise, View’s cultural politics were as complementary as they were conflicting towards the Surrealist critique of culture.

In the first chapter, I will look at how Surrealism informed View’s perspective on culture: the idea of the avant-garde was redefined without pure and autonomous art being its highest expression, nor as ‘a superior consciousness of history [...] a new kind of criticism of society’, which in Greenberg’s terms ‘made this [avant-garde culture] possible’.18 Instead, the avant-garde was sought in more composite practices,

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14 Gibson, Issues in Abstract Expressionism, p. 29.
18 Greenberg, I, p. 7.
undermining the distinctions on which Greenberg’s notions lie. View shifted the form/content conflict that underscored the rise of Abstract Expressionism onto the contingent ground of culture, which encompassed and determined the widening dichotomy between high art and mass culture, principles of production and reception, as well as the conflict between subjectivity and collective experiences. Through Surrealism, View recast the ‘art and culture’ relation: this not only involved the distance separating art and theory from everyday life, but also art’s conflict with its own forms, the problem of intent and the value of opposition.

Against the backdrop of View’s approach, the mythical turn that marks Surrealism’s American interlude will be discussed more as a critique of culture altogether, rather than as suggestive of forms of cultural politics. Throughout their American years, the Surrealists persisted in seeking synthetic categories with a view to addressing the problem of reality in its totality. Such an intent, and not only the resistance to an abandonment of figurative forms, was what set Surrealism at a remove from Abstract Expressionism where the artwork was thought of as a space that can comprehend reality, precisely by preserving its distinctness. Moreover, the idea of myth involved a rethinking of the antinomies of Surrealism itself, and the totalising and negating aspects of the earlier Surrealist critique of modernity.

It is to this dual tendency that I will subsequently turn. In the second chapter, I will look at how a totalising intent was inflected through a thoroughgoing negation of the promises of modernity and how this determines the historicity of Surrealism as well as its return in poststructuralist perspectives critical of modernist thought. Emphasis will be laid on how Surrealism’s potential to become an element of cultural critique is predicated on the critique of Surrealism itself. As is the case with myth, Surrealism’s ties to the fundamental categories of modern thought unfold on the basis of this duality: this involves subject/object relations, and the critique of language and representation. On the other hand, in the light of recent readings that examine how Surrealism anticipates the poststructuralist critique of modernity, I will look at how Surrealist principles were intended to both undermine and redeem modern categories. This will provide the context for a discussion of Joseph Cornell’s, Frank O’Hara’s and John Ashbery’s encounter with Surrealism.
In the third chapter, I will look at Joseph Cornell’s assemblages, which Michael Newman has referred to as an instance where the avant-garde ethos meets postmodernism, situated at ‘the interface between consuming and collecting’:

Like the allegorist, the ‘fascinated’ artist is also an appropriator or, better, a collector. Joseph Cornell, a latter-day Symbolist for whom the culture of *fin de siècle* Paris was an exotic Orient, might be conceived as the antetype of the postmodernist *fasciné* as well as the *bricoleur*. He catches just that moment when the Surrealist encounter with the *objet-trouvé* meets the desire arousal of mass-consumerism.\(^{19}\)

Tempting as it is to overstate his unclassifiable position in the development of American art on the basis of his ability to catch ‘that moment’, Cornell’s ‘American Surrealism’\(^{20}\) is symptomatic of his inability, or resistance to critically expose the contradictions between his subjectivism, his objects and their contexts. A self-styled eccentric,\(^{21}\) he was untouched by Abstract Expressionism and equally distanced from Surrealism, to which his work was nonetheless associated from the mid-1930s until well into the 1940s. At the same time, emphasis has been laid on his influence on postwar American artists: Carter Ratcliff refers to John Ashbery’s drawing our attention to ‘Cornell’s importance to younger contemporaries – chiefly Robert Rauschenberg’. Despite the difference in ‘tone’, their ‘enchanted response to Manhattan’s image bank is comparable’. Ashbery sees the Minimalist geometric sculpture of Sol LeWitt, Donald Judd, and Robert Morris laden with a ‘magic import’ that makes their forms as pure as Cornell’s; and this despite the fact that Minimalist works were intended as ‘demystified things’, whereas the boxes, ‘even the most severely Euclidean box’, ‘[look] like an inhabited place.’\(^{22}\)

The association of Cornell with Surrealism was largely due to the fact that his work was shown in contexts sympathetic to Surrealism, like Julien Levy’s Gallery

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where Cornell first saw Ernst's collages in 1931, his inclusion in the 1936 exhibition *Fantastic Art Dada Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art and in the 1938 Surrealist exhibition in Paris, and his contributions to *View* in the following decade. Cornell embraced Surrealism while being sceptical of its subversive intent and theoretical content. In a letter of November 1936 to Alfred J. Barr, he wrote that he did not 'share in the subconsciously and dream theories of the surrealists' and 'that surrealism has healthier possibilities than have been developed. The constructions of Marcel Duchamp who the surrealists themselves acknowledge bear out this thought, I believe'. More telling in respect of his formal and biographical connection to Surrealism is a much later statement where, against the comings and goings between the far ends of binary conceptual pairs, Cornell prefers Surrealism's 'white' side, 'not monstrously, but in wonderful variations. All I want to perform [...] is white magic.'

Diane Waldman sees his work as reconciling the American tradition with the Surrealist influence: 'he was able to fill a substantial gap between the pragmatic aspects of American realism and the metaphysical tendencies inherent in Surrealism.' Robert Motherwell who in 1953 saw Cornell as reason enough to prevent Europe from 'snub[bing] our native art', drew a parallel not with America's visual artists but with a 'masterpiece like William Carlos Williams's 'In the American Grain'. As for the plastic qualities of Cornell's work, Motherwell said that Klee

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24 Dickran Tashjian sees the Surrealist influence as an integral part of Cornell's own ambivalence and wilful equivocation. See Tashjian, pp. 252-60. For the circumstances of Cornell's contributions to *View*, see John Bernard Myers, 'The Enchanted Wanderer', *Art in America*, 61 (September 1973), 76-81.

25 Harold Rosenberg is one of the first American critics to point out that '[Cornell's] ties with Surrealism are biographical rather than aesthetic or ideological'. Harold Rosenberg, 'Object Poems', *Artworks and Packages* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 79.

26 Cited by Ades, 'Transcendental Surrealism', p. 19


29 In respect of the connection with Cornell, Williams's 'In the American Grain' was advertised in the 'Fantastica Americana' issue of *View* as 'the real fantastic America'. *View*, ed. by Charles Henri Ford (New York: View Inc.) II: 4 (January 1943), p. 1, (further references to *View* are given after quotations.
'had a similar, but poorer and more conventional mind. Klee never understood
cubism the way Cornell understood what was moving in the surrealists – who in the
end preferred [Arshille] Gorky’s moustache, to their shame'. 30

In retrospect, against the backdrop of the American 1950s, Cornell’s assembled
subjectivism offsets the heroic, gestural imprint of individuality in Abstract
Expressionist art. On the other hand, in seeking an untheorised primal identity of
ideas and perceptions, objects and forms, Cornell shared in the justification of
abstraction in the 1940s in America, without at the same time giving up extrinsic
content. Moreover, the fact that his constructions have no explicit oppositional intent
was not meant as distancing from earlier avant-garde paradigms. The defamiliarising,
or conversely, the mystifying effect of his assemblages, seems to be more a matter of
reception and context than intent. Moreover, Cornell’s eclecticism is quite unlike
Apollinaire’s ironic and exalted sense of how a contradictory, changing and
ephemeral modernity blends with personal experience in texts such as ‘Zone’, 31 and
unlike as well the earlier Dada practice of not making art but finding it. His attitude is
not one of openness: rather than bringing art into life, he confines life into boxes.

In the third chapter, I will turn to the relation between forms and objects as it
reflects Cornell’s uncertain relation to modernist and avant-garde art in general. This
involves his citational attitude to Cubist collage, his use of the grid as a metaphor for
symmetry in his more abstract constructions, as well as his relation to Surrealism
which influenced his turn to the object and assemblage. 32 As we shall see, it is at the
level of the object rather than form that his relation to Surrealism takes on a critical
interest. It is in relation to contexts, collective and private, that his objects, as well as
his principles of construction become as coded as they are transparent, as abstract as
they become bearers of contingent content. Ultimately, the ways in which his

31 Guillaume Apollinaire, Œuvres poétiques, ed. by Marcel Adéma and Michel Décaudin (Paris:
32 On Cornell’s formal links to Surrealist and Cubist techniques, see Ades, ‘Transcendental
constructions at once assimilate and resist the particularities of their environment, despite Cornell’s ‘unfathomable intent’; reflect the critical aspects of his work.

Following on from Cornell’s ‘American Surrealism’, O’Hara’s, and Ashbery’s negating irony stems from their disillusion before a culture that controls its own antinomies, which was also the insight behind Greenberg’s earlier distrust of Surrealism. The malaise of these poets is as self-critical as it is critical of promises of change and of theories of agency: in their poetry, Surrealism is both assimilated and left behind. At the same time, critical of modernist promises as their work might be, it is also nostalgic in its search for a dynamic view of the artwork and of a meaningful relation between subjectivity and reality.

Dissimilar as their works and personas were – Joseph Cornell sitting ambivalently in both the modernist and the postmodernist contexts, while Frank O’Hara is generally seen as paradigmatic of postmodern experiences – O’Hara’s life and work ironically raises problems similar to those raised by the eccentric and enigmatic Cornell. Carelessly calculated, light-heartedly affected, his poems are primarily seen as representative of an urban, fragmented, pluralistic, highly individualised experience. As we shall see, his playful and distracted manner is not at odds with his need to write his poems and not dissimilar from Cornell’s meticulous constructing habits: his loyalty to his poems parallels Cornell’s unfailing attachment to his objects. On the other hand, unlike Cornell’s, O’Hara’s and John Ashbery’s idioms constitute the most explicit and self-aware gloss on their relation to their own historical and cultural contexts.

Poet, art critic, curator at the Museum of Modern Art, inspiring and inspired by New York, O’Hara constitutes a mundane counter-paradigm and influential precedent for a demystified poetic discourse; his development is presented as idiosyncratic and exemplary of wider tendencies all at the same time. As for Surrealism, it ranges among his early formative encounters, along with French Symbolism, Apollinaire, the late Auden, music and the visual arts. Surrealist principles are generally seen as formal devices that allowed in the early 1950s a discontented O’Hara and his peers to renew established conventions of composition and poetic language, and his

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experiments with Surrealism are seen as being subsequently assimilated into a renewed American colloquialism. In her highly influential 1977 monograph, Marjorie Perloff pointed out that ‘for literary models we must turn to France—to the poetry of Rimbaud and Apollinaire, to Tristan Tzara and the Dadaists, to such Surrealists as Robert Desnos and Benjamin Péret’. Along similar lines, in her parallel between Blaise Cendrars and O'Hara, she noted that ‘postmodernism’ in American poetry may be less the revolution its proponents claim it to be than an injection of French ‘modernism’ [...] into the native American stream [...] [of] Emerson and Whitman.

James Breslin saw the 1956 ‘A Step Away from Them’, one of O'Hara’s most widely discussed ‘lunch poems’, as a most telling instance of an ‘anti-formalist’ revolt of a generation in search for poetic forms that could capture temporal immediacy and ‘for the language of a “breakthrough back into life”’. In the poem, O'Hara famously takes in contingent contents such as the sight of ‘laborers’ who ‘feed their dirty / glistening torsos sandwiches / and Coca-Cola’, or ‘a Negro’ standing ‘in a doorway with a / toothpick’, while ‘JULIET’S CORNER’ where he is having his cheeseburger brings to his mind Giuletta Masina; he explains in a tongue-in-cheek manner that she is the ‘wife of / Federico Fellini, è bell’ attrice’. At the same time, his nostalgic reminiscing of friends who have died, ‘first Bunny’ [Robert Lang], ‘then John Latouche, / then Jackson Pollock’ and his wondering whether ‘the earth’ is ‘as full as life was full, of them’ does leave him doubting whether ‘temporal immediacy’ can be captured after all, and whether a ‘breakthrough’ beyond rather than ‘back into’ an inconclusive life is at all possible. That he returns to work with his ‘heart [...] in [his] / pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy’, may be an affirmation

37 John Latouche was one of the sponsors of the First Papers of Surrealism exhibition organized by Breton and Duchamp in New York in 1942; First Papers of Surrealism 14 October - 7 November 1942 (NewYork: Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies), unnumbered pages.
38 Frank O’Hara, The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara, ed. by Donald Allen (Berkeley and Los
that the 'life' outside 'his pocket' will remain exactly as it was and is. Three years later in 1959, in his 'Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul', he takes us through a day in his life that concludes with or opens into a parodic repetitiveness, telling us that:

and surely we shall not continue to be unhappy
we shall be happy
but we shall continue to be ourselves everything continues to be possible
René Char, Pierre Reverdy, Samuel Beckett it is possible isn't it
I love Reverdy for saying yes, though I don't believe it. (CP, 329)

As eclecticism, openness, and a sense of paradox determined his varied affinities, O'Hara’s turn to the life outside the poem is not necessarily to be seen as being at odds with the reflexive and ironic aspects of his writing that have been seen as characteristic of postmodern writing. In his 1979 essay, Charles Altieri paralleled O'Hara’s ‘variety’ of American postmodernism to the Pop artists’ attitude to contemporary culture, who turned to the trivial and the commonplace as they no longer recognised anything as ‘intrinsically significant [...] for serious artistic exploration’. Like movies, O’Hara tells us ‘stories’, because ‘life provides fictions both more superficial and more interesting than pure fantasy or artifice’; his ‘immanentist’ poetics are experiential and not mimetic and deal with a ‘demystified’ presence.39 The ‘anti-ontological’ stance can only be one of ‘denial of referential moral systems’ while all a poet can offer is ‘a set of moral attitudes.'40 In relation to this, Altieri stresses O'Hara’s matter-of-fact awareness that ‘reality’ is irreducible to a dealable-with system [which] so distorts life that one’s “reward” for this endeavor [...] is illness both from inside and outside’. (CP, 495) On the basis of such statements, he parallels O'Hara's immersion in a representational culture to Derrida’s critique of ‘the epistemological and ethical implications of a post-modern reality without depth and impossible to interpret’. Although going 'beyond pop and Dada acts of creativity, which endow the objects with importance [...] to merge his own

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40 Altieri, p. 199.
creative acts with the energies of the city', unlike the Dadaists or Duchamp, O'Hara lays emphasis ‘(foreign to [Charles] Olson and to Pollock) on the surface qualities of the object’. His ‘stories’, for Altieri, are instances of ‘what Derrida calls “free play”, in a world whose givenness is all one can have’.

For Altieri, there is no nostalgia for the loss of our contact with a substantive reality in O’Hara’s poems, but rather a sense of freedom in realising and accepting such a lack. However, O’Hara’s attitude to the world’s ‘givenness’ and to the role of representation in shaping our experiences was ambivalent throughout. He famously referred – not without irony – to his own ‘variety’ of the relation between life and art in his 1955 ‘My Heart’: ‘you can’t plan on the heart, but / the better part of it, my poetry is open.’ (CP, 231) As we shall see, his irony is both a critical tool and a protective mechanism and similarly the ‘surface qualities’ of his immersion-in-the-world are underscored by longing for depth.

In the fourth chapter, independently of formal influences, O'Hara’s use of Surrealist categories will provide a critical perspective on the ‘postmodern givenness’, to use Altieri’s turn of phrase. O’Hara looks back on Surrealism and the avant-garde with a demystifying nostalgia: a nostalgia which is also the catalyst of an awareness particular to his immersion into a life that, like his poems, can only be a semblance of immediacy. In a reverse manner, his parodie attitude will provide the ground for rethinking Surrealism, as his poems take on avant-garde techniques with a view to questioning their efficacy and intent, and to reinscribing them in a life practice that questions historicist dialogues with the past and with projections onto experiences beyond representation.

I will first turn to the relation of the poems to the world of things. While Cornell’s work inadvertently stages and resists the precedence of culture over a transcendental notion of the self, in O’Hara, the subject is subsumed by a culture where everything is reduced to the status of ‘thing’. His poems are a mobile, yet impermeable space where relations between things assume fleeting, undefined, or neutral guises. The Surrealist category of the object in O’Hara is an implicit reminder of the object-world’s incursion into subjectivity, before signs turned empty and signifieds fixed and obsolete. Indecision as to whether a reified world can and ought to be redeemed on

41 Altieri, p. 206n, p. 207n.
the one hand, and indifference towards the idea of reconstituting either subjectivity or
the object as catalysts for processes of change on the other, reenact unfulfilled visions
of disruption.

Ashbery's dialogue with Surrealist categories and avant-garde techniques in
general raises a similar problematic. His poems are ambivalently presented as
autonomous, mobile discursive entities on the one hand, subsumed by an unnameable
order on the other. Moreover, his openness to any content, contingent and imagined,
takes a step further from Cornell's compulsive and selective eclecticism and O'Hara's
excessive immersion in the contingent and the untheorised conflict between language
and reality. Ashbery is generally seen as having integrated avant-garde, modernist
and postmodernist tropes alike in the most self-conscious manner and has entered the
canon on the grounds of a paradigmatic complexity that has gained him a 'central
place in the major tradition of American poetry', in Harold Bloom's words. 

Telling of the range of responses and the affinities that Ashbery's work suggests, is Helen
Vendler's note on the cover of a recording of Ashbery's reading his 1973 'Self-
Portrait in a Convex Mirror', where she states that 'Ashbery lives in the afterlight of
Romanticism [...] and Modernism': although sharing 'Eliot's skepticism about the
permanence of European culture, his American cheerfulness lets him assume the
perpetual (if intermittent) availability of artworks'.

As for the Surrealist inflections in his work, critics and writers have discussed
them in the context of early influences or thoroughly dismissed them as incompatible
with the American aspects of the poems. In his 1979 study of Ashbery's poetry,
David Shapiro, for instance, has noted that Surrealism was the incentive to Ashbery's
interest in psychoanalysis; this '[permitted] a more or less watery relationship with
the unconscious and everyday mind, a technique of "dipping into" an almost
completely associational stream' which he 'shares with the abstract expressionists and
surrealists'. Shapiro stressed that the 'escapist and phantasmagoric' dream imagery of
his early poems gave way to 'sustained meditation' and noted that Ashbery

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42 Harold Bloom, 'Editor's Note', in Harold Bloom, ed., Modern Critical Views: John Ashbery (New
43 Helen Vendler, 'Reading and Hearing John Ashbery's Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', essay on
the cover of a recording of Ashbery's reading of the poem, with a foreword by the poet, in John
assimilated 'the lessons of collage' with a similar attitude of openness and critical distancing.\textsuperscript{44} For Douglas Crase, to whom Ashbery dedicated his 1975 \textit{The Vermont Notebook}, Surrealism is essentially dated and derivative; it resembles 'an ingenious housewife, forever rearranging the furniture [...] fed up with being thought French. She knows her Emerson ("Bare lists of words are found suggestive, to an imaginative and excited mind") and she can squeeze an analogy out of the barest list'. Apart from \textit{The Vermont Notebook}, where 'she had a field day', she otherwise 'gets stuck in the house, where she understandably insists on the sad variety of woe'.\textsuperscript{45}

Formally experimental, while questioning the self-sufficiency of form, Ashbery is critical of the value of newness in the avant-garde mentality. In his 1968 lecture 'The Invisible Avant-Garde', he defined the avant-garde as 'a tradition of sorts'\textsuperscript{46} implying that there is nothing intrinsic to any form that is resistant to mainstream culture. Yet this insight, he added, should not prevent us from valuing the works on their own terms; despite the establishment's appropriation of Pollock's work, for instance, it fundamentally 'remains unresolved'. Before Pollock, Picabia, Duchamp and De Chirico defied the distinction between traditional and avant-garde forms; therefore, we can only distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' art. Moreover, the more the establishment is open to assimilate the avant-garde, the less art can entertain the illusion of being in the margins: as the period during which an important artist 'goes unrecognized' decreased, 'paradoxically, it is safest to experiment'.\textsuperscript{47} Despite this, Ashbery ends with an optimist tone which is nevertheless belied by his own work. Marked as it is by a demystifying intent similar to O'Hara's, his work is also informed by a recurring longing for forms that would restore a lost immediacy.

Critical of a complacent culture, Ashbery's poetry integrates postmodern parodic pastiches and reflexive anti-climaxes with an ambivalent intent towards contingent contents on the one hand, and nostalgia for authentic experiences on the other. In relation to this, David Shapiro has spelled out the distinct tendencies that Ashbery

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incorporated in his poetry. Like Charles Altieri in his reading of O'Hara, Shapiro sees poststructuralist principles at work in the poems: he argues that he anticipates Derrida's injunction to undermine 'the metaphysics of presence', 'by giving us against and again the playful zone of deferred sense'. Like 'Stevens, Ashbery is master of those who do know they do not know' and at the same time he 'is interested in creating the most autonomous of worlds, a Schoenbergian systemic with a bare nostalgia for the high orders'. In saying that Ashbery's poetry may be best understood as 'an homage to consciousness and a love song to language inside language', Shapiro states Ashbery's own ambivalence as to the tension between the self-referential aspects of discourse, the inescapability of language, and the nostalgia for substantive experience. Ashbery himself described this in his 1973 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', doubly referring to Parmigianino's 1523-4 painting and his own poems, as follows:

And just as there are no words for the surface, that is,  
No words to say what it really is, that it is not  
Superficial but a visible core, then there is  
No way out of the problem of pathos vs. experience. [...]  
But it is certain that  
What is beautiful seems so only in relation to a specific  
Life, experienced or not, channeled into some form  
Steeped in the nostalgia of a collective past.

In the fifth chapter, we will follow up at the level of the conflict between representation and reference, the problematic of form/object relations in Cornell, and the dualities of text and experience, production and consumption in O'Hara. Rather than at a thematic or formal level, Ashbery's dialogue with Surrealism will be reassessed through his attempt to come to terms with the problem of reference. In Ashbery's poems, discourse is both the form and the content of our experiences. It can be argued that, by radicalising the claim that language and representation is all there is, he takes O'Hara's complicity to its logical conclusion: if the production of text also defines a culture of consumption, positing the text as a mechanism that is autonomous and self-undermining, is the only viable form of critique. As he put it in

48 Shapiro, John Ashbery, p. 1, p. 2, p. 3.  
49 John Ashbery, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1985), p. 70, p. 77 (hereafter cited as SP, further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text).
'The Skaters', one resorts to 'phrases' for no other reason, 'Except to say that the carnivorous / Way of these lines is to devour their own nature, leaving / Nothing but a bitter impression of absence, which as we know / involves presence, but still'. In this respect, Ashbery's affinity with Raymond Roussel allows us to bring in both the Surrealist and Foucauldian readings of Roussel's writing.

As O'Hara’s ironic cynicism is doubly a critical mode and a disillusioned expression of regret, so is Ashbery’s parody of meaningful representation underscored by a persistent anxiety for his impossibility to name the referent. The anxiety over our means to represent is also a parody of reflexivity: in this sense Ashbery’s poems, like O’Hara’s, point to the distance that separates the text from the order of reference, without however attempting to overcome this distance. Ashbery’s critical intent towards Surrealism dwells on the fact of this gap. In his exploration of the relation between visual and verbal forms, language, sense perception and experience, he no longer seeks catalysts for breaking from representation, or rather no longer sees such principles as agents of change. This opens up the parallel with Cornell and O'Hara once again: Ashbery's dialogue with Surrealism brings back Cornell’s and O'Hara’s sense of the discrepancy and/or identity between the contents of their work and the contents of subjective experience and their distinct ways of addressing their respective inadequacies.

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1. Surrealism and American culture: history, theory and cultural practice

1.1 Art and/or culture?

Vouloir méconnaître le souci [...] de faire partie de la tragédie collective, avouer
son ignorance de la totalité de l'existence, se réfugier dans l'exercice d'un "art
pour l'art" indifférent aux affres du Temps [...] d'où est exclue toute
représentation de la peur, de la violence et de la mort, cela semblait possible à
une époque d'euphorie comme celle qui a précédé la guerre capitaliste
commencée en 1914. [...] La seule justification d'une œuvre d'art, d'un poème,
d'une découverte [...] est de contribuer à l'élargissement de l'homme, à la
transmutation de toutes les valeurs, [...] à la dénonciation de la classe
dominante, responsable de la guerre impérialiste et de la régression fasciste.1

André Masson’s response to an enquiry launched by Cahiers d'art in 1939
summarises the dilemmas about the role of art that marked the beginnings of View,
when leftist critics had to sustain as well as question the promise of progress, while
resisting positing either form or subject-matter in art as inherently either progressive
or regressive. Nor, for that matter, could the ‘avant-garde’ be unequivocally used as a
metaphor for a progressive culture as a whole. Similar concerns had been voiced a
year earlier in America, in the ‘Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art’ co­
authored by Breton and Trotsky during Breton’s stay in Mexico, and published in
Partisan Review in the fall of 1938 under the names of André Breton and Diego
Rivera.2

Trotsky, whom Breton, on returning to Paris in November 1938, addressed as ‘le
vainqueur et le grand survivant d’octobre, le théoricien immortel de la révolution
permanente’,3 was particularly influential in the late 1930s in America. Trotsky’s
defense of independent art seemed as an alternative to the widening gap between art
and mainstream politics, as well as a legitimate pretext to embrace modernist

1 André Masson, Le Rebelle du surréalisme, Écrits, ed. by Françoise Levaillant (Paris: Hermann,
collection Savoir sur l’art, 1994), pp. 4-5.
2 André Breton and Diego Rivera, ‘Manifesto: Towards a Free Revolutionary Art’, trans. by Dwight
Macdonald, Partisan Review, VI: 1 (Fall 1938), 49-52, reprinted in French as ‘Pour un art
révolutionnaire indépendant’, André Breton, La Clé des champs (Paris: Sagittaire, 1953, repr. Jean­
Jacques Pauvert, 1963), pp. 36-41. On the Breton-Trotsky encounter, see Mark Polizzotti, Revolution of
the Mind: The Life of André Breton (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), pp. 453-65; see also Serge Guilbaut,
How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War,
3 Breton, ‘Visite à Léon Trotsky’, La Clé des champs, p. 54.
principles of artistic autonomy. For Trotsky, a revolutionary culture was not necessarily a proletarian one; therefore it was in keeping with Trotsky’s writings that Greenberg asserted that the preservation of ‘whatever living culture we have right now’ takes precedence over unspecified notions about a new proletarian culture that did not yet exist.

In the late 1920s, Trotsky sought a progressivist notion of culture: initiated in the struggle with nature, it consists in both ‘material achievements’ and in ‘its deposit in the consciousness of man’ which is ‘its most precious part’. In the 1926 ‘Culture and Socialism’, culture, for Trotsky, is the primary expression of human development despite the fact that historically, it had been ‘the basic instrument of class oppression’; it is despite and against this, that he embraced the principle of progress and stressed ‘the significance of art as a means of cognition’.4 Yet in seeing intellectual and artistic activity as the highest form of culture, Trotsky seems to bypass the relation between cultural progress and alienation, and the Marxist theory of the impact of the division of labour on the production of art. A little earlier, in order to reconcile art’s claim to autonomy with the activist imperative in the 1923 ‘Literature and Revolution’, he defined ‘artistic creation’ as ‘a complicated turning inside out of old forms, under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside of art’. His view that art advances in a non-linear, yet progressive manner, and that a work of art should ‘be judged from the point of view of its achievements in form’5 was intended to reconcile the dialectical materialist approach to the formalist approach to art.

Moreover, Trotsky’s optimism about the artist’s ability to appropriate bourgeois culture in the service of ‘the complete and radical reconstruction of society’ – as he and Breton put it in their joint manifesto – was not devoid of pessimism. A radical culture opposes, yet is generated by a regressive history which aborts the promise of emancipation. In describing the artwork as ‘a protest against reality’,6 Trotsky does not elaborate on the paradox whereby the content of art is social in so far as social

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5 Trotsky, p. 37, p. 38.
6 Trotsky, p. 104.
conflict is expressed through the problem of form which is internal to the artwork; neither does he spell out how the discrepancy between the individual and the collective, subjective experience and form would be resolved inside art. Trotsky, however, voiced the long-awaited redemption of autonomous art which could 'become a strong ally of revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself'. As the development of Abstract Expressionist theory in the following decade implied, it is by reflecting on the autonomy of its forms rather than by attaching itself to political causes, that an artwork can assume its social significance.

At the time, the 'manifesto' represented one such alliance of art and revolution while bearing both Trotsky's and Breton's discontents: the former's disillusion with the principle of progress and the latter's resentment towards the very notion of culture. Moreover, the Breton-Trotsky-Rivera alliance was not furthered on either the artistic or the political front; it was rather another instance where the abstract value of culture could not be reconciled with the impersonality and irrationality of history. Breton's most explicit imprint on the 'manifesto' was the point about how 'chance' is both the form and realisation of the 'necessity' that informs both 'subjective talents' and the ensuing 'objective enriching of culture'. Echoing his earlier theory of objective chance, only when external and internal necessity met, the individual and the collective recognise and manifest themselves in each other. Trotsky's imprint, on the other hand, is felt in the parallel between the revolutionary resolution of social conflict, an essentially collective process, and 'the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self' in 'the struggle for artistic truth'. Overall, the difficult relation between the 'need for emancipation felt by the individual spirit' and 'this primeval necessity: the need for the emancipation of man' must have caused a
friction between Breton and Trotsky. Given the growing indecision about the role of a collective agency, such a take on the role of art in social change might have sounded ambiguously consonant with the desire to sustain individual creativity and the artwork’s distance from collective experiences. For Greenberg, as well as for Breton and Trotsky, the ‘avant-garde’, just as it referred to a specific moment in the history of European art, was a notion that involved the role of art in the wider dynamic between culture and society; what was distinctive about the artistic avant-garde was the fact that its oppositional intent rests on its claim to autonomy as well as on the critique of the conditions of this autonomy. In relation to this, instead of embracing Greenberg’s purist tendencies, and by implicitly questioning the limitations of Trotsky’s and Breton’s ‘manifesto’, View acknowledged the institutionalisation of art; as art’s social role inescapably determined its critical aspects, View sought a similar dialectic in other spheres.

View took over from Partisan Review, and Breton’s and Trotsky’s mixed feelings of malaise and optimism, and addressed why and how the value of culture came to be seen as the way out of the impasse of politics, and how political activism gave way to the politics of culture. Its early years represent an uneasy alliance between Trotskyist tendencies, the attraction of popular culture and the Surrealist approach to history as a dialectic of destruction and redemption. View first appeared in September 1940, the outcome of the joint efforts of the poet Charles Henri Ford and fellow poet, art and film critic Parker Tyler. It was the main forum for Surrealist-inspired ideas and constituted the only sustained attempt to suggest ways of looking at American culture ‘through Surrealist eyes’, to paraphrase the early epigraph of the magazine “through the eyes of poets”. Writings and works by or on André Breton, Max Ernst, Yves

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12 In his highly influential Theory of the Avant-Garde of 1974, Peter Bürger has defined the ‘historical avant-garde movements’ – the term refers to Futurism, Constructivism, Dadaism and early Surrealism – as a distinct socio-historical phenomenon; beyond the modernist attack on traditional genres and techniques, these movements challenged ‘art as an institution’ within bourgeois society. ‘The concept 'art as an institution' [...] refers to the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works’. Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. 22.

Tanguy, Benjamin Péret, Pierre Mabille, Marcel Duchamp, appeared alongside contributions from exiled sympathisers and artists such as Pavel Tchelitchew, Leonora Carrington, Nicolas Calas, and an enlarging and diverse spectrum of American voices, including contributions by Lionel Abel, Paul Bowles, Alexander Calder, Joseph Cornell, Paul Goodman, Henry Miller, Harold Rosenberg, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams. View was short-lived and the possibilities of bringing Surrealism to bear on American culture were all but abandoned. Be that as it may, and despite its wilful oversight of the early years of Abstract Expressionism, View represented in Parker Tyler’s words:

a cultural popular front between fashionable transatlantic elements and neglected aspects of American talent. ...Within View’s range are all the native affiliates corresponding to the imaginative sources approved by Surrealism: self-taught, fantastic and naive poetry and art.¹⁴

Contrary to Greenberg’s stressing the divide between mass culture and the ‘avant-garde’, Tyler’s notion of ‘a cultural popular front’ suggests a ground of affinities rather than opposition between high and popular culture. What Tyler implies is that both may be as complicit with, just as they may be critical, and that the critical element of formal experimentation is not confined to high art alone. In response to this, View featured diverse approaches to political activism, World War II, American cultural history, the European avant-gardes, Hollywood films, popular entertainment, jazz, naive and black art, indigenous cultures, the Surrealist approach to magic, alchemy and myth; these voices coexisted in the magazine, often to the uneasiness of the contributors involved.¹⁵ This is evident in the ways in which View’s Americana was informed by Surrealism, just as Surrealism was assimilated and criticised on American grounds. Overall, instead of adopting an embattled position towards the fact that, in Greenberg’s terms, ‘the avant-garde’ has deluded itself in ‘[assuming] itself to be cut off’ from ‘the enlightened ruling classes of society [...] to which it has always remained attached by an umbilical cord of gold’,¹⁶ View attempted to map out

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¹² On the uneasy relation between Ford and Breton and the tension between View’s American strain and Surrealist tendencies, see Tashjian, pp. 176-201.
the avant-garde as something that cuts across the individual and the collective, as well as the problematic divide between high and mass culture, at the levels of either production or reception. Rather than defining either term against the other, View sought elements that transcend these categorisations in favour of a notion that embraces anything that sits uneasily in either polemical or elitist positions on the avant-garde/mass culture interface.

View’s Surrealist affinities and its notion of an ‘avant-garde culture’ were the target of Greenberg’s critique. In a 1941 review he called the magazine ‘putrescent’ while at the same time inadvertently describing, albeit negatively, View’s more dynamic view of culture: ‘from [View] we gather that the surrealists are unwilling to say goodbye to anything. And that the American species identifies literature and art with its social life, and that this social life is complicated and satisfying.’

That the idea of the avant-garde was predominantly associated with political and/or artistic progressivism and innovation was equally evident in Robert Duncan's ‘attack’ on View: ‘from reverence of the monster to irreverence of the monster, from impulse to opportunity, [...] Ford [...] set up what is one of the most tasty and highbrowed wax museums on the boardwalk of the avant-garde.’ For similar reasons, Duncan deplored what he saw as the way ‘romantic artists’ and ‘revolutionists’, like André Breton and Nicolas Calas, ‘were taken up and taken in by the culture collectors’ and that ‘all the drama of the real political world was played in charade to give excitement to the boredom of the rentiers’. Duncan’s critique aimed at what he saw as View's noncommittal attitude towards art’s powerlessness against its social function, as well as at View’s seeing oppositional potential in the unaware resistance of ‘neglected aspects of American talent’ to which we will return later.

In the first issues of View, as well as in its 1941 ‘Surrealist number’, the value of culture was inflected through the relation between artistic form and empirical reality. With regard to this, Edouard Roditi’s subdued optimism in his 1940 article on ‘Why and How Lorca is Translated’ is telling: he addressed the permanence and

17 Greenberg, I, pp. 42-3.
significance of the ‘modern tradition’ at a time when the link as well as the discrepancy between life and art were no longer self-evident. As Roditi puts it: ‘it is difficult to disentangle the skein of action and poetry’ in ‘lives’ which ‘prolong their poetry just as the lives of saints are permanent dramatizations of their faith’. In Lorca, life and art were as complementary as they were incommensurable. While Lorca left Roditi ‘with an impression of his being wholly wrapped up in the personal problems of living and writing’, he notes that The Poet in New York ‘is more abstract: guitars, montage, all the paraphernalia of cubism and surrealism’. Like Lorca, the contemporary artist ‘derives his emotion from his own skill’ and increasingly retreats from ‘nature’ and from the ‘reality’ of pure ideas.\(^{19}\) By highlighting the intrinsic value of the artwork, both when it turns to itself and when it opens into the external world, Roditi questions the validity of the contents of both life and art: this amounts to questioning whether an artwork can capture the life outside itself in a dialectic between subjective experience and form.

This was aptly voiced in a much more resolved manner than Roditi’s by Wallace Stevens in his ‘Materia Poetica Part I’, which appeared in the first number of View in September 1940. Stevens related the distinction between life and art to the larger category of experience. The poetry of experience is larger than life – ‘experience, at least in the case of a poet of any scope, is much broader than reality.’ Imagination, reality and sensory perception are interrelated for Stevens, for whom poetry is ‘a means of redemption’ that ‘increases the feeling for reality’.\(^{20}\) That subjectivity redeems reality does not work in the reverse manner for Stevens though, and this, as we shall see, was the point in his critique of the Surrealist faith in the emancipatory potential of the reality outside the artwork.

In respect of the relation between reality and form, View hosted the following year Nicolas Calas’s attack on Salvador Dali. In his ‘Anti-Surrealist Dali: i say his flies are ersatz’, Calas criticised Dali’s ‘morphological determinism by tricks’, through which ‘[he] imitates reality instead of producing it […] lost in his unconscious, when

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conscious reality has become so terrible.' Although Calas deplores that Dali reduced the unconscious to a formal principle, it is quite ironic that in the ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’ essay, Greenberg criticised Dali for ‘[representing] the processes and concepts of his consciousness, not the processes of his medium’, and that he saw this as typical of the Surrealist ‘reactionary tendency […] to restore “outside” subject matter’. Whereas for Greenberg, artistic forms are historical by referring exclusively to themselves, Calas, for whom form is also an expression of historical reality, sees the artwork as simultaneously drawing from formal experiment and from subjective experience:

Laws of science, of art, are but instances in an endless time. The utmost we can achieve is to feel sometimes the rhythm of their change. For this, experiment is necessary. Each new discovery is a beat of the pulse of life.

Yet Calas leaves unspecified how an artwork can become an authentic form of intervention into life, the desired alternative to Dali’s ‘ersatz flies’ that fail to participate in ‘decomposition’, which in his paintings is an ‘illustration’ rather than ‘a process of life’. Calas’s attack on Dali and Greenberg’s critique of Surrealism are underscored by similar indecisions as to how artistic forms become vehicles of history. In relation to this, Wallace Stevens’s critique of Surrealism in his ‘Materia Poetica Part II’ sounds like a gloss on both Calas’s faith in Surrealism and Greenberg’s critique of its inadequacy. For Stevens ‘the essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering’; his own notion of the ‘unknown’ negates the Surrealist faith in the potentiality of the contingent and at the same time nuances Greenberg’s categorical embrace of pure forms: ‘[the unconscious] should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination.’

Neither form nor external reality, but subjectivity is for Stevens the repository of the particularity of the self’s relation to the world.

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21 Nicolas Calas, ‘Anti-Surrealist Dali i say his flies are ersatz’, repr. in View Parade, pp. 15-8 (p. 17, p. 18).
22 Greenberg, I, p. 9n.
23 View Parade, p. 16.
24 View Parade, p. 17.
25 Reprinted in Opus Posthumous, p. 203.
Against the backdrop of this problematic, View signposted its Surrealist affinity with a ‘Surrealist Number’ compiled by Calas, in the fall of 1941;\(^{27}\) the number opened with an interview that Calas conducted with Breton. Alongside his discovery of a new species of ‘surrealist flora’ in the countryside around New York and his ‘initiation into the mysteries of American butterflies’, Breton speculated on the role and ‘orientation’ of Surrealism and art in general. His responses bear a sustained faith in regeneration, although he says that ‘it is still too early to judge that which is living and rich in promise on the 1940 tree’. Nonetheless, he contemplates with optimism the idea that artistic and intellectual advances coincide with moments of crisis in history. In this manner, he attempts to shift the dominant perspective on the antinomy between historical regression and progress in art, and strike a balance between self-realisation and the realisation of collective causes.

Breton stresses that Surrealism’s ‘preoccupations […] [arise] from the eternal (the mind grappling with the state of man)’ and ‘from the actual, the mind witness of its own movement’. This tendency to reconcile contingent and atemporal principles marks Breton’s growing preoccupation with myth in the following years: as I shall go into more detail later, this tendency was ambivalently consonant with early Abstract Expressionist thought, just as much as it was dissonant to View’s approach to culture. Announcing the end of ‘the illusion of independence, […] of the transcendence of the work of art’, Breton urges artists to further ‘the great modern tradition’. In claiming that ‘Surrealism will never find a more favorable period for its program which is to render to man the concrete empire of his functions’, it remained uncertain how this program was going to come about, if not through intellectual and artistic advances which, on the other hand, seemed incommensurable with any other realm of social life. (I: 7-8, October-November 1941, 1, 2) A similar and more unequivocally optimist sense of urgency to relate inner emancipation to the historical condition of humanity informed his opening statement for VVV.\(^{28}\)

\(^{27}\) On Calas’s American years, see Christopher MacGowan, ‘Sparkles of Understanding: Williams and Nicolas Calas’, William Carlos Williams Review, 22: 1 (Spring 1996), 81-98 (p. 83). The interview was reprinted in French in André Breton, Entretiens as ‘Interview de Charles-Henri Ford’, pp. 225-34.

\(^{28}\) ‘VV […] that double victory, ν again over all that is opposed to the emancipation of the spirit, of which the first indispensable condition is the liberation of man’. VVV, 1 (June 1942), 1; repr. in French as ‘Déclaration VVV’, in La Cité des champs, pp. 74-5.
Alongside the interview with Breton, View’s ‘Surrealist Number’ featured Georges Henein’s ‘Message from Cairo to Poets in America’. In Henein’s ‘message’, which sounds like a distant echo of the Breton-Trotsky manifesto, the role of art in the reconstruction of reality comes up: as ‘the regions overrun by war’ are ‘less devastated than the hearts and wills of men’, he urges ‘American poets’ ‘to bring [their] ardor’ to ‘an entirely material revolution, materialist and utilitarian’. (I: 7-8, p. 3) A similar programmatic tone informs Calas’s ‘The Light of Words’: ‘every work replaces certain of [the] obstacles [of life] with new values, intoxicating and exalting, which oblige man to readapt himself to a reality different from the old.’ (I: 7-8, p. 4) Resisting a wider discontent, Calas overlooks how the values of artworks are contradicted by historical reality: art is in conflict with itself just as much as it is in conflict with the external world. In relation to this, Henein’s and Calas’s circumstantial sense of urgency was offset by Masson’s, Seligmann’s, and Mabille’s views on what is represented inside art and what exists outside it; the artwork’s ability to open up into something latent and unrealised, and to express a reality that defies representation came to the foreground. Perceived either as distinct from reality or as an organic, yet alienated part, the artwork can assume its independence only by participating in this reality.

In the context of View, Masson’s critique of mimesis in ‘The Bed of Plato’ can be read as a parable on the subject’s involuntary participation in history. Masson’s views are not unrelated to the distrust of figuration in Abstract Expressionism in the following years. On the other hand, by contesting its ability to represent and by increasingly becoming its own subject, abstract painting could also be seen as confirming the Cartesian model of the artist who, in Masson’s words, ‘is locked in a dungeon so deep that even if he could escape he would never pass beyond the frame itself of his invention’. Yet at the same time, by becoming its own subject, the artwork comes to pass as an unmediated, inalienable expression of the self. Both the self and the work participate in contingent and latent realities, hence Masson’s wish that the artist will ‘stretch out in domains where liberty does not yet exist’: art can break from the constraints of a deceptive representation of reality as well as from the closure of form. (I: 7-8, p. 3) Masson’s openness to ‘all signs [which] will serve us in
the avid arena of Desire' involves the potency of the self/world interaction. Yet this openness is also an expression of uncertainty as to whether it is historically pertinent to carry on reflecting on how 'the artwork' can participate in the social realm; or rather, 'the avid arena of Desire' is an expression of the hope that art could transform society only in 'domains' that transcend empirical reality. On the other hand, the fact that an artwork may make 'the forests rise and walk' does not necessarily imply that its dynamic reaches what lies beyond it. For Masson, the artwork is primarily a reality with a life of its own and therefore an incentive to, rather than a means for social change.

In his 'An Eye for a Tooth', Kurt Seligmann, in seeking to come to terms with the reality of war, sees destruction as a reversible process in which opposing forces participate in each other; this allowed him to sustain art as a principle of metamorphosis: 'if perversion is a state of grace, it is by the grace of the devil. But sanctioning this kind of diabolism amounts to affirming its antithesis.' For Seligmann, art is an esoteric process which becomes manifest through forms that are neither exclusively figurative nor abstract: 'in an iconoclastic era such as our own, we shall speak the language of hints. We shall shiftingly identify ourselves with our cryptic images'. These images will deliberately remain uncertain; they are as real as much as they represent a reality which does not correspond to codified notions about figuration: 'there will remain nothing but this actuality from which the depiction of the unhappy-worker will be excluded as antisocial, in which abstract painting will be one with the bands and bars of which the blind and imprisoned dream.' (I: 7-8, p. 3) Like Masson, Seligmann implies that the content of art expresses, yet is distinct from what lies outside it.

In a similar manner, Victor Brauner dismisses 'external reference', when it comes to refer 'to the world of reality of these gentlemen'. The "mist" of inspiration' recalls the principle, fundamental in Surrealism, of the reciprocal relation between the self

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29 This reappeared in the 'Prologue' of his 1943 Anatomie de mon univers: 'Du lien lancé dans le vent / À la souffrance d’une flamme / Au sillage d’une chevelure / Au vol d’une plume dans l’ombre / Tous les signes nous serviront / Dans l’avid arène du désir', André Masson, Anatomie de mon univers (Marseilles: André Dimanche, 1988), Prologue iii. See also Le Rebelle du surréalisme, p. 219, p. 241n, for a slightly different translation into French; the original French seems to have disappeared and the first English translation was done by Meyer Shapiro.
and the external world. Like Seligmann, Brauner seeks to come to terms with the reality of war; visions of extinction assume the dialectic of ending and regeneration, as the 'mist' tells him: 'I am the element that springs from a formless matter, I am the protoplasm or the ectoplasm. [...] All begins and disappears through me, in me...'. (I: 7-8, p. 5) Brauner responds to the problematic role of the subject in a destructive history by prioritising subjectivity as an elemental origin that becomes manifest through the artwork.

Pierre Mabille’s uncertainty as to whether ‘we shall be on the same side in the rupture of the world now in progress’, and his positing our ‘immersion in most distant zones – “hermetic” knowledge of metaphysics’ as our only means of redemption, bear the same longing for a radical breakthrough, similar to Masson’s looking out into ‘domains where liberty does not yet exist’ and to Seligmann’s ‘language of hints’. Yet in positing an unspecified transcendence of the contingent, Mabille’s ‘hermetic’ tendencies may have sounded as a sublimation of the reality of war. Wolfgang Paalen’s critique of the politics of Surrealism was also predicated on the potentiality of destruction. Although ‘Nietzsche was less mistaken that Marx [...] when, through his metaphysical darwinism and in treating history somewhat lightly, he announced a zealous rebestialization of Europe’, the revolutionary principle can still be redeemed, once ‘unburdened of the weight [...] of suppressed religiosity’. Surrealism’s error, for Paalen, was to have ‘conceded to politics a kind of reality apart, outside surreality’. By wishing to see Surrealism intensifying its negation of the boundary between surreality and reality yet again, Paalen seeks to sustain a transcendent promise of redemption. (I: 7-8, p. 5)

Max Ernst’s ‘The Hundred-Headless Woman’, part of the unnumbered poetry supplement, is the most enigmatic and the least circumstantial component of View’s ‘Surrealist Number’: unaccompanied by any of the collages of his 1929 collage-novel La Femme 100 têtes, the text includes captions from the novel interweaved into a cryptic biographical narrative of Loplop, The Bird Superior, Ernst’s alter ego. As Katrina Neiman has noted, ‘Ernst studies [...] give no information on the status of this text or its translation except to indicate that it was published [in View] for the first
time.' Ernst’s cryptic gloss on the absent collages comes across as a personal and collective allegory of the horror of war: a gloss on himself, his work and the war, it ends equivocally with the unknowable promise of destruction: ‘Loplop the sympathetic annihilator and ancient best bird [shooting] some elderballs into some debris of the universe. END AND CONTINUATION’. (I: 7-8) Suggestive of a notion of history as a dialectic of conscious and unconscious, psychic and social processes, in the context of View, Ernst’s metaphors of violence become allegories of history where the distinctness between individual and collective experiences is not overcome, but levelled.

Whether View’s ‘Surrealist number’ offered an accurate ‘view’ of Surrealism is secondary to how it brought up the problematic of the relation of artistic forms to historical experience, the autonomy of the artwork, and its contingent content. As Surrealism could not provide a consistent paradigm for the social role of art, View shifted its perspective onto the equally problematic ground of culture. As an indication of the direction of its subsequent dialogue with Surrealism, the ‘Surrealist number’ tentatively turned an eye to American popular culture in a context of Surrealist affinities. Joel Carmichael in his article ‘That Great Man’ stressed the critical welding of elements of high and popular culture in W. C. Fields’s film The Bank Dick; Fields ‘is a product of circuses, vaudevilles, and Hollywood. Yet in form and conception “The Bank Dick” is the quintessence of Franz Kafka, with echoing overtones of Waugh and the surrealists’. (I: 7-8, p. 8) Such effects are presented as stemming from an eclecticism that brings together avant-garde experimentation and culturally specific contents. Moreover, wilful discrepancies such as that between a ‘matter-of-fact treatment of dementia’ and ‘the eerie effect of threadbare comedy routines’, also defined Joseph Cornell’s approach to technique and subject-matter, high art and popular culture throughout the 1940s.

Dickran Tashjian has considered the ‘Surrealist number’ ‘as a virtual throwback to the first numbers of Breton’s Révolution surréaliste [1924-29]’, as it ‘was dominated by the word’, and noted that ‘Ford himself later claimed Breton’s

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30 View Parade, p. 27n.
Révolution surréaliste as a predecessor for View'.

Could, however, Mabille's immersion in 'hermetic' zones, Seligmann's immersion in magic and medieval alchemy, along with Fields's 'artistic vanguardism [...] in its most advanced stages [...] an amusing instance of cultural parallelism' (I: 7-8, p. 8) result in forms and practices beyond the high art/ mass culture divide? As we shall see next, in subsequent issues of View, popular culture was not necessarily posited as a corrective or a correlate to high art, neither was high culture seen as a self-contained refuge from mass culture. As for Surrealism, it initiated a critique of culture beyond the polarity between progress and regression. In relation to this, the interest of View's eclecticism on the one hand, and of its Surrealist affinity on the other, lies precisely in its circumstantial and untheorised nature. For all its distrust of Greenberg's modernist purism, View's eclecticism was not meant to exclude high art. Surrealism seemed as a most interesting precedent, suggestive of a critical approach to diverse cultural realms, addressing both their separateness and blending with a sense of irony and paradox. Lacking or resisting a programmatic intent, through its interest in Surrealism and American culture, View sought assemblages critical of notions of high and low, the mainstream and its margins, high and mass-produced culture. View, however, still had to address the relation between the individual and the collective as well as how production and consumption determine each other.

Resisting Greenberg's emerging elitism and Surrealism's uneasy relation to the rise of abstraction and mass culture in America, View sought to acclimatise Surrealism in the margins of either strand. It set out to explore a popular imaginary in order to challenge the qualitative value thought as intrinsic to formal advances in art on the one hand, and to redeem the defamiliarising potential of the marginal and the banal; the popular imaginary was seen as paradigmatic of more substantive experiences and as redeeming the presumed alienating effects of mass-produced culture. On the basis of its unaware resistance, the popular imaginary was implicitly posited as both complementary and opposed to the self-awareness of high art.

Before turning to View's ambiguous optimism with regard to the relation between high and mass culture, I will briefly consider Adorno's highly debated views on the
‘culture industry’. In the opening of his essay ‘Culture Industry Reconsidered’, Adorno famously stressed that the term ‘culture industry’, which he used with Max Horkheimer in their 1947 *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, replaced the term ‘mass culture’ in order to ‘exclude […] the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is something that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art’. For Adorno, the culture industry’s power of deception stems from the way it ‘fuses the old and familiar into a new quality’. This is both distinct from and similar to Greenberg’s famously defining kitsch as a ‘new commodity’, an ‘ersatz culture […] destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide. […] Kitsch is vicarious experiences and fake sensations’.

Not only contrasting the products of the ‘culture industry’ to ‘genuine culture’, what was new about the ‘culture industry’ for Adorno, was the way in which it had integrated the spheres of high and low, at the price of the destruction of the former’s autonomy through ‘speculation about its efficacy’ and the neutralisation of the latter’s resistance, a resistance ‘inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total’. Adorno’s critique targetted the media of mechanical reproduction and the ways in which production determines reception; in Adorno’s terms, as the end product defeats the process that went into its creation, the ‘culture industry’ offers novelty that aborts the need for social change. Therefore, rather than expressing a ‘protest’, as Trotsky had also wished for independent art, the products of the culture industry ‘[become] wholly integrated in those petrified relations’ they might have turned against.

Criticised for its pessimist elitism, in opposing high art’s negativity to mass culture, Adorno’s views were partly and indirectly justified by View’s difficulty of sustaining its tentative alternatives.

*View* sought to relativise the dichotomy between mass-produced culture and the subjective, reflective involvement with technique that Adorno recognised in the formal complexity of modernist art. Much Surrealism thought and practice before the

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32 Greenberg, I, p. 12.
war on the other hand, engaged with the relation between ‘the internal organisation of the object itself’ and its environment, to remember Adorno’s terms; a relation in which an artwork was meant to expose the alienating effect of the techniques of distribution and mechanical reproduction in the culture industry.\(^{34}\) View opened a perspective on a popular imaginary in which individualised involvement with form and technique on the one hand, and the effects of spontaneous, collective experiences on the other, do not cancel each other out. Still, in doing so, View did not bypass the problematic of novelty and progress inherent in the idea of the avant-garde, just as it came up against the problematic distinction not only between high and mass culture, but also between mass and popular culture. This becomes particularly evident in its consistent attraction to the intrinsic value of artworks, as well as in its attempt to sustain a form/content dialogue in a context of Surrealist affinities.

Moreover, in taking its cue from Surrealism and in attempting to open up a Surrealist perspective on American culture, View was also implicitly responding to a dialogue with Surrealism that had already taken shape in the 1920s and 1930s: between 1920 and 1940, the American avant-garde was a changing context which brought together different personalities who felt acutely the social unrest and the artistic void of the time. In seeking to define the social and cultural sources of distinctly American forms of expression, they also sought to integrate the European avant-garde’s means of expression. In respect of Surrealism, this dialogue was twofold. Prior to the dissemination of Surrealist and European art in general through a series of exhibitions in the 1930s, the American sensibility was also becoming aware of the fact that American experiences could become raw material for a Surrealist outlook. As for the popularisation of Surrealism and its having become a set of ‘fashionable transatlantic elements’, to use Parker Tyler’s turn of phrase, it was largely the result of Salvador Dali’s New York activities, over which the Parisian nucleus, and Breton in particular, had very little control.\(^{35}\) Still, Dali’s New York presence only exacerbated André Breton’s indignation over the former’s fascist

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\(^{34}\) Adorno, ‘Culture industry reconsidered’, pp. 87-8.

\(^{35}\) Throughout the 1930s in New York, Dali was widely exhibited, delivered lectures, designed advertisements for designer houses, decorated display windows, and designed a Surrealist pavilion
leanings, and his own malaise over the cultural and the aesthetic orientation as well as the troubled political allegiances of Surrealism at home. To the Americans on the other hand, American culture seemed to be the unexplored ground where Surrealism was at work outside the realm of art. It seemed as if, just as Surrealism would offer a set of theoretical principles with which to tap into the Surrealist potential in America, Surrealism in its turn could also be enriched by the distinctly American affinity for locality, particularity, and popular culture. Although such perspectives would, in principle, realise the Surrealists' own aim to blend aesthetic principles with a cultural programme, as evidenced in View, the Surrealists themselves did not adopt a similar perspective on American culture or on the high/low interface. As we shall see, View's affinities stumbled not only against the Surrealists' own resistance to its approach, but also against the rise of Abstract Expressionism, and the separation of its forms from popular culture.

Mathew Josephson's response to the early days of Surrealism in his 1922 articles 'Made in America' and 'After and Beyond Dada' in Broom, is just as telling of his own misperceptions and of his own agenda, as it anticipates View's approach. Alluding to his own marginality in the Paris scene in 'Made in America', Josephson begins by deploring the stereotypical view of America that the Americans themselves are also responsible for disseminating: 'boatloads of Americans, therefore, transport themselves to Europe and [...] hate the United States, nation of bad taste, shorn of liberty, ungentle to their paranoias and inhibitions.' He goes on to deplore the insensitivity of the public and the way in which American intellectuals deceive themselves in their 'desire, naïve enough, to vulgarize literature in America' and 'in attempting with Mr. Loeb [Broom's main editor] to “bridge the separation between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' which isolates the artist from the community”'. It is not that the 'gulf' between the artist and the greater public is not wide enough in Paris. Yet as European artists are 'not fooled [...] into compromise' and are aware of this distance, the Americans, in their turn, should draw their lesson from this

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36 Mathew Josephson, 'Made in America', Broom, vol. 2, no. 3 (June 1922), pp. 266-70 (266).
'intransigence'. He then goes on to talk about the 'affirmative Promethean attitude' that the Surrealists draw from Rimbaud and Lautréamont, and which forms the basis for the new art presented in *Littérature*. Josephson describes this new 'attitude' as resulting from 'unlimited experiment with form [...] from greater daring and a more penetrating humor' which he links to his own programme about the revolutionary potential of the machine. Getting back to the formal experiments of the Surrealists, 'confirmed explorers who are turning up new soil', he shifts his perspective onto America again: rather than the 'equal groping toward purer forms of literature', what is distinct about America is the fact that:

> the fundamental attitude of aggression, humor, unequivocal affirmation [...] comes most naturally from America [...] Reacting to purely American sources, to the at once bewildering and astounding American panorama, which only Chaplin and a few earnest unsung film-directors have mirrored, we may yet amass a new folk-lore out of the domesticated miracles of our time.

A little later in his 'After and Beyond Dada', he spelled out his notion of 'a new folklore'; it is interesting that Josephson this time links formal experiment with a negative outlook which he defines as the incentive to search for 'fresh booty' in 'the contemporary American flora and fauna': an amalgam which may be 'collected, in an arbitrary fashion, out of the inimitable films, the newspaper accounts, the jazz band', sources that View set out to tap into much later. Moreover, View corrected Josephson's own contradictions, typical among intellectuals with communist sympathies in Josephson's own time, in that it did not seek to bridge programmatically a formalist 'intransigence' in the realm of art with what the 'American flora and fauna' could offer 'to the play of the intellect'. On the other hand, either in relation to Josephson's 'positive' agenda, or in the context of View's subsequent interest in 'neglected American talent', Breton's discovery of a new species of 'surrealist flora' in the countryside around New York in 1941 and his 'initiation into the mysteries of American butterflies' seems somewhat wanting and hardly engaging with the particularities of American experience that Josephson had contemplated.

37 'Made in America', 267.
38 'Made in America', 269.
39 'Made in America', 270.
40 Mathew Josephson, 'After and Beyond Dada', *Broom*, vol. 2, no. 4 (July 1922), pp. 346-50 (347).
To get back to View's predecessors, Surrealism continued to appear in American Little Magazines throughout the late 1920s and 1930s: as was the case with Josephson's misperceptions and insights, the responses to Surrealism were determined by the Americans' views on their own culture and by their own cultural and aesthetic programmes. Eugene Jolas's interest in Surrealist ideas is a case in point, especially in the early years of transition's run. In the August 1927 number of transition, Breton's 'Introduction to the Discourse on the Dearth of Reality', translated by Jolas himself, appeared alongside Hemingway, Mc Almon and Joyce. In the February 1928 number, he published an excerpt from Desnos's Liberty or Love, alongside Joyce, Elsa Von Freytag-Loringhoven, St-J. Perse, Comte de Lautréamont, and Kafka. Interestingly, in his 'The Revolution of Language and James Joyce', Jolas seems to be taking his cue from Breton's 'Introduction to the Dearth of Reality' to talk about Joyce; we should approach Joyce's work with language, Jolas implies, by acknowledging that 'the disintegration of words and their subsequent reconstruction on other planes constitute some of the most important phenomena of our age'. Joyce subverts the norms of meaning in a way intended to shock an indifferent and apathetic readership; in terms reminiscent of Breton's, Jolas tells us that 'the process of destruction [...] opens up heretofore undreamed-of-possibilities of expression'. Further on in his article, he posits an affinity between Joyce's work on language, Leon Paul Fargue, the Surrealists and Stein: yet in doing so, Jolas conflates modernist formal experimentation to the Surrealist aim to blend life and art, an aesthetic and a political programme: 'the revolution of the surrealistes who destroyed completely the old relationship between words and thought remains of immense significance' and this revolution made it possible 'to create a universe of beauty the existence of which was never suspected before'. Against the backdrop of Jolas's interest in the Surrealist exploration of the unconscious on the one hand, and his interest in

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41 On Jolas's interest in the beginning of Surrealism at the time when he was working as a literary columnist for the Paris edition of the Chicago Tribune, and on his own notion of myth and his 'revolution of the word', as well as on Surrealism's role in the American Little Magazines of the period see also Tashjian, pp. 11-35.
43 Jolas, 'The Revolution of Language', 111.
modernist experiment on the other, Joyce becomes a pretext to present his own emerging programme on the modern consciousness.44

The intermittent appearance of Surrealism in Edward W. Titus's This Quarter, this time adapted to a context that was committed to Anglo-American and European modernist experimentation, offers a contrast to Josephson's, as well as to Levy's and View's interest in a Surrealist-inflected Americana in the following decade. On the other hand, even negatively, America is again presented as a ground of unexplored potential. In the second number, alongside Pound's Cantos, Carl Sandburg, Robert Mc Almon, and Jolas, Williams in his 'Jacataqua', like Josephson before him, spells out misperceptions about America and America's particularity in relation to Europe. The belief 'that life in America is compact of violence and the shock of immediacy' is misguided for Williams: 'were it so, there would be a corresponding beauty of the spirit' which would put America on an equal ground with 'the spirit of other times and other nations'. The 'violence' offered to the public by newspapers 'is not immediacy but FEAR'. It is the particularity of raw Americana which, for Williams, incites 'poets' to look for 'character in out of the way places' and to create new forms 'which give character and dignity to the damp mass of the overpowering but characterless resistance'.45 Despite his constant interaction with avant-garde experiments, Williams makes no specific allusion to the context that would offer such new forms, least of all, Surrealism, although, through Josephson, he was introduced to Philippe Soupault when he was preparing his translation of Soupault's Les Dernières Nuits de Paris in 1929.46

After a series of special numbers on Italian, Russian, German, Austrian and Anglo-American modernism, just before it folded, This Quarter put together a special number on Surrealism in the Fall of 1932, with André Breton as guest editor. Prior to this, Surrealism had marginally appeared in the pages of This Quarter without any

44 The discoveries of the subconscious by medical pioneers as a new field for magical explorations and comprehensions should have made it apparent that the instrument of language in its archaic condition could no longer be used. Modern life with its changed mythos and transmuted concepts of beauty makes it imperative that words be given a new composition and relationship.' Jolas, 'The Revolution of Language', 109-10.
45 William Carlos Williams, 'Jacataqua', This Quarter, no. 2, pp. 182-94 (182, 188, 192, 193).
editorial comment as to its place in a context of modernist affinities. Breton’s own imprint is manifest throughout, and there is no hint as to how Surrealism would open up new perspectives onto American experiences. Moreover, Titus in his uncertain and somewhat puzzled assertions in the editorial, rather than looking at how Surrealism addresses the crisis of the modern consciousness or looking at the inroads of the Surrealist programme into everyday life, ultimately presents Surrealism like an idiosyncratic approach to thought and art, which nonetheless yields extraordinary visual and verbal experiments. The number was divided into sections on ‘Experimental Prose’, ‘Expository Articles’, ‘Surrealism and Madness’, ‘Poems’, ‘Prose’, a ‘Scenario’ – Bunuel’s and Dali’s ‘An Andalusian Dog’–, Péret’s ‘Story’ ‘At No. 125, Boulevard Saint-Germain’, and ‘Drawings’. The divisions are very much reminiscent of the presentation of material in La Révolution surréaliste.

In ‘Editorially: By Way of Introducing This Surrealist Number’, Titus tries to justify his uncertainty as to the pertinence of including Surrealism in a context of modernist affinities. As if voicing Breton’s own conflicting attitude to modernist writing and art, he describes the Surrealist number as a ‘spell, a relief from that art which an artist always produces “out of his consciousness, and with no other aim than to please”. Not only the kind of modernist writing that This Quarter was consistently committed to, had other aims ‘but to please’ or to convey the working of the conscious mind alone, but also, in dissociating Surrealism from this kind of art, Titus does not engage with Surrealism’s relation to modernism. If not apologetic, Titus seeks to justify this change of course by saying that without compromising its ‘vacationless pursuit of an undiminishing standard’, This Quarter ‘[was] casting about for a passing distraction’. Highlighting that Surrealism deserves attention for having brought up the hitherto unexplored potential of the unconscious, Titus stresses that he intends to correct misperceptions about Surrealism which ‘regarded in its early days as merely a new litero-artistic movement, has since enlarged its scope to embrace moral, social and political interests’. Closely following at this point Breton’s emphasis on how Surrealism is a set of principles drawn from and returning into life, he stresses that ‘the surrealists do not create their world, they simply find or discover and explore an
existing world, the world of the unconscious'. Like A. Everett 'Chic' Austin, Julien Levy, and Alfred J. Barr who introduced the American public to the visual output of the Surrealists in the 1930s, Titus is somewhat reluctant to make a value judgement about the aftermath of Surrealist experiments, a caution that was not the case in his editorials on modernism:

Their work must be taken as it stands, measurable as it is by no standards that we know. Possessing ourselves not a germ of Surrealist proclivities, we may, however, say this, that if, by the evocation of the unconscious or subliminal self, poems are produced such as some of those printed in this issue, the day may come when the need of re-examination of every known definition of art – certainly of the art of poetry at least – will force itself upon us.

While in the 1920s, Surrealist ideas and writings were primarily disseminated through Little Magazines, a series of exhibitions of Surrealist art in the 1930s set the course for responses to Surrealism in the following decade. Yet again the American experiences that corresponded to the Surrealist spirit were at stake, as well as the extent to which popular and commercial culture could offer raw material and new forms for the acclimatisation of Surrealism. The first exhibition of Surrealist art in America was organised by A. Everett 'Chick' Austin, the newly appointed director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. An amateur magician himself, Austin was attracted to the Surrealist idea of the marvelous: moreover, throughout the early 1930s, Austin was in close contact with Julien Levy, most influential enthusiast of Surrealism, who had recently opened his own gallery in New York. Austin's 'The Newer-Super-realism' opened on 16 November 1931 in Hartford, followed by an almost identical show at Julien Levy's gallery in New York. Austin exhibited works by nine artists, with Dali, Ernst, Picasso, Miró and Masson among them. Shifting the slant of the previous decade, Austin praised but somewhat bypassed the Surrealists'
formal avant-gardism or their cultural and political programme, and instead highlighted that:

these pictures [...] are of the moment. [...] Many of them are humorous [...] some of them are sinister and terrifying, but so are the tabloids. It is much more satisfying aesthetically to be amused, to be frightened even, than to be bored by a pompous and empty art.  

This statement is not necessarily apologetic in respect of his choice to mount a show of a controversial kind of art; at the same time, Austin seems to suggest that there is not an intrinsic value in formal experimentation, just as he is more inclined to freely adapt the spirit of Surrealist art, highlighting the reception and the effect at the expense of the intent behind any one form of expression.

Staged in New York in January 1932, Levy’s ‘Surréalisme’ not only had a more far-reaching effect but also intimated an American Surrealism; the show included photo-montages by Georges Platt Lynes, who also devised the cover of the foldout catalogue for Austin’s show, Man Ray and Joseph Cornell. Most importantly, and in a manner prescient of View’s approach, Levy presented Surrealism as a way of encountering the world, and as an incentive to see the artistic sensibility involved with everyday life: hence the inclusion of his ‘own frieze of negative photostats, a series of shocking cover-page seriocosmic collages from the New York Evening Graphic, the yellowest of vulgar journalism and incredible Americana featuring the story of “Peaches” and her “Daddy” Browning. Premonitions of Pop-Art?’

Not unlike Josephson’s notion of the potential of the cultural assimilation of Surrealism, unencumbered on the other hand by Josephson’s Communist sympathies, it still remained unclear what kind of new art or writing such Surrealist-inspired encounters would yield. Although an ‘incredible Americana’ may be ‘raw’ Surrealism, Levy gave no indication as to how it would blend into American life, or as to how Surrealism was going to transform and bring out the American marvelous. This uneasiness as to how this cross-fertilisation could possibly materialise may also be the reason why such a raw Americana was virtually absent from the Surrealist one-man shows that Levy subsequently mounted.

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50 Austin cited in Zlotsky, p. 59.
51 Levy, p. 82, see also pp. 79-89.
The souvenir catalogue for Dali's one-man show (December 10-January 9, 1937) is one such instance: a two-sided cardboard with a list of the exhibited works at the back and a black and white drawing of a faceless woman at the front. The skin is drawn like a hairy texture, with an opened drawer at the level of the eyes. Her sagging breasts are two foldouts with contact-size black and white prints of Surrealist imagery. The enigmatic and monstrous aspect of the female image is a promising glimpse of what was on offer at the show: a list of such sights appears on the upper left side of the front page. This list accurately describes Dali's pictures, yet offers no links to the bizzare and extravagant banality of American yellow journalism for instance; the flora and fauna of fantasy in Dali is cultivated rather than raw, subjectivised rather than collective, ironically closer to the letter than to the spirit of Surrealism, at least as the Americans understood it:

snapshots in colour and prompted by dreams, objective and subjective phantoms, diurnal phantasies, images in half-sleep, overwhelming objects, object-beings, morphological spectres, lilliputian uneasinesses, paranoiac associations, experimental onerism, caprices within the womb, drawers of flesh, malleable watches, very hairy apartments, subconscious images, images of concrete irrationality.**

Ironically the defamiliarising aspect of such encounters could most likely occur inside Levy's gallery rather than outside it, within the sensational stock-in-trade imagery the American public was increasingly becoming familiar with. The social element of such imagery, or rather the extent to which popular sensationalism could be vested with a 'concrete irrationality' that redeems an otherwise impoverishing banality is uneasily silenced.

Alfred J. Barr’s 1936 landmark show Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism seems as if intended to resolve the twofold stake in America’s encounter with the European avant-garde. In the preface to the first edition of the catalogue, Barr spoke of the exhibition as ‘the second of a series of exhibitions planned to present in an objective and historical manner the principal movements of modern art’, the first being Cubism and Abstract Art.** Still, Barr’s essay is marked by a difficulty that also runs through

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View: on the one hand, he highlights that Surrealism is anchored in its own historical
and intellectual context, by spelling out its aesthetic, political and cultural aims, and
on the other, he seeks to argue for the relevance of the Surrealist spirit for
contemporary America.

In a manner that anticipates Tyler’s approach to the category of the ‘fantastic’ in
View, Barr turns to the ‘fantastic’ predecessors of Surrealism: by ascribing a
transcultural and transhistorical character to a Surrealist lineage, Surrealism would
more naturally blend into American lines of enquiry. At the same time, he
distinguishes between formal effects and outlook, and tells us that a parallel between
Surrealism and the art of the past may also be ‘superficial or merely technical in
character rather than psychological [...] [because] many of the fantastic or apparently
surrealist works of the Baroque or Renaissance are to be explained on rational
grounds’. Still, the category of the ‘fantastic’ and the genre are conflated. This is
also the reason why the section on ‘comparative material’ which includes Surrealist
affinities outside the realm of art could also qualify for the category of the ‘fantastic’:
it is this section, however, that allows Barr to introduce the Americans’ need to
integrate what their own everyday encounters with the fantastic may offer in a context
that inflects aesthetic and political concerns; ‘commercial and journalistic art’ appears
alongside the ‘art of children’, the ‘art of the insane’, ‘folk art’, ‘miscellaneous
objects and pictures with a Surrealist character’, and ‘scientific objects’.

In his ‘Introduction’, like Tyler a little later in View, Barr addresses the historicity
of Surrealism, while at the same time he freely interprets Surrealism as a form of
experience that cuts through different historical realities:

the explanation of the kind of art shown in this exhibition may be sought in the
deep-seated and persistent interest which human beings have in the fantastic, the
irrational, the spontaneous, the marvelous, the enigmatic, and the dreamlike.

Despite the fact that the appeal of Surrealism stems from the fact that it tapped into
experiences which are fundamental in the constitution of ‘human beings, like Titus in
1932, rather than making a value judgement on Surrealism, Barr prefers to conclude


54 Fantastic Art, p. 7.
55 Fantastic Art, pp. 225-34.
56 Fantastic Art, p. 9.
by noting that Surrealism’s far-reaching impact will become manifest in unsuspected
directions.\(^{57}\)

In the next part of this chapter, I will look at how View highlighted the critical
potential of experiences inside as well as beyond the realm of art: susceptible to
become ideological as they might be, also bear potential for resistance. In this
manner, View addressed both Surrealism’s ties to its intellectual and historical
context, as well as a distinctly American problematic, that between what they saw as
America’s resistant particularity and the need for artists to convey this particularity in
new forms. Ironically however, Adorno’s pessimism, which was almost
contemporary to View’s take on culture, stems from an insight not dissimilar to
View’s: rather than redeeming high art as a privileged realm that can remain untainted
by empirical reality, Adorno acknowledged that the different guises which any one
form of expression may assume, simultaneously expose and conceal its complicity.\(^{58}\)
Nonetheless, whereas for View, any form of unaware resistance bore unrealised
potential, for Adorno, the only valid form of critique is a negative one, a critique that
exposes the limitations of its resistance and its inescapable complicity. As we shall
see, View’s, as well as Cornell’s, O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s interest in Surrealism,
reveal how these two positions presuppose just as much as they negate each other.

\(^{57}\) Fantastic Art, p. 13.

\(^{58}\) See Eugene Lunn, ‘The Frankfurt School in the Development of the Mass Culture Debate’, in
Ronald Roblin, ed., The Aesthetics of the Critical Theorists: Studies on Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse,
and Habermas (Lewiston, Queenstown, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, Problems in
1.2 View's cultural politics: Surrealist Americanism or 'American Surrealism'?

The December 1941-January 1942 number on 'prophecy, cinema, fable, art' which succeeded Calas's 'Surrealist number', published Parker Tyler's 'Every Man His Own Private Detective' on John Huston's *The Maltese Falcon*, Cornell's "Enchanted Wanderer" excerpt from *a journey album for hedy lamarr*, Leonora Carrington's 'White Rabbits', Tyler's 'Nostradamus Against the Gods, An Assertion of the Active Principle of Prophecy' (under the pseudonym of Hilary Arm), and John Goodwin's 'Remarks on The Polymorphic Image'. It also featured 'The Destruction of the World', an excerpt from Mabille's 1940 *Le Miroir du merveilleux*, translated by Charles Henri Ford: this represented View's attempt to complement Trotskyist politics with the Surrealist politics of desire.

Mabille presents teleological, apocalyptic visions of destruction as allegories of an esoteric unity between self and world. Whether they were intended as metaphors of activism, in the context of View, they sounded a note of critique in relation to the decline of political activism. Mabille recognises a most fundamental sadistic drive underlying the 'voluptuous satisfaction' of the child in the face of a 'cataclysm' and man's 'insane taste [...] to go even further into the paroxysm [...] in the midst of his groans'. The 'principle of eternal destruction', 'seen' only by poets like Lautréamont, subsumes the reality of violence in a redemptive process where artistic activity is an integral part. Realising 'the distance that separates the real life within himself and the social conditions where the already fetid dead assemble their gangrenous stupidity', and that 'the cries of the wage-slaves and prisoners of to-day' are 'more lugubrious than those in Dante', all the poet can do is '[prophesize] that indispensable destruction'. (I: 9-10, December 1941-January 1942, p. 1, p. 8) This statement is symptomatic of Mabille's own uncertainty: in contemplating a subjective agency that defies a rationalist and deterministic view of history, he values the poet's inner 'real

Contemporary Philosophy, Vol. 23, 1990), pp. 27-84.


60 Unlike Péret's or Calas's Trotskyist affiliations, Pierre Mabille's esoteric tendencies were criticised by Sean Niall in *Partisan Review*. Niall described Mabille's *Égrégores ou la vie des civilisations* as a curiously idiosyncratic revisionist Marxism, veering towards 'social astrology'. Sean Niall, 'Paris Letter', *Partisan Review*, VI : 3 (Spring 1939), 100-5 (p. 104).
life' over 'social conditions' on the one hand, while he prioritises the 'cries of the wages-slaves' over the ones in Dante on the other.

Mabille's uneasy politics notwithstanding, the number was a telling instance of the dual aim that underscored View's notion of cultural eclecticism: a step away from the emphasis on the role of subjectivity and principles of production, it addressed the potential of the reception rather than the production of popular and mass-cultural forms. Intended to redeem mass-produced culture through the directness of collective and spontaneous expressions of a popular imaginary, View's eclecticism was directed towards content rather than towards formal and technical advances. Through categories such as the 'fantastic' or the 'macabre', View set out to redeem idiosyncratic collective experiences not only against high art but also against mass-cultural products that assume deceptively a guise of individuality. Given this, no hierarchical or qualitative link was posited between Mabille's redemptive vision of destruction, Leonora Carrington's hallucinatory tale — an allegory of confinement, insanity and violence, or Tyler's defense of prophecy in the face of the rationalisation of the irrationality of war. Neither was an explicit link drawn between Cornell's nostalgia for the aura of his idol in silent movies and Tyler's incisive view of Sam Spade as a 'symbol of universal distrust' — 'the criminal, the crippled genius of pity, and the average American', or Clark Mills's 'advice' to the 'beggars' to avoid 'the turgid centers of congestion, the magnetic blaze of cinemas, night-clubs and well-kept faces'. What the assemblage of such diverse affinities was meant to suggest was that spontaneous and unaware resistances do not necessarily coincide with a self-aware social intent.

William Carlos Williams's playful responses to a questionnaire entitled 'Towards the Unknown' in the February-March 1942 number, explored such critical effects. For Williams, the stars are as arbitrary as 'the disappearing point of the unconscious' which in America 'is well represented in life by the New York Evening Star'. In this manner, Williams describes the double-edged impact of mass culture: 'journalism' gives us 'all sorts of fascinating detail, the most accurate and expensive that the

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61 See also Clark Mills's poem 'The Beggars: Place Edmond Rostand', Partisan Review, VI: 1 (Fall 1938), 42.
imagination can buy'. It induces 'a state' that has 'features of the universal religious ecstasy of the 12th century. In this congeries of factual events is caught the sublime and the irrational'. (I: 11-12, p. 10) Williams's point is reminiscent of responses to Surrealism in the previous decade, highlighting that American culture offers Surrealism in a raw state. At the same time, his defense of irrationality is not uncritical of the irrationality in mass culture. Moreover, given Williams's closeness to Surrealism at the time, it is likely that his reference to 'the universal religious ecstasy of the 12th century' is drawn from Surrealism. Breton concluded his 1933 *Le Message automatique* with Thérèse d'Avila's visionary power to transform her cross into a 'crucifix de pierres précieuses'; Breton saw this as a paradigm of the merging of 'imaginative and sensory faculties'. (OCII, 390-1) Breton's parallel between mediumistic practices and Surrealist automatism inflects the relation between self-aware principles of reception and unintentionally critical modes of spontaneous production. With regard to this, Williams's attempt to reconcile the poetic mind and the unaware resistance of the popular imaginary is akin to Breton's. Breton however draws the line between a socially-induced passivity and the Surrealist intent.

Whereas for Greenberg, mass culture affords only unreflective and 'vicarious' experiences, closer to Surrealism in this instance, Williams suggests that the arbitrariness of the prefabricated coherence of mass culture can be transformed into a defamiliarising principle; hence, Williams's optimism about the critical potential of the stories of the *New York Evening Star*. Parallel to this, the creative principle, for Williams, rests on an awareness of the potentiality and incompleteness of subjective experiences: as 'the complete blank in our lives caused by the impossibility of knowing death [...] creates the irrationality of our existence [...] the business of the poet is to interpret [those who run mad to become the heroes of the world] in the true terms of their blankness'. (I: 11-12, p. 10) To illustrate this, Williams presents Alva N. Turner's 'real American Surrealism' as one such instance of unaware creative potential for resistance where it is least expected to be found:

>This man was a Baptist preacher, went mad – largely by way of love! was put in an insane asylum where he rotted for four years. Finally he was released and he learned to love cats! [...] He has a marvelous history all the way back to Daniel Boone and this is the logical and inevitable chute! His is the history of America. (I: 11-12, p. 5)
Eager to revise an American genealogy in which cultural specificity and transcultural, transhistorical principles are not incompatible, with his few contributions, Williams was instrumental in View’s opening its pages to ‘all the native affiliates corresponding to the imaginative sources approved by Surrealism’, in Tyler’s words. In a letter which appeared in View’s ‘Tanguy/Tchelitchew’ number, he wrote that ‘Surrealism is just that: Don’t try. An incentive to creation’. Williams here sees Surrealism as the catalyst for releasing the liberating effect of repressive everyday pathologies – the affinity of the words ‘omit’ and ‘vomit’ being a case in point. Contrary to Stevens’s objection to the contents of Surrealism for being ‘invented’ rather than ‘discovered’, Williams embraces the principle of relating contingent and imagined contents in an attitude that ‘discloses without trying’. (II: 2, May 1942, p. 13)

On the other hand, the fact that Surrealism could only be an ‘incentive’ and not an end set the ground for a critique of the historical and cultural specificity of Surrealism. Williams’s later critique of Breton, on the occasion of Roditi’s translation of Breton’s poems in a collection entitled Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares, is telling of a deeper dissonance between Williams’s and the Surrealist outlook. The title of the collection was taken from a horticultural manual that Breton found in New York and the cover was designed by Duchamp; a collage of the Statue of Liberty with Breton’s face pasted onto it. For Williams, Breton represented ‘The Genius of France’. Williams criticises Breton’s poetry for its lack of spontaneity and directness, which Williams translates in cultural terms: ‘complete freedom of enterprise is unknown there. That is why they exported the Statue of Liberty to New York harbor.’ Williams’s optimism for the ‘iconoclastic adventures’ of American poetic forms which, unlike Breton’s, are thought as assuming ‘the same character of natural forms’ (View VII: 1, October 1946, p. 45, p. 47) will be significantly nuanced.

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62 On Williams’s attraction to the ‘American Fantastic’ and to Surrealist alchemical and mythical principles in the 1940s, see Mike Weaver, William Carlos Williams: The American Background (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), pp. 128-56. See also Tashjian, pp. 205-9. Also, Williams contributed to VVV with a poem titled ‘Catastrophic Birth’, where he links violence and regeneration, VVV, 1 (February 1942), ed. by André Breton and David Hare (New York: VVV editions), p. 3, (further references to VVV are given after quotations in the text).

63 This may be an ironic allusion to the earlier political affiliation of Surrealism: given his links with Partisan Review in the late 1930s, Williams might have known that during the years of the Cultural Front, the French Communist Party claimed to represent ‘the genius of France’. See Guilbaut, p. 18.
by O’Hara and Ashbery in the following decade. Both, acknowledge ironically that poetic forms are as historically-determined and context-bound as any one form of expression and medium in either high art or popular culture, and that notions of immediacy like Williams’s are only deceptive.

To get back to the questionnaire, Harold Rosenberg responded in a way intended to bridge creative imagination and a critical approach to contemporary culture in much more pessimistic tones than Williams’s: ‘death’ is not a threshold to a cycle of regeneration, it is ‘washed up, finished, stymied’. Mystical and transcendent yearning can only pass as incongruous or parodic when ‘individual radio sets’ replaced ‘memorial slabs’ from a Brooklyn cemetery, ‘given to WPA sculptors’ who made elephants and apes of them for a Coney island playground’; or when the leader of a ‘masquerade’ devoted to Death in New Mexico, returns ‘to carving letter openers and blouse buttons for tourists’. (I: 11-12, p. 5)

View’s subsequent numbers explored diverse cultural practices and artistic forms interchangeably: this implied that artforms were not the sole means for privileged insights into either collective or individualised experiences. In this manner, View tentatively presented ways of approaching artworks outside of the established conventions of art criticism while seeking in other practices – and not necessarily in art – alternatives to the exclusivity of high art and correctives to the decline of politics. View targeted unconscious impulses in alienated forms of social consciousness. Moreover, the shift of emphasis from the permanence of artistic forms on contingent contents informed a revised notion of an avant-garde culture. In order to counter the fact that the value of novelty which had defined the artistic avant-garde was taken over by mass culture, View posited the idiosyncratic and anachronistic aspects of the popular imaginary as tropes that expose the false novelty and the deceptive immediacy of mass culture. At a more general level, and in contrast to the development of Abstract Expressionist theory in the mid-1940s, instead of foregrounding individual creative potential, View drew attention to collective modes

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of reception and consumption. The special numbers on Ernst, Tanguy and Tchelitchew, on America’s ‘neglected’ cultural past and present, on the cultures of the ‘fantastic’ or the ‘macabre’, drew on a disparate repository of experiences which, susceptible as they were to be absorbed by the homogenising impact of mass culture, were also most powerful reminders of the dynamic interface between the spheres of high and low.

In respect of View’s ‘view’ of Surrealist art, Dickran Tashjian has noted that View’s special number on Max Ernst was ‘a highpoint of collaboration between Ford and the Surrealists [...] concurrent with the exhibition of thirty-one paintings by Ernst at the Valentine Gallery’; a list of the works exhibited featured as an advertisement. (II: 1, April 1942, pp. 18-9) Tashjian also points out that ‘[Ernst’s] attempt to integrate the arts beyond the arbitrary distinctions of society was echoed by the mix of writers and painters’ that contributed to the number. Ernst incited responses addressing the relation between art and history, cultural specificity and the permanence of forms. The assemblage was as revealing about Ernst’s work and about Surrealism’s uneasy acclimatisation in America, as it was telling of the willingness to recognise Surrealist categories in ‘neglected’ aspects of American culture. Hence the juxtaposition of Janis’s analysis of Ernst’s 1924 Deux enfants sont menacés par un rossignol and for instance, Carrington’s description of the Bird’s union with ‘Fear’, a cryptic tale of her relation with Ernst and a metaphor of the unity of destruction, violence and creation. (II: 1, p. 13) Breton’s ‘notes’ and Ernst’s ‘data’ explore how the dynamic between subjectivity and external contingencies in the artwork breaks through a linear notion of historical experience. Breton sets elective contexts for Ernst through imaginary projections onto both a collective and an individualised past. In a similar manner, Ernst confronts his alter egos and projections as simultaneously imagined and real. For Ernst and Breton, artworks interact with external reality: reality, sense perception and fantasy sustain as well as alter each other’s boundaries. Echoing a similar approach, Tyler and Miller describe how Ernst’s paintings stage shifting correspondences between external and subjective frames of reference. Both stress Ernst’s ability to perpetuate his comings and goings between this and an ‘other’

65 Tashjian, p. 193.
world: in Tyler’s terms, ‘he creates only the malcontented image developing, in its hated home, the first limb of rebellion,’ (II: 1, p. 16) and for Miller, ‘behind the phenomenal world with its feather-weight armadas, sleigh-bells, searchlights and mediumistic trappings, lie the arcane realms where creation never ceases.’ (II: 1, p. 17)

Julien Levy drew a parallel between his own and Ernst’s encounter with childhood. He recalls an encounter with a ‘precociously developed child of six […] mere object of spiteful teasing […] a monster, a witch, an object of superstitious terror or of implacable persecution – a surrealist!’, a female child conforming to ‘no conception of adolescence or of post-adolescence [existing] in this world’. (II: 1, p. 26) This is the preliminary to a series of reflections on the ‘imaginary’ children ‘inside’ Ernst’s paintings, whose peace and wartime experiences informed works in which biographical allusions seem equivocally lived and imagined. As for Levy’s encounter, it is as suggestive in respect of the relation between subjective experience and form in Ernst’s work, as it is interesting in respect of what qualifies as ‘Surrealist’ in an American context. Levy sees Ernst’s mental encounters with childhood as reminders of absence and loss, reminders of confinement and emancipation interchangeably – ‘when the war is over, we must be prepared for a surprise.’ His own encounter may be as lived or imagined as Ernst’s, yet less suggestive of ‘a landscape infinite with memory and hope and imagination’ in which children are not confined but ‘concealed’. (II: 1, p. 27) Ernst’s work is seen as an incentive to restore such repressed sights as elements of cultural critique just as Surrealism was for Williams the ‘incentive’ to turn to America’s pathologies.

Cornell’s collages (II: 1, p. 23) resemble Ernst’s collage-novels both formally and thematically and set up a visual space for the enigmatic correlation of cultural references and technique, characteristic of Ernst. Nineteenth-century steel-engravings, reminiscent of the latter’s use of illustrations from late nineteenth-century magazines of popular science and serialised novels, are seamlessly pasted onto varied backgrounds of urban and natural scapes. Yet Cornell’s sense of amazement and wonder, menace and harmony is considerably distanced from the violence and the social intent of Ernst’s pre-war collage-novels. Instead, Cornell’s sixteen collages are
more expressive of his longing for a lost innocence and his own retreat from a violent reality – in one of the collages, a male figure playing a drum retreats on the left away from an industrial scape in flames. Still, drawing on Ernst, Cornell experiments with the enigmatic relation between the pasted elements, the figures and their backgrounds, primary and reconstructed contexts. Yet cultural narrative becomes a formal principle in Cornell; as we shall see later, although form often seems to become parasitic on content in his boxes and collages, content is also divested of its potential to disrupt form. Cornell’s *Story without a Name* for Max Ernst66 (figure 1) illustrates Tyler’s emphasis on the twofold effect of Ernst’s concealing and exposing the medium, yet less so the conflict between form and content or Levy’s willingness to see American pathologies ‘through Surrealist eyes’. Cornell will head towards a more Americanist direction, yet still not without ambivalence towards the Surrealist intent, in the *Fantastica Americana* of the following year.

Generally, the attempt to map out a ground where the elliptical and cryptic, historical and formal aspects of Ernst’s work converge, was not only meant as a defense of the complexity of artworks which involve more than the ‘processes of their medium’, to use Greenberg’s turn of phrase.67 The juxtaposition of such diverse accounts was meant to stress the intrinsic complexity and the ciphered, historical and autobiographical, references in the works themselves. As was often the case in *View*, this was not, however, intended to set out a sustained approach to the works or to the artists’ intentions. The Ernst number was an expression of the uncertain relation of any artist to his work, as well as of *View’s* tendency to prioritise cultural specificity over a formalist approach to art.

However, this was not substantially furthered in the May 1942 issue on Yves Tanguy and Pavel Tchelitchew which also coincided with a Tanguy exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery and a Tchelitchew exhibition at the Julien Levy Gallery. Rather than exploring ‘a world of total latency […] behind the scenes of life’ (II: 2, pp. 35-6), a realm of potentiality that redeems life from abstraction, as Breton

anticipated it in his ‘What Tanguy Veils and Reveals’; View started exploring Surrealist-derived categories outside of Surrealist art and thought. As for Pavel Tchelitchew, rather than drawing links between his work, and either ‘neglected’ aspects of American culture or with Surrealism, Tchelitchew’s work was presented as universal and singular at once. Tyler, for instance, in ‘Tchelitchew’s World’, stressed Tchelitchew’s links to Leonardo and how the inward-looking eye of modern art comes to meet external reality. (II: 2, p. 1, p. 2) On the other hand, without mentioning Surrealism, Williams credits Tchelitchew’s iconography for the same immediacy of perception and sense of urgency in the external world that he recognised in Surrealism. (II: 2, pp. 11-12) In 1947, speaking of Tchelitchew’s ‘new phase’, Tyler stressed Tchelitchew’s distance from the rise of abstraction evident in his treatment of the human organism. Tanguy’s or Picasso’s ‘emotively distorted representations of the human [...] deflect the human myth [...] on to some sub-human myth’. Suggesting a shift from a manifest ‘human myth’ to a latent one, Tyler’s sense of Tchelitchew’s ‘centripetal-centrifugal gesture’ in this instance, is more attuned to the Surrealists’ evolving principle of analogical correspondences: ‘the rate of expansion [...] through space: the human silhouette—around, beneath, and above whose nervous circumference exists only in the pure, moveless abyss.’ (‘Human Anatomy as the Expanding Universe’, VII: 1, October 1946, p. 7, p. 11)

The Tanguy/Tchelitchew number also published Harold Rosenberg’s ‘Dialogue’ between ‘Rem,’ ‘Hem,’ and ‘Shem’ and its sequel, ‘Breton – A Dialogue’. In the first dialogue, the three interlocutors allusively address how Surrealist thought was seeking to reconcile a revolutionary agenda to its evolving notion of myth. ‘Rem’ voices scepticism about closed societies of initiates that seek to shut off the real world – ‘the initiate mounts into a cult, a circle of the elect.’ ‘Hem’ reminds that any human action involves the whole of the reality of life: ‘action’ here is also a metaphor for artistic creativity, ‘the meeting place of the physical, the illusory, and the possible’. All action is a precarious instance of the ‘eternal conflict between form and content, organic and structural, the man and the Hero’. ‘Rem’ responds with optimism as to

67 Greenberg, I, p. 9n.
68 It reappeared in French as ‘Yves Tanguy Ce que Tanguy voile et révèle’, in André Breton, Le
the ultimate overcoming of the regimentation of human life and our obscured sense of
the whole: 'there is nothing fundamental in the opposition between the unique being
and the pattern'; fragmentation is not intrinsic to social being but constructed in
institutionalised forms of society. (II: 2, p. 23) Rosenberg here stages a dialogue
between the mythic and revolutionary tendencies in Surrealism and voices his
scepticism as to how the effect of mystification at the most mundane levels of
everyday life could be countered through the alleged purity of an 'all-embracing
myth'. He is critical of Surrealism's difficulty of resolving the conflict between the
individual and the collective in its 'new myths', and equally, his 'dialogue' sounds
like an undecided defense of the totalising thrust of Surrealist thought. (II: 2, p. 24)

'Breton - A Dialogue' engages the same interlocutors – 'left-wing intellectuals' –
on the occasion of Lionel Abel's translation of Breton's 'brief discussssion on the need
for a new myth'. 'Hem' embraces the 'need for a new myth' to which 'Shem' retorts
that it would 'conceal what is irrational in present social relations, and thus [...] 
preserve it'. 'Rem' seeks to reconcile the latter's social determinism and the former's
'irrationalism', by seeing 'a revolutionary rejection of the past' as bearing both
'primordial' and historical, 'objective' forces. 'Hem's' defense of 'myth' lies on a
critique of the arbitrary validity of all 'objective' or 'scientific' truth. 'Rem' resorts to
a relativism of context that justifies 'science': to Hem's wish for a 'liberating myth'
against the 'enslaving myth of the fascists and [...] the emptiness and petty
insincerity of the liberals', he opposes 'freedom' from 'all myths', for as long as 'the
starving, the helplessness, and the dreaming are one connected thing'. (II: 2, p. 26)

Rosenberg sounds unwilling to dismiss Surrealism's utopian promise, while being
sceptical towards the possibility of transcending a reified history by subsuming the
polarity of regression and progress into processes of destruction and redemption.

The 'dialogues' are telling of his own conflicting loyalties towards principles of
collective action and self-realisation through the creative act. Generally, they reflect

In respect of Rosenberg's writings on Abstract Expressionism, Fred Orton has argued that contrary
to Greenberg, Rosenberg made Abstract Expressionism's social and political content explicit. Orton
describes the development of Rosenberg's Marxist critical principles throughout the 1930s and 1940s,
and suggests that his notion of 'action painting' was the token of his faith in the possibility of social
change, despite the failure of revolutionary movements. Fred Orton, 'Action, Revolution and Painting',

Footnote:
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Rosenberg’s mixed feelings towards Surrealism as well as his awareness of the contradictions in the development of American art at the time, and its difficulty to reconcile formal and a-temporal principles with a social programme. His influential 1952 essay on ‘action painting’ is underscored by these contradictions. Presenting the work’s antinomies as ambivalently resolved and in conflict, Rosenberg’s notion that ‘what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event’ is both reminiscent of and incompatible with Breton’s earlier notion of ‘l’œuvre d’art événement’. In Rosenberg’s terms, Abstract Expressionist painting is an autonomous process, but also an embattled one; self-referential yet a valid and most authentic statement on its time; an irreducible, pure and painterly experience yet eclectic, assimilating ‘anything that has to do with action – psychology, philosophy, history, mythology, hero worship’; contingent, yet capable of ‘[translating] the psychologically given into the intentional, into a “world” – and thus [transcend] it’. Intended as a metaphor of process, ironically, Rosenberg’s notion of ‘action’ ends up descriptive of the work’s formal and structural elements.

Harold Rosenberg and Lionel Abel also contributed to VVV. VVV briefly coincided with View; in retrospect, it comes across as a failed attempt to sustain a dialogue between the synthetising tendencies in Surrealism and View’s more plural approach to contemporary culture. Generally, VVV was predominantly attuned to the Surrealist critique of culture rather than to View’s cultural politics. Lionel Abel’s...
opening statement for VW ‘It is Time to Pick the Iron Rose’, presented Surrealism as the alternative to both teleological views of history and universalist aspirations with regard to form, the only viable system of thought that can overcome the discontinuity between the historical condition of man and inner development. The way out of the crisis, Abel writes, is to ‘reject the lie of an “open universe” and “support those doctrines which indicate how man’s acts are circumscribed’. In a manner reminiscent of the Breton-Trotsky manifesto, Abel attempts to reconcile determinism and chance: he ‘[welcomes] those images which make us stronger on our way to action’, because only the ‘imagination’ is capable of discovering and seeing through ‘an infinity of political, social and natural determinisms’. (VW, 1, p. 2)

Harold Rosenberg’s ‘Life and Death of the Amorous Umbrella’ was a pessimistic corrective to Abel’s optimism. Rosenberg criticised Surrealist thought for sublimating a reality of violence in aesthetic experiences. The irrationality of history and the development of art are interdependent and irreconcilable at the same time. For Rosenberg, a radical act cannot be free from determinism. Although he admires ‘the free, pure, beautiful and revolutionary’ energy in a ‘perfect act’, he notes that in the umbrella’s ‘unpremeditated leap […] everything points to frantic impulses and the absence of the critical spirit’. Rosenberg recognises that a rationalist view of history conceals the irrational, but unlike the Surrealists, he is ambivalent towards the emancipatory effect following from the release of repressed energies in chance encounters: ‘everything torn open to chance encounters cannot survive.’ In a pessimistic vein, he sees Chamberlain’s opening ‘his bat’s wings’ over the European War as the historical manifestation of Lautréamont’s umbrella, ‘the prime abnegator of choice’. (VW, 1, pp. 12-13) Neither thought nor art can be freed from determinism and still remain an allegory of and incentive to action. Rosenberg’s view of history could not accommodate chance as both a redemptive and a destructive principle. Unlike Lautréamont’s encounter, such total freedom leaves the course of history beyond human grasp.

Although responding to the same dilemmas as View, VW did not present its peripheral place in American artistic developments as any kind of wilful resistance, and View took over from VW’s interlude in this respect. The ‘Vertigo’ issue of View
of the Fall of 1942 hosted Roger Caillois’s Nietzschean take on ‘vertigo’, translated
by Charles Henri Ford. Against Breton’s evolving principle of myth, Caillois voiced
Georges Bataille’s take on destruction. Abandoning the force of subjective will,
‘inflames [one’s] pride with the thought that he is in accord with the world, with life
and history, and so the eddies of fate lead him to the abyss or to glory.’ (II: 3, October
1942, p. 7) This parallels Bataille’s notion of transgression which involved the
radicalisation and annulment of subjective agency. Ironically, although Breton sought
to redeem the historical subject, his notion of myth, as Rosenberg’s ‘dialogue’
suggested, seemed as totalising as Bataille’s.⁷³

Rather than seeking to resolve the Surrealist problematic of myth, View paid
‘homage to Battling Siki’: that ‘naïveté has an eternal function’; Siki ‘had not the
fatality of deductive intelligence’; that his ‘estimated vocabulary of 96 words’ was
‘poetry in itself’; all this turn the Senegalese wrestler into a transhistorical and
transcultural symbol of an essential and fundamental resistance to society.
Reminiscent of Victor Hugo’s imagining ‘a man conquering an iron cannon gone
berserk on a ship in a storm’ and Scott Fitzgerald’s ‘[pretending] to write this kind of
fantasy […] [where] for the first time in his life Siki was up against real madmen –
American businessmen, gangsters’, Siki was among the first ‘affiliates’ of Surrealism
outside Surrealism in View. (II: 3, pp. 21-2) In this sense, the January 1943 Fantastica
Americana was a turning point in View’s encounter with Surrealism, as Parker Tyler’s
category of the ‘fantastic’ was explicitly intended to cut across cultural contexts and
artistic forms:

[The fantastic] is acquired by the spur of the moment. The formal organization
of an object by Joseph Cornell or a painting by Florine Stettheimer is fantastic
because will has become the reflex of an unpredictable perception. [It] is the
compulsion neurosis of a whim. (II: 4, January 1943, p. 5)

Rather than abandoning ‘will’ on the way to ‘abyss or to glory’, our will,
‘compulsively’ inclined to ‘unpredictable perception’, encounters the ‘fantastic’
which is latent in the most mundane and ordinary as well as in the most unexpected or
forgotten realms of experience. It is a composite form of experience, subjective as

⁷³ Caillois had joined Bataille and Michel Leiris in drawing the programme for the Collège de
Sociologie. See Denis Hollier, ed., The College of Sociology (1937-39), trans. by Betsy Wing
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, Theory and History of Literature series, vol. 41, 1988),
well as collective, specific rather than abstract, and cannot be ‘converted into professionalism’, as was the case with Picasso whom Tyler dismisses for having ‘made a Mardi Gras from styles of painting’. To Picasso’s eclecticism, which Tyler implicitly criticises here for turning contingent contents outside the artwork into formal principles internal to it, Tyler opposes forms and contents which are critical, not only because of their disparate nature and of their intrinsic resistance to become reduced to principles of form alone, but also because they are unaware of their ‘fantastic’ potential. As a category of perception, the fantastic cuts across the conflict between forms and subject-matter. Therefore the fantastic is defined as:

an uninterrupted series of exceptions. [...] Before becoming an art it is definable as the imagination of the underprivileged aware of a fresh and overpowering strength. [...] [It has] the secret of spontaneous combustion. [...] It is grasped and exposed so close to the source that no one can miss the electric thrill of origin or fail to sense the mechanics of birth. [...] [It] is the inalienable property of the untutored, the oppressed, the insane, the anarchic, and the amateur, at the moment when these feel the apocalyptic hug of contraries. (II: 4, p. 5)

Tyler here suggests a paradigm of a perspective on experience with unmistakable Surrealist overtones: reminiscent of the spark produced by the rapprochement of the most distant realities, it erupts into consciousness like the marvelous, it is as arbitrary and cryptic as the happenings of objective chance, as subversive – ‘not without a violence contrary to the world of order’ – as Lautréamont’s encounter. Reminiscent as it was of Surrealist metaphors at the time – ‘its livery of lightning, [...] builds as it destroys’ – Tyler’s notion was primarily meant to attune universal categories to cultural particularities and to relate principles of universality to a revised notion of the indigenous and the local. (II: 4, p. 5) Transhistorical and transcultural, the ‘fantastic’ can be specific, though not exclusive to particular contexts.74 The interest of Tyler’s editorial also lies in its distance from Abstract Expressionism’s interest in primitive forms and the way in which they were seen as expressions of a primordial consciousness; a ‘self-conscious primitivism’ determined the Abstract Expressionists’

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74 On the prehistory of the American avant-garde’s attraction to the ‘American fantastic’, see Weaver, 
_Williams: The American Background_, pp. 128-37.
ambivalent attitude towards a modernity which they sought to redeem and which they also thought of as being beyond redemption.\textsuperscript{75}

Moreover, Tyler’s editorial read as a follow-up to Robert Allerton Parker’s ‘Explorers of the Pluriverse’, published in the catalogue of the 1942 exhibition \textit{First Papers of Surrealism} put together by Breton and Duchamp, where Parker talked about ‘homegrown eccentrics [...] specimens all of the marginal consciousness, doughty defenders of the subjective from the regimented invasion and standardized error of the external world’.\textsuperscript{76} Parker’s description of the impoverishing impact of the ‘external world’ on subjectivity brings to mind Adorno’s description of the repressive thrust of the culture industry. Nonetheless, Parker’s unspecified notion of the contingent subject as a repository of a generalised collective resistance rather than as the site of exclusive individualised abilities, was no less problematic than Tyler’s ‘fantastic’.

Still, Tyler’s category was an implied corrective to Greenberg’s notion of the irreconcilable dichotomy between reflective and unreflective experiences in high and mass culture. After the example of Surrealism, anything can become a defamiliarising – or else, ‘fantastic’ – device. Surrealism, in this instance, allowed Tyler to posit marginalised aspects of American social and cultural history as an unexplored territory, a repressed imaginary that could become the alternative to the growing ‘favoritism’ of the avant-garde – to use Tyler’s phrase – and the passive elements in mass culture. The material presented in this issue was staked on dialogue, rather than the exclusion of either form or content, the universal or the particular, the individual or the collective.

Cornell’s collages for the \textit{Americana Fantastica}, represent a most consistent effort, through anachronistic and dated references, to map out a creative margin for the popular imaginary between high and mass culture. For the cover, he pasted reproductions of high-wire performers, an antique map of hemisphere, two stills from \textit{King Kong}, two native American chiefs, a 15\textsuperscript{th}-century navigator map and compass,


\textsuperscript{76} \textit{First Papers of Surrealism}, 14 October - 7 November 1942 (New York: Coordinating Council of French Relief Societies), (unnumbered pages).
nineteenth-century women and children, on scenes of Niagara Falls (figure 2). The Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice) is a collage story for a little girl with a presumed knowledge of astronomy and the natural sciences. It also includes a collage which is an assemblage of his own fetishes, another reconstructed elective context for the real and imaginary Berenice (figure 3); Cornell brought together a child rider mounting a sculptured horse; a newspaper clipping with the headline ‘New Star Explodes’; the image of Berenice next to a print showing preparation for her Pagode de Chanteloup; a detail from a late Renaissance work; a New York Times clipping showing the photograph of a child feeding a duckling in Central Park. A play on collective narratives and fantasy, this assemblage inflects collective symbols as subjectivist particularist allusions, as Cornell links American cultural history to his own private storehouse. In the context of View, Cornell’s subjectivism comes across as cultural eclecticism, through its emphasis on the defamiliarised, subjectivised guise that collective narratives may assume. For Cornell, both content and technique had critical aspects through which he sought to redeem idiosyncracy from the levelling effect of mass-produced experiences. His ‘story’ is played out on the potential anachronism and the potential discrepancy between technique, reception and content. At the inflection of content and form, in his blending of a private and a collective imaginary, his nostalgic attitudes towards current and outdated, unfamiliar and banal material combine with his Surrealist affinity to take on a double-edged guise, critical and uncritical at once. (II: 4, pp. 10-16)

Playful and nostalgic, ironic and hopeful about the release of ‘fantastic’ energies, like the impulse that ‘[fooled] the eyes of those typesetters’ who instead of ‘[illustrating] a typeface for advertising purposes, were possessed with a contradiction inherent in their orderly and professional act, and made up fantastic poems’, (II: 4, p. 5) the Fantastica Americana set a most effective precedent for a revised notion of avant-gardism. Following on from the Fantastica Americana, View’s overall thrust was a revised radicalism that still, however, had to confront how production and reception determine each other, and how universal principles and a particularist emphasis on locality may also become uncritically interchangeable. Such indecisions

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run through Charles Henri Ford’s editorial ‘The Point of View’ of April 1943, where he shifted Tyler’s perspective on culture back to art in a way that shows that the dilemma between a socially-minded art and a modernist search for formal autonomy was far from resolved; in doing so, he brings into play the problematic role of subjective agency on the one hand, and the form/content dichotomy on the other.

Whereas ‘in the 1920s and 1930s the two main themes of inspiration were the unconscious and the masses’, Ford writes, the reality of war makes it ‘necessary to focus our attention upon other aspects of the artistic problem’. For that, ‘the artist’ should ‘go in search of the exceptional because it is only by the exceptional that extreme purity can be reached and critical situations clarified’. Purity in this context, sounds reminiscent of Breton’s and Trotsky’s uneasy defense of independent art in 1938, just as much as it is meant as an indirect critique of Breton’s posited ‘need for a new myth’. All myths are deceptive, Ford argues, and not only ‘myths’ such as the ‘American offshoots of Christian mythology or [...] Washington’s Cherry Tree’. Also, Ford’s emphatic assertion of the communicative and transformative power of art – he speaks of the artists’ ‘methods’ as ‘[helping] perpetually to renew our deepest contact with the world’ – is uncertainly informed by the antinomy between regression and progress. Ford’s editorial notwithstanding, the material presented in this number was much in the spirit of Tyler’s ‘American fantastic’. In Henry Miller’s ‘Dream of Mobile’, the discovery of America ‘by madmen [...] in search of the marvelous’ who ended up ‘spreading the white man’s poison’, triggers a ‘dream’ of a ‘full-fledged city being born out of a man’s loins!’.

Alone Miller’s take on the ‘fantastic’, Paul Bowles’s ‘The Jazz Ear’ takes issue with the high/low distinction; as we are increasingly deceived by visual experiences, and since art and commodities alike are destined to please the eyes, auditory perceptions seem to be as critical just as they are alienating: ‘today (leaving out the detonations of war, which, changing everything at once, changes nothing)’, we are confronted ‘with

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78 Dore Ashton reads the editorial as representative of the ‘conflicts that [...] bedeviled the advanced painters. [Ford] spoke of their dependence on myth as escapist devices on the one hand, but on the other he offers an exalted definition of the contemporary artist as a “magician”. Ashton, The New York School, p. 20. Ashton also notes that the periodicals that gravitated towards Abstract Expressionism revised View’s dilemmas about the nature of radicalism. Ashton, p. 113, p. 124. Dickran Tashjian reads the editorial as Ford’s taking his distances from Breton’s concept of myth at the time. Tashjian, p. 197.
antigastic Musak, [...] [and] machines which can do everything but be quiet’. It is because music still ‘remains a low-grade cultural vehicle’, that Bowles sees unexplored potential in ‘auditory esthetics’. (III: 1, p. 28)

Like Levy’s reading of Ernst, Harriet and Sidney Janis’s ‘Albright: Compulsive Painter’ is interesting in respect of what could constitute an indigenous predecessor to Surrealism:

merciless analysis, frightful fascination, intensive psychological study, sordid tawdry accessories, pathological suggestions, super-rugged technique, strange freaks of anatomy, dry clarity of technique, loathsome feeling of horror, dubious if sensational results. (III: 1, p. 25)

As in Cornell’s nostalgic Americana, in Albright’s paintings, the repressed is interchangeably personalised and collective; the alienating effect of his distortions and unorthodox techniques is seen as a ‘neglected’, unaware precedent of Surrealist techniques where reality and fantasy are wilfully indistinct. Albright’s studies in decay originate in World War I where he observed and drew ‘amputations, fractures, operations and gun and shrapnel wounds’ in sketches which, the Janises write, ‘when seen inverted they do not resemble wounds, but are sensitive water colors somewhat like the spontaneous early abstractions by Kandinsky.’ (III: 1, p. 26) Presented as another instance of unaware resistance to the exclusivity of high art, Albright worked as if his sense of abstraction and his penchant for physical decay bore no difference in kind; in relation to this, the Janises refer to an ‘unfinished picture [...] of a doll bedecked with white and cream satins and laces and strings of simulated pearls and diamonds, lying in a glass case’, which was ‘worked in complete detail with charcoal and white chalk’, a work ‘in progress for a year’, ‘abandoned because “mice ate the clothes, someone swiped the perfumery, and the dress changed eight shades duller.”’ (III: 1, p. 31) Albright’s untheorised variations on decay withhold and liberate repressed and unrestrained fantasies which, like Cornell’s boxes, can ambivalently be defamiliarising, or become part of a stock-in-trade images of popular sensationalism. Albright’s own eccentric character can also be seen as an

indigenous precedent for Cornell’s Surrealism: although Cornell’s assemblages are anything but morbid, he also sought refuge into ‘compulsive fantasy’ and detailed the “natural history” of [his] emotional life. As Albright’s ‘iridescence of putrescence’ may be seen as an inadvertent anticipation of Surrealist imagery, Cornell’s ‘iridescence’ of longing, as we shall see, related equally ambivalently to the Surrealist precedent at the level of intent. (III: 1, p. 25)

In subsequent numbers, although Surrealism was never entirely lost from sight, it was far from being the unifying principle for View’s affinity for the popular imaginary. Paul Bowles’s ‘Bluey: Pages from an Imaginary Diary’ and Louis Zukofsky’s discovery of ‘Dometer Guczul’, a primitive realist whose work is ‘against the imagination’ precisely because it is reality itself (III: 3, p. 95) were variations on the American fantastic: rather than an a-temporal principle, Zukofsky’s ‘primitivism’ encompasses modern as well as pre-modern experiences where the individual and the collective are related in a non-alienating manner. In a similar vein, Paul Childs, View’s ‘black’ discovery – was another ‘native affiliate’ to Surrealism; his ‘Selfigraph’ is an unsophisticated and uncontrived counterpart to Cornell’s more painstaking and erudite attraction to popular culture: ‘usually [doing] skilled labor or porter work and building labor also a caremaker’, Paul Childs ‘heard the beyond call of the poets’ along with his ‘hobby for drawing ships and whales’ and his fondness for ‘gangster talkies and adventure romantics [...] bigtime floor show bars amusement parks’. (IV: 1, p. 27)

As the ‘native affiliates’ have considerably shifted View’s perspective away from Surrealism, potential for dissent was recognised in ‘Tropical America’. In Paul Bowles’s eyes, ‘Tropical Americana’ offered the image of a generalised resistance to technological progress: ‘the avant-garde is not alone in its incomplete war against many features of modern civilization; with it are the ponderous apathy and the potential antipathy of the vestigial primitive consciousness.’ His interest in ‘aboriginal isolationists’ in Brazil draws on neither political sympathies, nor modernist primitivism. He is after ‘a poetically apt version of life as it is lived by the people of Tropical America’. The ‘poetical’ and the ‘avant-garde’ are synonymous
and are recognised in contexts where resistance to 'manufactured goods' amounts to their destruction. (V: 2, p. 5)

Marius Bewley saw the 'macabre' as another category that exposes the commodified, and somewhat artificial division between high and low culture. This is a significant nuance to Greenberg's pessimism, to whom this 'disparity' which comes to pass as 'a part of the natural order of things' may also be 'something entirely new, and particular to our age',\(^80\) and to Duncan's disappointment with what he regarded as View's objectionable social intent: 'in a world of carnage, of horror and insanity, VIEW preached the aesthetic of the insane and the sadistic, perhaps with much the same utilitarian intention with which one might preach sado-masochistic aesthetic to inmates in a concentration camp'.\(^81\) As an inadvertent defense against this, Bewley addresses the relation between View's notion of unrealised resistance on the one hand, and a self-aware social intent on the other. The 'macabre', he writes, does not share in 'the aesthetic of a mature consciousness', yet it intrudes 'in the most unexpected quarters'. In the realm of literature, the 'macabre' is developed through individual visionary faculties and heightened states of consciousness. Moreover, both high and mass culture rely on techniques which can be either mystifying and critical in equal parts, since different cultural stereotypes may be met by different modes of consumption, and most importantly, because it is the product and not the consumer that determines the mode of consumption. What Bewley claims for the 'macabre' in the popular imaginary equally applies to high art. Either as a formal device or as a reminder of a personal trauma, it is also a collective metaphor. This is why the macabre underscores both Poe's stories and 'a story in a pulp-paper magazine [...] banned from Middle Western newsstands several years ago'. Although popular sensationalism and formal aestheticism may seem to have distinct social roles, it comes as no surprise that 'the hierarchy of intense perversion across which Maldoror won his ways to fulfillment in a female shark' may also become 'the respectable by-product of national expansion'. (V: 3, p. 7, p. 8)

\(^80\) Greenberg, I, p. 6.
\(^81\) Faas, p. 327.
Bewley's 'macabre', which without being 'consciously macabre [...] was only consciously American', (V: 3, p. 20) was another reminder of View's affinity with VVV. Robert Allerton Parker, in the March 1943 number of VVV, published his 'Such Pulp as Dreams are Made on', where he redeemed 'pulp fiction' as an 'authentic [...] adequate testimony of [...] communal participation'. In his description of an imagination out of bounds, a sense of revelation in the supernatural, such 'flights from “the real”, are what set 'pulp fictions' beyond the realms of high or mass culture into a realm reminiscent of Rimbaud's parodically exalted preference in _Une saison en enfer_, for stupid paintings, church Latin, or erotic books with nonexistent spelling. Parker stressed that a dialectic of conscious and unconscious forces is at work in both the production and consumption of forms that are 'frankly and without shame completely escapist in nature'. (VVV, 2-3, p. 62, p. 65) In Adorno's terms too, only such a shameless escapism could complement critically the unashamed purposelessness of high art.

Overall, View revised the antinomy between high and mass culture, regression and progress and sought to redefine the avant-garde, in order to relativise the incompatibility between political and artistic radicalism. View's attraction to Surrealism and to American popular culture aimed at both high art and mass culture, at the levels of both production and consumption. High art and mass culture were presented as both interdependent and autonomous, simultaneously integrative and exclusive. Surrealism's ironic critique of bourgeois values was a most appropriate precedent to explore the links between avant-garde and popular culture, between individual and collective experiences. Yet as was the case in the previous decade, Surrealism's coexistence with American popular culture in View did not open a consistent perspective either on Surrealism or on the relation between popular culture and the avant-garde, or most importantly, on the possibility of drawing a line between popular and mass-produced culture.

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Ultimately, rather than claiming a space for the avant-garde inside and against a mainstream culture, either high or low, View brought up the problematic of how culture accepts and represses idiosyncrasy and opposition, by implying that the latter are needed by that which they seek to undermine and negate. Resistance is built upon both the acceptance and rejection by a mainstream which creates and allows for its margins, an awareness that informed Frank O'Hara's experiments with Surrealism in the following decade. Anticipating O'Hara's disillusioned insight, View's acceptance of the institutional and historical role of the avant-garde was not at odds with a critical intent. As O'Hara put it in a 1965 interview:

> there's no reason to attack a culture that will allow it to happen, and even foster the impulse - and create it. Which is a change, you see, from the general idea of, that all avant-garde art has to be attacking the bourgeoisie.\(^4\)

At a remove from both Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, View's affinities reveal more how culture works and what culture is, rather than what it may potentially become. In this sense, Breton's wish in his 'Discussion on the need for a new myth', that 'the poets and artists of today' will 'translate into a decipherable code what ought to be, what will be' was reversed. (II: 1, p. 5) Moreover, as Abstract Expressionism ended up 'hot painting for a Cold War', to paraphrase Baudrillard, View's approach to popular culture hardly gave rise to a sustained politics of the repressed after the example of Surrealism. Although Surrealism provided the concepts for the discovery of repressed potential, it was hardly consonant with View's tactic of plural openness. In positing culture as a disparate and heterogeneous space, View sought equally to bypass and to expose the problematic of widening divides between different levels of culture. On the contrary, and this may have partially caused its gradual retreat from the magazine, Surrealist thought throughout the 1940s, countered the rise of a culture, that was as exclusive as it was integrative, with a series of inverse exclusions. As we shall see next, Surrealism's utopian and totalising

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intent aimed at abolishing, instead of relativising the boundary between the contingent and the repressed, conscious and unintended resistance.

Cornell’s, O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s Surrealist affinities and implied critique of Surrealism in the postwar period, are underscored by paradoxes and dilemmas similar to View’s. For instance, whereas in the context of View, Cornell’s work tentatively participates in View’s ironic intent, his boxes evolved in a different manner. They bear the conflict between abstract forms and contingent content, and the critical effect of his anachronisms in View is a precedent for his subjectivist nostalgic longing. While Cornell’s work only inadvertently brings up the historicity of Surrealist categories, O’Hara and Ashbery’s dialogue with Surrealism takes a step further from View’s approach in a different manner. Whereas in View, a collective imaginary was seen as a potent site of resistance and critique, in Ashbery and O’Hara, high and mass culture are seen as paradoxically transparent and impenetrable, assimilative rather than defamiliarising, and this also determines their attitude towards Surrealism.
1.3 Myth, subjectivity, and the critique of culture

This is how Breton described Masson’s work in 1939: his works are ‘events’ where forms become means to capture time, the movement of change which becomes perceptible only in the instance of the simultaneous realisation and loss of the self. For Breton, in Masson’s persona the artist and the revolutionary are one because his work is a form of action – ‘des ruptures dans le temps’, and an opening onto a form of transcendence – ‘la voie de l’inconnu’. This comes up in Masson’s own reminiscing: in a 1974 conversation with Gaëtan Picon, he said that ‘l’esprit de métamorphose et l’invention mythique [sont] […] les extrémités du balancier qui m’ont permis de traverser sur la corde raide un monde de tragédies, d’écueils et de souffrances’. That Breton saw Masson’s work as a paradigm of Surrealist activity in 1939 anticipates the course of Surrealism during its American years and its involvement with ‘l’invention mythique’ as a principle of both permanence and change.

Breton’s insight into Masson’s treatment of time reads like a gloss on the direction of Breton’s own thought during the War, on the growing importance for him of myth as a threshold to the unknown, as well as to the only form of knowledge that could unmask the myths that perpetuate life as-it-is. The notion of myth became crucial because of its double-edged thrust as a means of both opression and emancipation: a liberating principle, a source of repressed forces that would overturn the repressive myths, generated and sustained by intolerable historical realities. Mystifying and redemptive, myths were both the target of the Surrealist critique of culture and the only way out of the crisis of culture. On the other hand, in being equally mystifying and utopian, Surrealist myths were criticised for sublimating the reality of history.

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87 André Masson, La Mémoire du monde (Génève: Albert Skira), p. 8.
Masson, whose early experiments with automatism were decisive for Surrealism and subsequently were an important influence on early Abstract Expressionism, took his distance from Surrealism at the level of both outlook and technique. He made this explicit by drawing the following distinctive affinity: ‘je ne suis pas pour le collage, je suis pour la greffe’. With the metaphor of grafting, which bears the sense of gestation and latency as a correlate and corrective to the disruptive arbitrariness of collage, Masson responds both to the disjunctive and the totalizing thrust of Surrealism. On the other hand, in embracing opposing forces, the notion of ‘grafting’ is most apt to describe the tendencies of the 1940s, suggestive as it is of an underlying continuity and coherence in destruction.

In the 1943 Fantastica Americana issue of View, Masson’s Anatomy of My Universe was advertised as ‘[exploring] by means of drawing the domains of the painter’s imagination: the world of affinities and analogies, the emotional fusion with Nature, the theme of Desire, the elan towards Myth, the search for the totality of Man’. (II: 4, p. 2) The ‘anatomy’ was started in 1939 in Normandy and was suspended by the invasion of France; it was taken up again in Marseilles and completed in Connecticut in the summer of 1942. It appeared in English for the first time. Dedicated to his friend Dr Jacques-Marie Lacan, it is also an ‘anatomy’ of Surrealist thought, paradigmatic of the dual attraction to the contingent and the transcendental, utopian and pessimist at once. It is both a reminiscence, a ‘memory’ of this world, and an anticipation of its overcoming. In the realm of analogy, the conflict between subjectivity and objects, external and internal forces becomes a temporal principle, an instance of realisation that contains its annulment, signalling a new beginning in a ceaseless chain of metamorphoses. The notion of analogy is also a formal, relational element between distinct realities; drawn from esoteric thought, its coded and hermetic resistance to socialised practice was seen as a potent element of cultural critique.

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88 On how Masson’s emphasis on the picture plane, the rapidity of execution, and his sense of internal coherence were influential for Abstract Expressionism, see Carolyn Lanchner and William Rubin, André Masson and Twentieth-Century Painting (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1976).
89 Masson, La Mémoire du monde, p. 10.
Masson’s ‘anatomy’ opens with an expression of faith in the transformative effect of the image; rather than demarcating the realm of perception from the domain of the visual ‘image’, Masson says that ‘l’imaginaire est la chose la mieux partagée. Il n’y a de différences que qualitatives’. Rather than dissecting, his anatomy inflects the duality of opacity and transparence: forms are as reflexive as they are figurative, contents are simultaneously primal and ephemeral. The relation between his drawings and his ‘universe’ is experienced neither as difference, nor identity: the drawings both represent and are a world in the process of formation, populated by ‘sensations’ and forms encountered either in dreams or in conscious thought. The ‘irrational’ is the domain where analogical correspondences unfold, where images are signs that take precedence over both language and reality. The ‘anatomy’ unfolds as an optimist corrective to Breton’s anxiety over the loss of substantive meaning in his interview – ‘one sees everywhere today the survival of the sign of the signified thing’. (I: 7-8, p. 2) Disillusioned, Breton in 1940, witnesses the reverse of what he had wished in his 1928 Le Surréalisme et la peinture where he urged that visual works would prevent ‘dans le mode d’expression qu’ils servent, la survivance du signe à la chose signifiée’.

In response to this, like Masson’s analogies, Breton saw myths as refuges from an impaired world, revelatory of its flaws and inadequacies, as well as a means of overcoming a reified reality; a threshold onto infinity, onto meanings freed from their social functions. Still, his 1942 Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du surréalisme ou non opened with disillusion over the widening gap between individual and collective experiences, a discrepancy that impacts on any product of the intellect:

Il reste peut-être que toute grande idée est sujette à gravement s’altérer dès l’instant où elle entre en contact avec la masse humaine, où elle est amenée à se composer avec des esprits d’une toute autre mesure que celui dont elle est issue.

Breton returned to this in the 1947 ‘Signe ascendant’ where he wondered: ‘quelle aberration ou quelle impudence n’y a-t-il pas à vouloir «transformer» un monde

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90 Masson, Anatomie, Prologue, i.
91 Le Surréalisme et la peinture, p. 8.
qu’on ne se soucie plus d’intépreter dans ce qu’il a d’à peu près permament. In the ‘prolégomènes’, Breton opposes to the failure of collective action his own dissident lineage which allowed him to contest the givenness of both subjective experiences and empirical reality: ‘un système de coordonnées à mon usage, système qui résiste à mon expérience personnelle et, donc, me paraît inclure quelques-unes des chances de demain.’ This was followed by a ‘petit intermède prophétique’ in which he cryptically contemplates a total negation of reality as the catalyst for an unspecified mystical transcendence. To the collapse of causal and totalizing systems of thought, which for Breton are fundamentally reductive, he opposes ‘la résistance individuelle [...] la seule clé de la prison. Mais cette résistance doit être informée et subtile’. The speculative part of the ‘manifesto’ is followed by ‘Le Retour du Père Duchesne’, a parodically cryptic allegory of humanity’s emancipation from an impersonal history. On the other hand, since our awareness of reality will remain inadequate for as long as it rests on the primacy of the reasoning subject and on identifiable historical agencies – ‘L’homme n’est peut-être pas le centre, le point de mire de l’univers’ – Breton turns to a mythical ‘hypothetical’ being. As Novalis had put it, “Nous vivons en réalité dans un animal dont nous sommes les parasites. La constitution de cet animal détermine la nôtre et vice-versa”. With this metaphor, Breton wishes neither to transcend, nor to exclude empirical reality, but to enlarge our perception of reality. Novalis’s ‘hypothetical being’ and our subjectivist, ‘parasitical’ impressions about reality, occupy the two poles of his metaphor interchangeably. Both the ‘animal’ and the ‘parasite’ are mythic principles and this once more involves the duality of myth itself, a coincidence of passive and active principles, hidden and latent energies. Breton’s nuanced sense of the container and the contained in this metaphor is reminiscent of the opening of the 1920 Les Champs magnétiques: ‘prisonniers des gouttes d’eau, nous ne sommes que des animaux perpétuels’. It is also reminiscent of the wish for the release and loss of subjectivism in a process of ‘absorption’ in ‘Éclipses’: ‘j’arriverai peut-être à diriger ma pensée au mieux de mes

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93 La Clé des champs, p. 113.
95 Manifestes, p. 304
intérêts. Soins des parasites qui entrent dans l’eau ferrugineuse, absorbez-moi si vous pouvez’.

In the Yale lecture ‘Situation du surréalisme entre les deux guerres’, also of 1942, Breton attempted to reconcile an activist ethic for the individual with the collective once more, through the principle of myth. Hence the urge to explore ‘cette immense et sombre région du soi [du ça] où s’enflent démésurément les mythes en même temps que se fomentent les guerres’. The reality of history, for Breton, is the manifest content of some other hidden or absent cause which transcends us, as much as it has to be sought inside the self. Along with automatism, optimistic faith in the dialectic, humour noir and objective chance, he contemplates an open-ended resolution and calls for a ‘préparation d’ordre pratique à une intervention sur la vie mythique’.

With regard to this, Breton’s ‘need for a new myth’ was not devoid of irony and paradox either. This is manifest in the ‘myths’ that he compiled together with Duchamp for the exhibition First Papers of Surrealism in the fall of 1942. In his ‘De la survivance de certains mythes et de quelques autres en croissance ou en formation’, in a manner not unlike Masson’s drawing correspondences between the contingent and the imagined, the ‘formation of myths’ occurs through arbitrary juxtapositions in which Breton and Duchamp seek to relate disjunctive and ‘gestating’ principles, ‘la greffe’ and ‘le collage’. Varied ‘sets’ orchestrate diverse affinities and contexts, both mundane and ciphered. Throughout, captions and images are suggestive of an interplay between Surrealism and a popular imaginary not dissimilar to View’s. LA COMMUNICATION INTERPLANÉTAIRE juxtaposes a sample of ‘ultramartian writing’ by Hélène Smith – a playful allusion to

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99 La Clé des champs, pp. 72-3.
100 First Papers of Surrealism, unnumbered pages.
101 Breton referred to ‘Mlle Hélène Smith’ in his essay on painting, as an instance of the relation between ‘cognition’ and ‘recognition’: ‘je ne sais pour ma part, rien de plus dramatique et de plus
automatism and Breton’s address in the 1922 ‘L’Entrée des médiums’ (OCI, 273-79), a quotation from Charles Cros about two lovers stranded on Venus, and plate 126 from Ernst’s La Femme 100 têtes, with Fantômas, Dante and Jules Verne seated inside a sliced hotair balloon. Most suggestive of View’s approach to the popular imaginary was LE SURHOMME, a 1942 strip of Superman’s triumphant flight as a gloss on Nietzsche. Finally Breton’s own myth LES GRANDS TRANSPARENTS was illustrated with an extract from Maupassant’s le Horla, and a photograph ‘chauffée’ by David Hare featuring a naked body with flames rising from the waist upwards, strongly evoking the alchemical metaphors current in Surrealism at the time.

Breton’s and Duchamp’s myths targeted the alienating relation between the production and the reception of any one narrative. Their ‘myths’ are a play on the deceptive and arbitrary relation between contents and forms, thought of as either primary or ephemeral; myths that consist of ready-mades which, ironically, are as demystifying and cryptic just as they are thoroughly reified. In this sense, the Surrealist approach to myth in the 1940s was both dissimilar and akin to View’s approach to the popular imaginary: in either notion, repressed subjective faculties were seen as the point of the release of a collective imaginary. In Surrealist thought, myth is seen as the site of a subjectivity that transcends and encompasses the collective. In this manner, the question of origin which is fundamental in the structure of myth, is both redeemed and criticised; it is a primal moment that is contained in the contingent.

As View’s popular imaginary was intended to redefine the role of the collective for the redemption of the individual, the Surrealist notion of myth redefined the role of the subject in a non-alienating relation to the collective. Either notion was intended

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103 From a psychoanalytic perspective, Guy Rosolato has discussed how the fantasy of the primal scene and the anxiety of origin underscored the myth of the ‘grands transparents’; ‘le mythe a donc une fonction collective qui remplace une question, insupportable parce qu’elle rencontre infailliblement l’inconnu dans sa remontée aux origines, par une réponse idéalisée qui dicte le fantasme, à savoir une hiérogamie inaugurale.’ Guy Rosolato, ‘Les Grands Transparents: de la scène originale au mythe de la création’, in Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron and Yves Vadé, eds., Pensée mythique et surréalisme
to reconcile an ethics of permanence to the imperative for change. Opposing the irrationality of the contingent to the standardisation of the contingent in mass-produced culture, the increasing importance of myth in Surrealist thought in the 1940s is marked by the difficulty to reconcile historically-conditioned experiences with the a-temporal teleology of primitive myths.

Given this, not only a critique of the ‘standardized error of the external world’, to use Allerton Parker’s turn of phrase, the Surrealists saw myths as the ground of unfathomable potential; the attraction of the Native American is a case in point in respect of the Surrealist intent to reconcile transcendent tendencies to a heightened and empathetic response to the contingent. Rather than seeking repressed primary forces latent in everyday life, Breton and Péret turned to Native Americans for the manifestation of the contingent in the primal, a significant nuance to the Abstract Expressionists’ attraction to primitive forms. In the introduction to his *Anthologie des mythes, légendes et contes populaires d'Amérique*, written in Mexico in 1942, and published in *View* in June 1943 under the title ‘Magic The Flesh and Blood of Poetry’ (III: 2, p. 44-46, p. 63, p. 66), Péret says that he wishes to offer ‘une image aussi saisissante que possible de l’œuvre poétique de ces peuples’. Echoing Trotsky, he stresses that the primitive’s relation to nature involves a struggle for material domination. When nature surpasses the primitive man, the latter finds himself compensated by expanded mental faculties: ‘Il lui suffit de découvrir le moyen adéquat d’entrer en contact avec l’esprit qu’il est nécessaire de circonvenir.’ Péret however is as ambivalent towards the purity of the primal just as much as he is ambivalent towards purposeful, rational action. Through the primal, Péret revisited

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(Rushing, *Native American Art*, pp. 121-2.

104 ‘Essential to [John D. Graham’s, Wolfgang Paalen’s and Barnett Newman’s] theories and criticism of Native American (and other primitive) arts was an understanding of myth, totem, and ritual that relates to Jung’s ideas as well as others, and reveals these artists as the advocates of a new, transformed consciousness of modernity. [...] Graham was perhaps the single most credible purveyor of the idea that atavistic myth and primitive art are an avenue to the unconscious mind and primordial past.’ Rushing, *Native American Art*, pp. 121-2.


106 *Anthologie*, p. 10.

107 Like Calas and Abel, Péret’s name was associated with Trotskyism. In his October 1938 ‘Paris Letter’ in *Partisan Review*, Sean Niall referred to Péret’s parodic indictment of ‘La Conversion de Gide’; he noted that ‘not even Trotsky’s irritation with it as «poésie ouvriériste» can diminish the
the properties of language as means to restore a lost contact between the self and world. By criticising the value of culture in civilised society, Péret’s primal politics of language, imagination and necessity are intended to redeem an activist notion of a poetry and an art in which the subject represents reality only in order to change it.

The cultures of the Native Americans are seen as new thresholds to the Surrealist marvelous: the head of the Hopi Indians’ dolls in New Mexico, ‘parfois figure schématiquement un château médiéval. C’est dans ce château que je vais essayer de pénétrer’, writes Péret. The marvelous here is the principle of change: it allows Péret to integrate the contingent in the otherwise static and enclosed structure of myth. Like the Surrealist notion of ‘le merveilleux’, the primal transcends and breaks from cultural content, estranges our vision and restores the senses. It is a political as well as an aesthetic principle, or rather Péret here deliberately conflates the two. Before his growing disillusion with the unrepresentable reality of war, the primal allows a re-imagination, rather than a re-presentation of the political. In this sense, like Tyler’s notion of the fantastic, the marvelous is primarily a transhistorical and transcultural category, a constant force that nonetheless assumes different guises in different historical contexts:

le merveilleux, je le répète, est partout, de tous les temps, de tous les instants. 
C’est, ce devrait être, la vie elle même, à condition cependant de ne pas rendre cette vie délibérément sordide comme s’y ingénie cette société avec son école, sa religion, ses tribunaux, ses guerres, ses occupations et libérations, ses camps de concentration et son horrible misère matérielle et intellectuelle.

Against Péret’s ‘primal’ politics, Breton’s gaze towards Hopi Indians was much more pessimistic. In his encounter with Native Americans, the conflict between his mythical and subjectivist tendencies is manifest, as he resists linking a totalising, mythical authenticity to collective action. In a manner reminiscent of Rosenberg’s response to View’s 1942 questionnaire in this instance, he concludes that ‘[l’]attitude du public [est] plus dépourvue de tact encore (bavardages et rires)’, yet he also notes: ‘insister sur la valeur de cette communication très profonde avec la terre qui supplée general admiration for [Péret’s] volume’ and wondered why ‘he is not better known in America’. Sean Niall, ‘Paris Letter’, Partisan Review, VI: 1 (Fall 1938), 101-5 (p. 103, p. 105).

108 Anthologie, p. 15.
109 Anthologie, p. 16.
à tout, son authenticité totale, incontestable’. This nonetheless brings about a disillusioned attitude towards transcendence:


Péret on the other hand, attempted to overcome such disillusion before the contingent and sought to grasp and defeat the paradox of myth in a twin process. He sought manifestations of permanence against the ephemerality of civilised society, while at the same time pitting fragmented and alienated modern myths against the obscured or deceptive sense of unity in primitive myths. This is not unlike Breton’s earlier affirmative negation in the first Surrealist manifesto that ‘le merveilleux n’est pas le même à toutes les époques; il participe obscurément d’une sorte de révélation générale dont le détail seul nous parvient’. (OCI, 321) It is with this paradox in mind that we should approach Péret’s belief that ‘l’origine de la poésie se perd dans l’insondable abîme des âges car l’homme naît poète […] Voici les premiers mythes, les premiers poèmes de ces lointaines époques où les hommes sont tous plus ou moins sorciers, c’est-à-dire poètes et artistes.  

Such a sense of a lost unity informs Barnett Newman’s ‘The First Man was an artist’, where Newman, not unlike Péret, criticises the hierarchical relation between art and science with an anecdote about how ‘Chinese dragon’s teeth, piled high in a harvest on the shelves of Shanghai’s drugstores’ were the incentive to the paleontologists’ reconstruction of the past. Newman’s objection to science is that it fixes qualitative and quantitative principles, identities and functions. Against this, Newman stresses that ‘it is important to keep in mind that the necessity for dream is stronger than any utilitarian need. In the language of science, the necessity for understanding the unknowable comes before any desire to discover the unknown’.  

Péret’s notion of a ‘primal poetry’ involves the negation of a culture based on the distinction between the unknowable and the unknown. It is about a ‘poetry’ beyond

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the primitive’s double-edged and paradoxical condition of mastery and dependence
on myth, on the one hand, and the Western subject’s fragmentation on the other. As
Péret put it, ‘l’homme primitif ne se connaît pas encore, il se cherche. L’homme
actuel s’est égaré. Celui de demain devra d’abord se retrouver, se reconnaître, prendre
contradictoirement conscience de lui-même.’\textsuperscript{113} It is significant that Péret, in a 1955
addition to his 1943 essay, insisted that his notion of primitive myths was neither
static, nor ahistorical, and that what dissociates primitive myths from Western
rationality is a different self/world relation: ‘pour l’homme d’alors, aucun problème
ne revêt l’aspect qu’il prend pour nous, car objectif et subjectif sont, en son esprit,
aussi étroitement associés que l’hydrogène et l’oxygène dans l’eau’.\textsuperscript{114}

A little later, he opened his 1945 pamphlet \textit{Le Déshonneur des poètes} with a
yearning for purity: instead of seeking the purity of ‘primal’ forms, he defined the
‘primal’ as the repository of an ‘immaculate knowledge’. Against the rationalist myth
of progress, knowledge has to be divested of its instrumental role: its repressed purity
has to be mobilised against socialised contents. This knowledge, he continues,
encompasses the whole of the ‘spiritual life’ of humanity and can assume varied
guises. The ‘immaculate knowledge’, he writes:

\begin{quote}

demeure omnipotente, bouillonne dans le récit mythique de l’Esquimau, éclate
dans la lettre d’amour, mitraille le peloton d’exécution qui fusille l’ouvrier
exhalant un dernier soupir de révolution sociale, […] défaille, exsangue, jusque
dans les plus stupides productions se réclamant d’elle.\textsuperscript{115}
\end{quote}

By turning to subjectivities imbued by the collective, Péret tries to circumvent the
dilemma about prioritising subjectivity over programmatic action against ‘the forces
of regression’ which also included myths. Medieval mystics, the revolutionaries of
the ‘An II’ or of 1917, Péret says, ‘étaient le produit d’une exaltation collective réelle
et profonde’.\textsuperscript{116}

In a similar vein, in his 1946 \textit{Le Merveilleux}, Pierre Mabille related the
‘merveilleux’ to a notion of subjectivity in which conflict inside the self is part of a
process of dynamic interaction with the external world. Neither thoroughly
harmonious nor alienating, Mabille suggests that such instances can be glimpsed in

\textsuperscript{113} \textit{Anthologie}, p. 27.
\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Anthologie}, p. 33.
the poetry of Péret and Breton or in Indian narratives. In Péret, he writes, we get immersed in ‘un univers inquiétant de luttes, alternant avec des enchantements que pénètre le poète’. Throughout, Mabille juxtaposes visions of unity and loss, potentiality and destruction. The experience of the ‘merveilleux’ is the catalyst for the momentary overcoming of the alienating conflict between the world and the self. This was also expressed in the introduction to his 1940 Le Miroir du merveilleux where the ‘merveilleux’ is defined as ‘à la fois extérieur à l’homme et contenu en lui’, and – echoing Trotsky’s approach to culture – as ‘exigeant une conquête de la nature et un repliement constant de soi-même’.

As Breton’s metaphors in the ‘prolégomènes’ are underscored by anxiety over the collapse of agency, Mabille remains undecided towards the share of subjective and external catalysts in the marvelous. Masson on the other hand, not without irony, ended his ‘Anatomy’ with the synthetic/destuctive image of ‘the emblematic man’: ‘man is the mirror of the universe,’ not as a primary regulating principle, but rather as an element participating in an endlessly regenerating conflict, much in the spirit of Breton’s reference to Novalis.

Like Masson, Breton and Péret, in attempting to suggest an expanded notion of subjectivity, Mabille sought a more complex principle of agency. He turned to the ‘realists’ of the Middle Ages for whom ‘aucune différence fondamentale n’existe entre les éléments de la pensée et les phénomènes du monde, entre le visible et le compréhensible, entre le perceptible et l’imaginable’. Subjective experience is not the mere outcome of accident: every event bears its own teleology and occurs independently of subjective will, just as much as it is summoned by the latter. In this sense, Mabille’s attraction to esoteric thought was not at odds to an empathetic attitude to the contingent. Mabille concluded his 1939 ‘L’Œil du peintre’ by anticipating yet more manifestations of the links between human consciousness and a latent unconscious, links that become manifest primarily through violence. The incident of Victor Brauner’s enucleated eye and the 1931 self-portrait that predated it,

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119 Masson, Anatomie, Chapitre VII.  
was one such privileged coincidence in which 'une nouvelle conscience de l'univers et de l'humanité [...] se construit gravement.'\textsuperscript{121} In this incident, the symbolic mutilation of the visual faculty and its physical manifestation are made equivalent to each other: this is the point of release of repressed emancipatory energy. A little earlier, in his 1936 'Notes sur le symbolisme', he defined the artwork as an organic symbol that entails both its own constant interaction with its environment as well as the subject’s response to external realities.\textsuperscript{122}

A dialectic between a lost wholeness and an alienated, fragmented subjectivity informed Seligmann's conclusions on the role of magic in the history of civilisation, conclusions consonant with Breton's setting of Surrealism's aim 'to render to man the concrete empire of his functions' in his 1940 interview. Like myth, magic ambivalently works as a means of both liberation and represッション. In its entirety, 'the magical man', Seligmann writes, 'is not only integrated within the All, but he can act upon it. He strives for cognizance of the world mechanism.'\textsuperscript{123} In the February-March 1942 issue of \textit{View}, in his 'Magic Circles' he drew a parallel between alchemy, magic and artistic creativity by referring to Cornelius Agrippa's 'magic signs employed for conjuring the forces of the invisible world'. Like Mabille's, Seligmann's notion of the artwork does not involve retreat from empirical reality. It is an organic entity with its own intrinsic unity, which at the same time refuses to mark a static divide from the external world. As this 'unity' does not necessarily involve an identity between signs and signifiers, there is always the risk of loss of control over what 'correspondences' a work might initiate. The artist is like the 'magician who creates disturbances by means of a few scribbled signs'; as in magic, 'it is dangerous to draw any design, to write words, to create artistic or artificial things, because we cannot know what their correspondances will be.' The potent and enigmatic uncertainty of the artwork is Seligmann's antidote to the collapse of a collective agency and to the artist's necessary retreat into a world where secretly, knowingly and unknowingly,

\textsuperscript{121} \textit{Minotaure}, 12-13 (mai 1939), 53-56 (p. 56), repr. in Mabille, \textit{Conscience Lumineuse}, pp. 89-101 (pp. 92-3, p. 101).
\textsuperscript{122} \textit{Minotaure}, 8 (June 1936), 1-3 (p. 3).
everything interacts and communicates: ‘only in the state of trance, [...] when the World Soul has entered into the artist, will he be able to produce with impunity [...] those works which are in harmony with the universe and its secret laws.’ As in his ‘An Eye for a Tooth’, Seligmann here distinguishes between ‘similitudes’ and ‘hermetic correspondances’ which initiate metamorphoses that defy rational thought, metamorphoses in which the unity of the work is simultaneously experienced and unknown. (I, 11-12, p. 3)

Generally, like View’s popular imaginary, the Surrealist approach to myth and to the unity and disjunction between subjectivity and the world, aimed at redeeming the subject by redeeming the lost immediacy of collective experiences. By revising the role of the artist and the artwork; by turning myth into a means of cultural critique; by resisting an activist ethic as well as organic metaphors of progress, Surrealist thought in the 1940s revised notions of agency. Through the principle of myth, the dichotomy between form and empirical reality was projected into the problem of agency. The dialectic between form and subjective experience in Surrealism did not bear on their primary or derivative nature of form, or on the dilemma between autonomous artistic activity and revolutionary activism; it was instead underscored by a persistent anxiety as to whether and how notions of agency were to be sustained or rejected, and whether subjective principles could be restored as catalysts of immanent, rather than transcendent change. Instead of attempting to resolve the crisis of forms and the impasse of political activism, the notion of myth was intended to redefine subjectivity as a mobile paradigm, shifting from the contingent to the transcendent.

While View resisted Surrealist mythic tendencies, the principle of myth was central in the early years of Abstract Expressionism. It should be noted that in seeing Surrealism outside the rise of abstraction, View did not address how the Surrealists’ interest in myth and the Abstract Expressionists’ attraction to the purity of form were underscored by a similar concern with subjectivity and a reality which seemed increasingly impossible to represent. What is generally seen as a growing concern with form in the nascent Abstract Expressionism runs parallel to the critique of historical agency in Surrealism. In either the Surrealist or the Abstract Expressionist...
contexts, the development of art was seen equally as an antidote to a regressive culture and as a symptom of the crisis in notions of agency; like Surrealist myths, the permanence and the development of form was seen as reflecting both the contingent and the permanent aspects of culture. With regard to the role of myth in early Abstract Expressionism, Steven Zucker has pointed out that it was not only a formal principle but also a means to address the evil of contemporary history: it was gradually abandoned because of its irrational thrust and its ambiguous moral and ideological implications. In relation to this, Barnett Newman’s critique of Surrealism’s affinity for myth in 1946 is both a critique and an inadvertent expression of Surrealism’s own discontent at the time:

Surrealist art under its realistic and ideal surfaces contains all the weird subject matter of the primitive world of terror. But that time is over. The war the surrealists predicted has robbed us of our hidden terror, as terror can only exist if the forces of tragedy are unknown. We now know the terror to expect.  

The sustained emphasis on the possibility of social change could not be easily reconciled with the a-temporal impact of myth. As Newman implies, the crisis of forms and the critique of representation are elements of critique, just as they are symptoms of the crisis of subjective agency. With regard to this, the Surrealist faith in the transformative potential of myths may seem to come about at the expense of the earlier emphasis on the category of the object as bearer of the unconscious and disruptive of subjectivity.

A doubly synthetic and disruptive principle, the Surrealist interest in myth was not unrelated to the earlier emphasis on the potential of the category of the object. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Surrealists redeemed the accidental, the everyday and the banal as sites or pretext for the permanent. In the 1940s, they sought ways for correcting the destruction of primal relations at both manifest and hidden levels: from a mythical perspective, empty signs were turned into ciphered, yet meaningful experiences. The ‘need for a new myth’ expressed a need for both immersion in reality and a flight from it: this informed the importance attached to the empirical value of subjective perception and knowledge, as well as to a view of the artwork as a relational, as well as an autonomous principle. With regard to this, the return of

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124 Cited by Steven Zucker, ‘Confrontations with Radical Evil: the Ambiguity of Myth and the
subjectivity and the growing emphasis on myth in the 1940s were not unrelated to the earlier Surrealist critique of subjectivity and the emphasis on the category of the object – to which we will turn next.

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Inadequacy of Representation', *Art History*, 24: 3 (June 2001), 379-400 (p. 392).
2. Surrealism’s critique and the critique of Surrealism

2.1 Redeeming the object, recovering the subject: subjectivity and objects in Surrealism

The Surrealists turned to the categories of subject and object with the dual intent to undermine and preserve them. For the validity of this assertion to appear, we need only remember how the growing importance of the object throughout the 1930s determined Surrealist theory and practice, particularly during the years of *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (July 1930-May 1933). The Surrealists found, imagined, or constructed objects and contemplated how subjectivity and objects may participate in each other outside of socialised relations of domination, and against the illusion of the subject’s mastery of reality. Potentially critical of both use and exchange value, objects were seen as promises of a non-reified contact with the world. The Surrealist critique targetted the ways in which use was subsumed by relations of instrumentality, just as it turned against the relations of exchange that subsume all forms of social practice.

By criticising the alienated subject/object relation in modernity and by turning the object into a primary category for their attack on reason, the Surrealists also explored the psychic and the material conditions of the constitution of the subject: they contested the primacy of the subject as site of knowledge, as the agent that generates the world of objects. By exposing the crisis of subjectivity in modernity, the category of the object was the catalyst for both the critique and the redemption of the subject: subject/object relations were negated, but also open to transformation. Moreover, the Surrealist approach to the object involved a slippage between the object’s material and conceptual, psychic and social aspects: its contingent materiality, its role in the perceptual process and in representation.

Breton’s notions of *la beauté convulsive, le merveilleux, or le hasard objectif*, were posited as manifestations of an otherwise unattainable immediacy where subject and object interact beyond structures of either use or exchange. Projective guises of the unrepresentable, they involved how the dualities between the visible and the
invisible, the seen and the unseen, the manifest and the hidden, the material and the abstract, determine our experiences. In this manner, Breton redefined a theory of agency: both subject and object were seen as active principles, acting and acted upon. The need for relations that the rational intellect would fail to grasp was tentatively fulfilled: the object was seen as a threshold where a breakthrough from a rationalised world might occur.

Virtually anything could become such a catalyst, if it entered the realm of the subject’s projections and desires: in chance encounters, the subjective mind and the object meet in mutual recognition. Yet this recognition is not based on identity either. The most telling instance of such recognitions is Breton’s relation with Nadja. (OCI, 645-753) Through Nadja’s gaze, encountered or summoned physical objects and fantasies, visual or verbal images, are interchangeable and reversible. By observing how Nadja intermittently takes on the qualities of objects, Breton recognises hidden and repressed self/world relations. As for Nadja, she represents subjectivities marginalised and repressed by rationalism, as she is paradigmatic of how the subject is redeemed and engulfed through the object: in taking on the object’s ephemeral qualities, her own absences are ambivalently grasped as loss and realisation of the self. Given this, it is significant that Breton did not carry on Nadja’s empathetic way with her environment and her inner self. He uneasily leaves Nadja behind, as her ambiguous promise is also a premonition of a pessimist disenchantment: the social context and even the order of language itself not only repress but also allow for Nadja’s alienness. Breton’s anxiety to move onto the next catalyst for another latent and potent promise, for yet more hidden affinities between the apparently insignificant or accidental and the repressed, is an expression of his discontent that such coincidences can only have a fleeting impact.

His final failing to Nadja or her own failure to the narrator, ambivalently incite us to think that either she was a deceptive signifier without a referent, or a referent that risked engulfing Breton’s own subjectivity, and self-awareness as referent. Pierre Albouy has noted that Breton’s relational notion of the sign and the distinction between ‘signs’ and ‘signals’ in Nadja,¹ involve the problem of essence: ‘le signe

¹ See Breton’s famous description of events ‘qui, […] présentent chaque fois toutes les apparences
manifeste une essence; le signal est le signe de la signification'.

To this we may add that the subversive and emancipatory role of the category of the object in *Nadja* is located at the gap between signs and signals, between essences and the forms in which they become manifest to us. Hal Foster has responded to the sign/signal dialectic along the lines of this problematic. Doubting whether Surrealist categories ultimately recover a lost contact with reality, Foster describes Breton’s encounters as instances in which ‘repressed, the trauma is subsumed by the signal, just as in the uncanny the referent is subsumed by the sign’. This, for Foster, has a dual effect: the return of the repressed is seen as transcending the sign, and as demystifying essences at the same time. Unlike the Freudian uncanny which ‘is an unconscious compulsion associated with a real event’, the *hasard objectif*, Foster writes, is ‘a real event that produces an unconscious effect’; in the *hasard objectif*, our subjectivity recognises how external reality is also unconscious and unaware of its own dynamic. Moreover, the category of the uncanny allows Foster to predicate his reading of the critical potential of Surrealism on a critique of Surrealism: critical of social relations, the uncanny in Surrealism bears an inescapable anxiety over the identity or the difference between reality and representation, between the contents of perception and our means of perception. The same anxiety is seen as informing the Surrealist image, which, for Foster, is ‘a representation without a referent, or a copy without an original’.

The opening of *Nadja* hints at all this: the crisis of subjectivity results from the deceptive sense of a meaningful identity arrived at through differentiation alone. It is such differences that dissolve tentatively into Breton’s intermittent identification with Nadja. Similarly, the deception of the knowing subject can be corrected through the awareness of knowledge as an act of recognition – which here is experienced as a series of revelations. Yet in these revelations, the mechanisms of repression and the promise of emancipation involve the same catalysts. Breton realises this, through the ‘objects’, the ‘signals’ and the ‘events’ that he encounters with and through Nadja.

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His doubt as to the subject's participation in all these – 'de ces faits, dont je n'arrive à être pour moi-même que le témoin hagard', is followed by the 'pleasure' of the unrepresentable – 'ainsi en va-t-il de ces sensations électives dont j'ai parlé et dont la part d'incommunicabilité même est une source de plaisirs inégalables'. (OCI, 647, 648, 652)

It is significant that for Breton, there would always be a residue of enigma in Nadja; her enigma is the enigma of objects, which was also the cause of his fascination with De Chirico (OCI, 649-50) and it is the same enigma which he pursued in the 1937 *L'Amour fou*. In relation to this, it is interesting to remember the Surrealist attitude towards the fetish: the fetish character of the object is unmasked in order to expose how exchange dominates the real relations that went into its production – to put it more in the terms offered by the Surrealist ethos, the fetish is a token of repressed desire. On the other hand, a cycle of exchange allows the object to assume an enigmatic life of its own, independently of its origin. Drawing the psychoanalytic inflection of the ambivalent position of the 'object' of 'mad love', Guy Rosolato stressed that the object is caught up in the conflict between language and representation on the one hand, the unrepresentable and the aesthetic on the other. Again, the encounters are the sites where the repressive and the repressed, socialised relations and the unconscious, past and present clash. Surrealist encounters involve the dialectical relation between the promise of objects and the failure of the subject to respond to this promise; however, only then, the subject realises its inability to think itself independently of the realm of objects.

*L'Amour fou* begins with the problematic multiplicity of socially imposed roles on the subject, and our illusory redemption in projections into a supposedly unique object of desire: 'il n'est peut-être pas inutile de se convaincre que cette idée de l'amour unique procède d'une attitude mystique – ce qui n'exclut pas qu'elle soit

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entretenue par la société actuelle à des fins équivoques’. (OCII, 677) The rest of the narrative attempts to contemplate a synthesis between the realisation and the negation of the ‘unique object’. This however does not cancel the fact that desire is essentially a subjective and temporal principle intended to grasp and sustain process and change. Breton’s certainty that his responses to certain ‘poetic movements’ evoke ‘de tels états de parfaite réceptivité [qui] ne connaissent aucune dégradation dans le temps’, ironically bears his anxiety over time, while at the same time, these ‘movements’ are a metaphor for the immanent mystery of the object. This is what he attempted to resolve with his earlier notion of convulsive beauty at the end of Nadja, a ‘beauty’ which can only be glimpsed ‘au prix de l’affirmation réciproque qui lie l’objet considéré dans son movement et dans son repos’; that is, the utopian coincidence of the movement itself with ‘l’expiration exacte de ce mouvement même’. (OCII, 679-80) Breton here seeks to come to terms with the dialectic of time through the category of the object: a material entity, a psychic category, and a form of representation, the object both eliminates and sustains the distance that separates it from the subject. It is both a projective form and a self-sufficient entity that excludes the subject. Given this, the ‘pleasure’ of the chance find ‘est fonction de la dissemblance même qui existe entre l’objet souhaité et la trouvaille’. (OCII, 682) The dialectic of difference and identity here, unfolds in the relation between the projective and the actual manifestation of the object of desire. Throughout L’Amour fou, the potency of desire is subjectively perceived, yet activated only by the object. This culminated in the definition of the ‘hasard objectif’, ‘la forme de manifestation de la nécessité extérieure qui se fraie un chemin dans l’inconscient humain.’ (OCII, 690) It is Breton’s tendency towards a subject/object dynamic which reflects and assimilates time, external and internal to both subject and object, that underscored the desire for seeing ‘une locomotive de grande allure qui eût été abandonnée durant des années au délire de la forêt vierge’. (OCII, 680)

In his defense of dreams, Les Vases communicants of 1932 – the interlude between Nadja and L’Amour fou – Breton resorted to the principle of the object in order to address ‘[ce] que deviennent dans le rêve le temps, l’espace, le principe de causalité’. (OCII, 107) Here, he relates the category of the object and the principle of
the image: ‘tous fait image et […] le moindre objet, auquel n’est pas assigné un rôle symbolique particulier, est susceptible de figurer n’importe quoi’. (OCII, 181) Breton, however, also tells us that when our intellect latches onto the relations between two objects, it may falsely value the object’s right to any metaphor. That Breton corrects this, by positing desire – ‘le désir, lui, s’il est vraiment vital, ne se refuse rien’ in Les Vases communicants, ‘seul ressort du monde’ in L’Amour fou, (OCII, 181, 755) – as disruptive of reified relations is as utopian as it is pessimistic: utopian, in that it still contemplates the resolution of contradictions, which the metaphor of communicating vessels implies; pessimistic, in acknowledging its ephemeral and uncertain impact on reality. Sarane Alexandrian has stressed that Breton was intent on the forms desire may assume and the ways in which these forms distort appearances, rather than why and how desire is repressed.\(^5\) Equally, the object’s right to metaphors and images is a promise which at the same time raises doubt about the potency of the ‘events’ that would bring about a change in the constitution of the subject. Breton owned up to this when, despite his having chosen a ‘particularly irrational’ period of his life for Les Vases communicants, he realised that:

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\text{il s’agissait comme on l’a vu, du moment où, soustrait à toute activité pratique par la privation intolérable d’un être, de sujet et d’objet que j’avais jusqu’alors été et que je suis redevenu, je ne parvenais plus à me tenir que pour sujet. (OCII, 180)}
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Breton’s 1928 Le Surréalisme et la peinture is resonant with the problematic of his trilogy. Rather than incidents of his life, it is visual works that engage him in a similar line of thought. That Breton’s writings are in dialogue, is apparent from the opening of the essay where he links the problematic of seeing to the problematic of the subject: the ‘témoign hagard’ that Breton was in Nadja is overcome in the dialectic between ‘l’œil hagard’ and ‘l’œil à l’état sauvage’.\(^6\) Seeing does not only involve the seeing subject but also the unseen and the unrepresentable, and this link can be grasped only through the object.

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\(^5\) This is what distinguishes Breton’s approach to dreams from Freud’s for whom the dream is “la décharge psychique d’un désir en état de refoulement”. Sarane Alexandrian, ‘Le Rêve dans le surréalisme’, L’Espace du rêve, Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse, 5 (printemps 1972), repr. in Les Critiques de notre temps et Breton, pp. 59-65 (p. 62).

In relation to this, Martin Jay has stressed that Surrealism's involvement with vision is ambiguous; 'the Surrealist search for new visual experience, for what may well be called visionary redemption, paradoxically contribute[s] to the crisis of ocularcentrism.'\(^7\) This is manifest in Breton's essay on painting, premissed as it is on the subject/object interaction, and the critique and redemption of the seeing subject. The potentiality of the 'modèle intérieur' that Breton proposes, is synonymous to the subject's interiority: this 'model', which allowed Picasso to break from 'la trahison des choses sensibles',\(^8\) has to be discovered in and through the object. As what we see is inextricably linked to what we project, rather than representing something that supposedly exists independently of the seeing subject, Surrealist works, for Breton, seek to reproduce internal visions. Still, this was questioned by the Surrealists themselves — we need only remember the way the painter and his friends enter the picture plane in Ernst's 1926 *La Vierge corrigeant l'Enfant Jésus devant trois témoins: A. B. [André Breton], P. E. [Paul Éluard] et l'artiste*;\(^9\) with such a potent parody of seeing and the awareness of being seen, Ernst gives a most ironic twist to the alienated relation between the subject and the object of vision. The Surrealists consistently gave credit to visual images for granting unmediated experiences in which subjectivity and the unconscious are integral to the object/product. Crevel's homage to Ernst in a preface for an exhibition catalogue in 1928 stresses how Ernst turns 'the corpses of things' into 'exquisite corpses': 'alors parce que Max Ernst nous convie à la miraculeuse ascension, nos paupières deviennent des ailes, nos regards volent, plus rapides que le vent.'\(^10\)

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\(^7\) Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 236. Jay discusses Surrealism's paradoxical share in the crisis of ocularcentrism, by paralleling and contrasting the role of seeing in the thought of Breton and Bataille. Their divergence bears on their critique of rationalism and the role of subjectivity. For Bataille, Breton's anti-rationalism approached the irrational through subjective rational faculties; Bataille's categories were intended to shatter the dichotomy between materialism and idealism which, in Bataille's view, was maintained in Breton's problematic reconciliation of subjective and objective principles.

\(^8\) *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, p. 4, p. 5.


Generally, the artwork is assimilated into the category of the object, a ground where the conflict between the unrepresentable, the real and the represented unfold. This once again bears on the value of knowledge and the value of experiences in which the nature of reality is at stake. As Breton famously put it in *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*:

> Voir, entendre, n'est rien. Reconnaître (ou ne pas reconnaître) est tout. Entre ce que je reconnais et ce que je ne reconnais pas, il y a moi. Et ce que je ne reconnais pas, je continuerai à ne pas le reconnaître.  

Breton here involves the assertion and critique of phenomenological principles as means to reestablish a lost contact with things on the one hand, and as obstacles to maintain such a contact on the other. The complex resonances of Breton’s statement at the level of subject/object relations are symptomatic of Surrealism’s conflicting impulses. In positing the self-world encounter as a fact of re-cognition, Breton challenges the validity of subjective knowledge as much as he regrets the impossibility of recovering the origin of knowledge either in a historical consciousness or in the unconscious. This underscored his recurring emphasis on immanent rather than transcendent change, and the wider claim to break down dichotomies and still maintain a claim to unity:

> Tout ce que j’aime, tout ce que je pense et ressens, m’incline à une philosophie particulière de l’immanence d’après laquelle la surréalité serait contenue dans la réalité même, et ne lui serait ni supérieure ni extérieure. Et réciproquement, car le contenant serait aussi le contenu.  

All along, the synthetic and disruptive thrust of the manifestations of ‘la surréalité’ was meant to encompass and redeem the world of objects. Predicated on the unyielding ambiguity between reference and self-reference, the identical and the different, rather than vehicle of represented concepts, Surrealist categories were seen as irreducible to concepts alone.

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12 *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, p. 44.

13 *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, p. 46.
In response to the dichotomy between reality and representation, Aragon attributed an active role to the object in order to sustain perception and imagination as non-instrumental ways of reconstructing external reality. In the 1926 *Le Paysan de Paris*, Aragon revised the relation between perception and knowledge, external realities and mental images. Faced with a reality in which signs emerge, proliferate and disappear indiscriminately, Aragon sought objects that intermittently come across as mental images and as physical objects, in an attempt to restore language as a faculty that does not create the world, but is part of it. Ashbery’s poems are predicated on similar questions, as Ashbery seeks to grasp how visual and verbal forms of representation, produce, reproduce and subsume reality. Yet as we shall see, unlike the Surrealists, Ashbery questions the dual role of objects as referents and forms of representation.

To get back to Aragon, seeing and imagining coincide and clash in *Le Paysan de Paris*, as signs, mental images and sense perceptions create and populate external and internal reality interchangeably. Aragon redeems the changing appearances of things through the subject’s perception of them; in its turn, taken over by objects, our subjectivity is altered and the stages of identification and differentiation are neither sequential nor distinct. Seeking to turn language into an active principle, Aragon’s ‘nominalism’ is synonymous with immersion in objects which would bring about the collapse of the abstraction of concepts. The principle of identity of an object to a concept materialises in ‘lived’ language only. Words, images and objects are empty signs which, unlike symbols that point to realities beyond themselves, break through the seemingly necessary mediation of concepts: as he put it in ‘Le Sentiment de la Nature aux Buttes-Chaumont’, ‘un objet se transfigurait à mes yeux, il ne prenait point l’allure allégorique ni le caractère du symbole; il manifestait moins une idée qu’il n’était cette idée même.’

Aragon here redeems the principle of identity in instances where concepts are taken over by objects that defeat their symbolic function. By criticizing the organic nature of the symbol, Aragon redeems the alienated, contingent elements that may enter in any one relation and assume any one guise in any one context.

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In relation to this, Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron has opened her discussion of the 'pleasure(s) of the image' with Aragon's reflections on how language is productive of meaning. The pleasure of the image, she argues, does not stem from the absence of meaning but from the excess of meaning. In concluding, she stresses that the Surrealist image is primarily an attempt to break from time:

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\text{[un] souffle perdu et retrouvé, et d'appel à un temps originaire qui ne connaîtrait pas de compulsion de répétition. [...] ce lieu de la métaphore – jouerait l'invention à l’“état pur”, [...] la griserie de ce temps sans temporalité – non pas linéaire et abstrait mais rythmé, pulsionnel, chargé d'affect.}\]

For Aragon, this time divested of duration is located beyond the subject's experiencing of the passage of time, as well as beyond language. Whether the meaning of experience is realised in a flight outside of time, or whether the experience of the passage of time marks our awareness of an unattainable essence, this tells as much about Aragon's intention as it does about the Surrealists' own implied critique of their principles, to which I will go into more detail in the second part of this chapter. The gap between the signifier and the signified, representation and reference is both a promise of change and cause for pessimism for Aragon, who remains ultimately ambivalent as to whether the identity between word and thing is destructive or redemptive of subjectivity. Given this, Aragon's optimism bears a pessimist negativity; in the violent intrusion of the past into the present, the image is both redeemed and defeated by time, a problematic akin to Breton's take on desire.

Jacques Leenhardt has discussed the growing concern with the autonomy of the object in the avant-garde aesthetic in the 1920s, as a response to the destruction of social and conceptual hierarchies, as well as a symptom of a wider crisis in relations between objects: symptom of alienation, the problematic autonomy of the object initiated a critique that, in retrospect, seems anticipatory of the much later poststructuralist critique of subjectivity and essence. De Chirico's 'métaphysique' and Aragon's 'mythologie' are such instances. Like Benjamin's concept of the dialectical image, Aragon's 'mythologie' and De Chirico's metaphysical paintings suggest a

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15 Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, 'Plaisir(s) de l’image', in Du Surréalisme et du plaisir, pp. 85-97 (p. 97).

16 'It is not the case that the past sheds its light on the present or the present its light on the past, but the image is that in which, what has been, enters into a constellation with the ‘Now’ [Jetzt] in a sudden flash. In other words: the image is dialectics at a standstill [...]. The image read, i.e. the image in the
mode of perception of the manifestation of the past in the present. Breton had made a similar point in a 1920 article in the Surrealist periodical *Littérature*: revising ‘les données sensibles de temps et de l’espace’, in De Chirico’s paintings, ‘une véritable mythologie moderne est en formation’. (OCI, 251) Leenhardt stresses that De Chirico’s ‘métaphysique’ brings about the coexistence of different temporalities. De Chirico’s ‘métaphysique’ is a heuristic and a cognitive principle: it unfolds in a series of allegories of historical conflict, through which De Chirico redefines the aesthetic experience not as bearing a claim to truth, but as an experience in which the untruth of representation is exposed.

An ambivalent, uncertain catalyst for an unrepresentable immediacy, much in the manner of the Surrealist object/image, rather than a means to represent, De Chirico’s ‘metaphysical’ enigmas are a powerful critique of an inescapably mediated reality. As Leenhardt points out, ‘la recherche de l’effet métaphysique se fait par des moyens qui visent l’imaginaire et non pas le système de représentation’. De Chirico’s paintings open onto a space in-between reality and thought, between words and things, seeking a glimpse into the past from inside the present of representation; similarly, Aragon’s ‘modern mythology’ involves an experience adjacent to representation. Yet as discussed, Aragon’s attempt to recover the object as a catalyst for the disjunction between abstraction and matter rests on a pessimist utopianism.

Aragon’s 1924 *Une vague de rêves* anticipated the pessimist utopianism of *Le Paysan de Paris*: the loss of the ability to recover a coherent sense of life is turned into a positive principle, a wish to prolong the fleeting and evasive moments

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18 Leenhardt, pp. 10-5.

19 Leenhardt, p. 12.

20 Leenhardt quotes Aragon on this: ‘de ce carrefour sentimental, si je porte alternativement les yeux sur ce pays de désordre et sur la grande galerie éclairée par mes instincts, à la vue de l’un ou de l’autre
revelatory of the movement of change: ‘ce moment que tout m’échappe, que d’immenses lézardes se font jour dans le palais du monde, je lui sacrifierais toute ma vie, s’il voulait seulement durer à ce prix dérisoire.’ Moreover, mental activity has to be valued for its opacity and not for its transparence; this will come up in Ashbery’s poems too, where the awareness of the opacity of language brings about a longing for transparence.

In Aragon, language is both embraced and criticised as a means to recover the evasive moment when objects break free from concepts. Caught up in a dialectic akin to that of objects, the unconscious mind is seen as a latent threshold, both redemptive and critical of subjectivity: ‘en lui subsistaient des images qui prenaient corps, elles devenaient matière de réalité’. The possibility of such comings and goings between the material and the abstract is what leads Aragon to the assertion of ‘[un] nominalisme absolu’, since ‘il n’y a pas de pensée hors des mots’; similarly, ‘simuler une chose, est-ce autre chose que la penser? Et ce qui est pensé, est’. Yet immediately after, he relates the notion of the ‘surréal’ to the unrepresentable; ‘le surréel […] est en rapport entre l’esprit et ce qu’il n’atteindra jamais’. We might note how in order to offset his scepticism towards the period of hypnotic trances, Aragon celebrated dreams as the realm in which his ‘absolute nominalism’ takes effect, where the unrepresentable becomes light itself in a Surrealist understanding of it: ‘il y a une lumière surréaliste: celle qui à l’heure où les villes s’enflamment tombe sur l’étalage saumon des bas de soie’. At the same time, anticipating his pessimism and as if reversing his optimist defense of ‘error’, Aragon reminds us how on arriving ‘à ce tombeau fabuleux où il espère trouver l’anneau qui confère le pouvoir’, ‘le mystérieux Coeur-Rouge’ discovers ‘la trace bien marquée d’un talon Wood-Milne’. This makes Aragon realise that ‘c’est l’ombre, […] le silence que nous

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22 Une vague de rêves, p. 14.
23 Une vague de rêves, p. 15, p. 19.
24 Une vague de rêves, pp. 15-6.
25 Une vague de rêves, p. 22.
poursuivons de toute éternité, [...] c'est ce grand échec qui se perpétue'. As in Breton's *L'Amour fou*, this bears on the subject's failing to the object of desire, as well as on the discrepancy between the object's contingent and material qualities on the one hand, and its abstract, conceptual validity on the other. As in the 'talon Wood-Milne', either quality can remain ambivalently reified and potent with change. As if in response to the object's ambiguity, earlier on in his text, Aragon sought to redefine and enlarge the scope of subjectivity: despite his disillusion with collective experiments, he described Desnos's hypnotic trances as a moment of release of subjective and collective energies.

As Aragon's reflection on the object evolved parallel to his view of language, such a dual approach informed Breton's thinking on the referential and reflexive aspects of language. In the 1922 *Les Mots sans rides*, he voiced his optimism that words can be emancipated both from socialised signifying practices and from the delusion of essence: in Desnos's and Duchamp's wordplays, 'nos plus sûres raisons d'être [...] sont en jeu'. (OCI, 284-86) Desnos's experiments from *L'Aumonyme* to *Langage cuit* of 1922-1923 mobilised the order of the signifier against the order of the signified with an ambivalent intent in relation to the ways in which the subject is constituted in language. For Breton, in their recovered autonomy, words enter into as yet repressed or unknown relations. Similar possibilities were explored in the technique of collage where objects are ambivalently physical and representational.

This was taken up in the 1928 essay on painting, where Breton emphasised that we need to approach the relations between objects in Ernst's collages 'en tant que représentations': this is not meant to detach the object from its materiality, or conversely, to turn words and images into contingent physical entities alone, but rather to explore the dichotomy between the ephemerality and the arbitrariness of reality, and our perceptions of this reality. This is why Breton stresses that the effect of collage rests on a 'rêve de médiation' and that violence is the most potent

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27 *Une vague de rêves*, p. 27.
28 'Que ceux qui interrogent ce dormeur formidable l'aiguillent à peine, et tout de suite la prédiction, le ton de la magie, celui de la révélation, celui de la Révolution, le ton du fanatique et de l'apôtre surgissent'. *Une vague de rêves*, p. 18.
mediating device between subjective experience, language and objects, as well as between the object's psychic and material aspects.\textsuperscript{30}

In anticipation of such a 'rêve de médiation', in the 1924 *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité*, Breton wondered whether it is the external world or our means to represent and to imagine it that bear a primary deficiency; he goes on to correct this, by suggesting that we need to stop seeing the discrepancy between the world and our means to represent it as deficient. Therefore, it is needless to wonder whether 'la médiocrité de notre univers ne dépend-elle pas essentiellement de notre pouvoir d'énonciation', because it might not be too late to 'revenir sur cette déception, inhérente aux mots dont nous avons fait jusqu'ici mauvais usage'. (OCII, 276) Yet rather than turning to the critical possibilities of our use of this 'deception', in the following decade, Breton revised both his earlier hope and distrust towards the referential and the non-referential possibilities of language. Now for Breton, the use of language bears a dual thrust similar to that of the object in relation to the contingent subject. As he wrote in the 1936 'Le Merveilleux contre le mystère':

\[\text{La cause profonde en est, selon moi, que le langage non strictement usuel, non strictement adapté aux besoins pratiques, entraîne de la part de qui s'y exerce un effort pénible, met en jeu une certaine souffrance. [...] Ce que je tiens le plus à dire n’est pas, il s’en faut, ce que je dis le mieux. Une grande déception me vient de l’absence de tout secours extérieur en pareil cas.}\textsuperscript{31}

In seeking something beyond communicative language which functions merely according to a principle of utility, the very inadequacy of language and the failure, or rather the lack of external 'aids', ironically, still seem to be the liberating gap where language opens up into reality, where the relation between signs and referents becomes transparent. Before this tension between representation and reference in Surrealism, Michael Riffaterre has suggested that Surrealist texts involve relations between systems of signs rather than relations between signs and referents. For Riffaterre, if the Surrealist text refers to something outside itself, this can only be another textual system. Yet this view bypasses the relation between self-reference and reality altogether.\textsuperscript{32}

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With regard to this, we need to remember Breton’s nostalgia for what he recognised as the last instance of identity between signs and signifieds: ‘avec [Baudelaire] la chose exprimée ne se distingue encore presque en rien de celui qui l’exprime: elle préexiste, ce qu’il importe par-dessus tout d’observer, au mode de son expression.’ This coincidence is neither entirely arbitrary, nor subject to use, and only in such coincidences ‘le langage peut et doit être soustrait à l’usure et à la décoloration qui résultent de sa fonction d’usage élémentaire’. Like objects caught up in the cycle of use and exchange, language clashes with both empirical and conceptual categories: therefore, Breton concludes that ‘jamais un changement de régime social n’entraînera une telle adéquation de l’esprit au nouvel ordre établi que ce drame, fonction des conditions humaines d’expression, soit conjuré une fois pour toutes.’ Ultimately, although ‘the mediocrity of our universe’ does after all depend on our means to represent it, Breton does not see this as necessarily contradictory to what he defined as the last instance in which the thing which we seek to express is indistinct from the form with which we express it, as was the case with Baudelaire. The fact that ultimately the contingent precedes or ‘preexists’ our means to represent it, not only maintains but may also transform the problematic relation between reality and our ways of experiencing it.

Dali addressed the time/space dialectic in subjective experience and in our means to represent it, in his experiments with the formal and physical aspects of decay. In his L’Ane pourri, which appeared in the first number of Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution in July 1930, not without irony he stressed that his categories were meant as correctives to problems inherent in metaphysics and materialism. Like the phrases in automatic writing, the new simulacra summoned by ‘paranoiac’ thought ‘agiront habilement et corrosivement avec la clarté des apparences physiques et diurnes’, and will bring back ‘[le] vieux mécanisme métaphysique avec quelque chose que de bon gré nous confondrions avec l’essence même de la nature qui, selon Héraclite, aime à se cacher’. The order of the signifier will ‘corrode’ the order of the signified, which in its turn may be freed from fixity. Dali stresses that the represented object ‘sans la moindre modification figurative ou anatomique’ comes to represent

33 La Clé des champs, p. 9, p. 11, p. 8.
something completely different: in Dali’s terms, paranoiac activity liberates meaning from deceptive static essences.

Like Aragon and Breton, Dali sees the relation between reality and representation as open to change. As ‘paranoiac thought’ was intended to unmask the arbitrariness of appearances, representation can undermine reality, just as much as reality exposes the inadequacy of representation. Like the notion of the ‘surréal’, Dali’s ‘method’ contemplates devices that would alter both our perceptions and our means to represent; paranoiac activity frees the subject from the dichotomy between concept and image, form and matter. This allowed Dali to perceive decay as a process that defeats and assimilates both psychic and physical realities. He illustrated this by famously suggesting that any image may take on the appearance of ‘un âne pourri’, an allegory of a ‘decaying’ form and a form of decay. On the basis of this ambiguity, Dali saw ‘putrefaction’ as ‘le reflet aveuglant et dur de nouvelles pierres précieuses’.34

Generally, a dual intent is inscribed in Surrealist principles: in reproducing internal visions, they were intended to criticise not only the illusion of a reality that exists independently of the subject, but also the arbitrariness and the inadequacy of the forms in which we come to perceive reality. In the subject/object conflict both the failure and the potential of the arbitrariness of the sign and its relation to the referent were at stake. With regard to this, Max Ernst, whose optimism was even more nuanced than Breton’s and Aragon’s, has stressed that Surrealist works occur in the contested liminal territory between reality and representation. As he put it in the 1934 ‘Qu’est-ce le Surréalisme?’, Surrealist painters:

[...] se meuvent librement, hardiment et tout naturellement dans la région frontière du monde intérieur et du monde extérieur qui, bien qu’elle soit imprécise encore, possède une complète réalité (‘surréalité’) physique et psychique; qu’ils enregistrent ce qu’ils y voient et qu’ils interviennent énergiquement là où leurs instincts révolutionnaires les poussent à le faire.35

As in Aragon’s images the instance of the metamorphosis of objects and concepts may break through the space of representation only fleetingly, the longed for

34 Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution, 1 (July 1930) 9, 10, 11.
35 Max Ernst, Écritures (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 232 (hereafter cited as E, further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text).
liberatory effect of a ‘complete reality’ can be neither maintained nor prolonged: this is the problematic that we will follow in the second part of this chapter. For Aragon, such liminal experiences occur only in the instance of the eruption of the past into the present. For Ernst too, although this ‘région frontière’ offers glimpses of an unmediated ‘complete’ reality, this ‘dream of mediation’, in Breton’s words, is ultimately integrated inside the space of representation. Caught up in the dialectic between a utopian and a destructive impulse, in the conflict between the represented and the unrepresentable, the manifest and the repressed, ‘la surréalité’ often ends in mutual exclusion of its constituent parts.

Despite his pessimism as to whether a ‘complete reality’ can be recovered in destructive processes, as we shall see next, Ernst deems violence necessary, in order to redeem a reciprocal notion of agency. This opens the possibility to see irresolution as a critical principle; but at the same time, such unresolvable rather than unresolved, contradictions are powerful indications of the discontent that underscores the Surrealists’ pessimism. Speaking of Ernst in 1923, Robert Desnos described this malaise by stressing that ‘notre inquiétude recrée le monde dont elle juge et condamne sévèrement la toujours inutile présence dans l’espace en apparence intangible’. Desnos here speaks of our sense of alienation both in relation to the contingent world and in relation to a representational system through which we seek to recreate and dominate the world; a system which nonetheless ends up dominating us.

It is in this sense that Surrealist thought can be seen as anticipating O’Hara’s or Ashbery’s immersion in the postmodern paradox of an abstract, yet palpable representational order, where the recognition and participation of the order of the signifier and the order of the signified into each other, did not abolish the arbitrary nature of the sign; still, it is the arbitrariness of the sign that allows for the thoroughgoing critique of language and of subject/object relations inside it. As discussed, the breakthroughs contemplated by the Surrealists could not defeat their

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own transience: such experiences bear their own ephemerality, as much as representation seems to rely on its permanence.

Owning up to the need for representation and the need for a critique of representation, the Surrealists turned to the conflict between representation and reality: in relation to this, we can remember once more how Breton’s setting out to discover whom or what he ‘haunts’, or what ‘haunts’ him in the opening of Nadja, (OCI, 647) ends with his final ambivalent malaise towards a resolution that is as unresolved as it is unresolvable. As suggested, although his utopianism rests on the unmediated desire for the other, his failing to Nadja is an allegory for the subject’s failing to the object of desire. His recurring projections into states where subject and object recognise each other as neither different nor identical to each other, were underscored by the anxiety that the problem of language and representation may not be ultimately resolved. This is taken to a dystopian conclusion in Cornell’s boxes and O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s Surrealist-derived poems. In the latter’s poems especially, representational mediation and the necessity of language ‘haunt’ the subject to the point of not experiencing any distinction or identity between external and inner realities, self and other, in either space or time.

In Ashbery’s and O’Hara’s poems, where the proliferation of signs and the expansion of a reified culture are shown to conceal the subject/object conflict and the problematic of agency, it seems that all we are left with is to own up to the absence of catalysts for change. Either approach has both negative and positive implications for a critique of culture. Rather than contemplating disruptive principles, any one relation in O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s poems, however irrational or arbitrary as it might seem, ends up subsumed by relations of instrumentality. Similarly, Cornell’s objects bear the anxiety to represent in a manner that naturalises the duality between the psychic and the social, the physical and the conceptual components of objects. Before exploring the ways in which these may be historicised avatars of Surrealism, I will now turn to how Surrealist theory and practice explored the dystopian thrust of its promises.
2.2 Violence and pessimism of the object

Having assimilated the destructive impulse of Dada and the negating irony of Surrealism's early years, Max Ernst's work gives a complex twist to Surrealism's utopian thrust. Explaining in a tongue-in-cheek manner, why the technique of collage is a most appropriate way to face the world as a whole, he wrote that it is because in collage 'on s'insurge [...] contre les rapports, les fonctions et l'échelle hiérarchique entre les objets. On fustige le monde en renversant l'ordre qu'il avait établi entre ses produits'. (E, 34) The complementarity of subjective experience and language that Aragon envisaged in *Le Paysan de Paris* may be seen as one such precarious instance of Ernst's notion of a non-hierarchical reciprocity. As for Ernst's collages, although his collages were meant to criticise social relations and to suggest a reciprocal relationship between subjectivity and the realm of objects, his work leaves us with a pervading ambivalence as to the potential and the limitations of this reciprocity.

His critique of vision and his simultaneous pursuit of its redemption reveals both pessimism and faith in relation to the disruptive potential of objects. Seeing for Ernst - for whom '“Voir” était ma préoccupation première' - (E, 12) inflects the object's effect on the subject: the subject's coherence is shattered by the incursion of objects that are irreducible either to mental images or to external reality. He realised this when, on discovering a supplier’s catalogue of teaching aids in 1919, the absurdity of the taxonomic principle impacted on both his intellect and senses:

> leur accumulation trouble son regard et ses sens; suscite des hallucinations et donne aux objets représentés des sens nouveaux qui changent rapidement. Max Ernst sent ses “facultés visionnaires” si soudainement accrues qu’il voit apparaître sur un fond inattendu les objets qui venaient de naître. (E, 31)

It is not only the cumulative effect that is disconcerting but the fact that Ernst’s hallucinations, the absent physical objects and the ones represented in the catalogue bear no fundamental difference in kind; yet neither are they identical to each other. Real or imagined, these objects impact on the faculty of sight and release repressed visionary faculties. Such reciprocal effects may or may not result in more equitable social and psychic relationships.

The collage in this sense, is a catalyst for a lost immediacy. The claim Ernst
makes of his rubbing with a pencil against textured surfaces is also valid for the
technique of collage: 'la technique du frottage n'est rien d'autre que le moyen de
porter les facultés hallucinatoires de l'esprit à ce dégré où les «visions» s'y imposent
automatiquement; c'est un moyen de se délivrer de l'aveuglement'. (E, 50) Similarly,
citing Rimbaud, he tells us that a collage can bring about 'LE MIRACLE DE LA
TRANSFIGURATION TOTALE DES ÊTRES ET OBJETS AVEC OU SANS
MODIFICATION DE LEUR ASPECT PHYSIQUE OU ANATOMIQUE.' (E, 253)
Like Dali's experiencing of the transformation of both concepts and physical objects
in the 'paranoiac-critical' activity, without the aid of traces of decay, Ernst's
optimism that a 'total transfiguration' may occur without any physical change was
meant to criticise the distinction between difference and identity, reality and
representation.

Ernst spoke of his dissatisfaction with realist representation in the following
parodic incident: in his Notes pour une biographie, he reminisces how his father,
teacher of the sign language for the deaf-mute and an amateur painter, suppressed a
tree in one of his paintings because it disturbed the composition:

Si ton arbre t'agace, arrache-le et jette-le. Philippe [his father] se décide à
éliminer l'arbre du tableau. Mais non content de supprimer l'image de ce détail
dans son tableau, il se précipite au jardin pour y arracher et détruire l'innocent
arbuste qui a offensé son sens de la probité dans l'art. (E, 16)

Ernst's irony aims at his father's will to correct reality and his faith in the identity
between reality and representation. As Ernst's father resorted to violence for the sake
of identity, Ernst, in his own work, posited violence as revelatory of the discrepancy
between the real and the represented. One is as arbitrary as the other, and this allowed
Ernst to reverse the dichotomy between the seen and the unseen. Violence sustains a
representational system like his father's, just as it exposes its repressive aspects.
Rather than affirming the subject's mastery of the world, violence, in Ernst's work,
both disempowers and thus emancipates the seeing subject. This gives a more
ambivalent twist to the Surrealists' playful irony.

With regard to this, we can remember Aragon's, Boiffard's, Éluard's and Vitrac's
statement for the first number of La Révolution surréaliste in 1924, where they
addressed what reality is and how it comes to us: reality is neither a pure product of
the mind, nor does it exist independently of seeing, imagining or representing. Language and perception create reality, but neither contains each other in its entirety:

L’arbre chargé de viande qui surgit entre les pavés n’est surnaturel que dans notre étonnement, mais le temps de fermer les yeux il attend l’inauguration. Toute découverte changeant la nature, la destination d’un objet ou d’un phénomène constitue un fait surréaliste. Entre Napoléon et le buste des phrénologues qui le représentent il y a toutes les batailles de l’Empire.37

In relation to Ernst’s own critique of language and representation, Elizabeth Legge has suggested that through Jean Paulhan, Ernst and Éluard, at the time of their collaboration on Les Malheurs des immortels, might have been familiar with Saussure’s theory of the sign – the second edition of Saussure’s Cours de linguistique générale appeared in 1922.38 Legge notes that Paulhan ‘took the purist view that visual art cannot be representational’; therefore it bears the same deficiency as language, a deficiency that Ernst exploited for its disruptive value. What Paulhan suggests about metaphors, might as well apply to the ways in which the technique of collage targets perception:

La métaphore, loin qu’elle soit l’effet de notre besoin de peindre ce que nous sentons, traduit entre les interlocuteurs un défaut d’entente; nous n’y recevons pas ce que l’on nous dit de la façon qu’on nous le dit, mais à l’envers, et sur un plan différent.39

Seeking ways of breaking from a vision modeled on language involved questioning the signifier/signified relation in encounters between mental images and physical objects. The space of representation is the testing ground of the limits and the cognitive value of perception: it is the correlate of the subject, through which the subject’s relation to objects can be rethought. In collage, represented and physical objects enter relationships in which the disjunction of signifier and signified, and the division between the essential and the apparent is exposed.

38 Against the backdrop of a growing body of readings of Surrealism and Dada in the light of structuralist and poststructuralist views of language, Judi Freeman has suggested that the question can be reframed historically and argues, contrary to Elizabeth Legge, that the Surrealists’ or the Dadaists’ ‘awareness of contemporary philosophical studies of language, like that of de Saussure and his followers, is difficult to verify’. Judi Freeman, The Dada and Surrealist Word-Image (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1989), p. 15.
Parallel to his approach to the object, in his 1933 ‘Comment on force l’inspiration’, Ernst addressed the problem of subjective agency with a similar intent: in Surrealist works, he writes, ‘la part active de celui qu’on appelait jusqu’ici “l’auteur” de l’œuvre se trouve subitement réduite à l’extrême’. From his position as producer, the ‘author’ becomes a ‘spectator’ – a consumer of his own work, with all the destructive connotations that consumption entails: ‘indifférent ou passionné, [il] observe les phases de son développement.’ What the ‘author’ observes and experiences is a dépaysement which, as Breton put it, is something more than ‘la possibilité d’agir dans l’espace’. The effect of dépaysement is defined as the spark generated when distant realities are brought together in collages, when objects are freed from their contexts. In this manner, the collage is a technique intended to liberate both subjects and objects from the system of representation and is ambiguously experienced both as a representation and as a referent.

Ernst’s first collage-novel, La Femme 100 têtes of 1929 explores how the ‘fait surréaliste’, to use Aragon’s, Boiffard’s and Éluard’s turn of phrase, opens up the gap between reality and representation. In La Femme 100 têtes, Ernst exposes the conflict between deceptively cohesive social relations and explores how the irrationality of arbitrary and violent encounters may or may not bring about a ‘total transfiguration’ of the objects and contexts involved. La Femme 100 têtes consists of 147 plates where he pasted nineteenth-century engravings from illustrated serialised novels and magazines of popular science – themselves a dated and anachronistic mode of representation and reproduction in relation to Ernst’s own creative environment. Unlike Cubist collage, instead of inserting fragments of reality into drawings or paintings, Ernst took on the practice common to nineteenth-century illustration of including pictures accompanied by captions. The cutouts are seamlessly pasted onto their backgrounds and the encounters are ambiguously menacing and enigmatic, inflicting violence and subject to it. Reminiscent as they were intended of Lautréamont’s famous encounter of the umbrella and the sewing machine on the dissecting table, Ernst’s collages are in a state of suspension. The actual ‘transfiguration’ or its effect is not always visible; in fact, there is no distinction

40 Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution, 5 (mai 1933), 43.
between cause and effect. Similarly, the suspended moment and its aftermath are not sequential: they coexist in an indistinct manner.

The 'novel' is populated by bourgeois types, female torsos, neoclassical statues in varied poses, human bodies, dead or in trance-like states, strange beasts, optical and other mechanical devices, either in motion or oddly unperturbed. Organic and inorganic, mechanical and natural elements are juxta posed in most incongruous and suggestive ways. The backgrounds are as varied as the pasted objects and the figure/ground distinction has no interpretative consequences: laboratories, natural or urban spaces, in states that vary from uncanny stillness to apocalyptic cataclysms, may haunt and be haunted by the human figures. It often seems as if contexts and objects are unaffected by, even unaware of each other's presence. In Ernst's collages, passive and active elements are reversible, it is ambiguous who acts and who is acted upon.

La Femme 100 têtes opens and ends with the image of a man descending from an egg-shaped structure pulled with great effort to the ground by two agitated groups of men; or conversely, it may be that the giant-egg pulls them upwards. The plate is accompanied by the caption 'crime ou miracle: un homme complet. Fin et suite'. For either an end or a continuation, there has to be a beginning in the first place and Ernst seems undecided as to whether a 'complete man' is the beginning of things as we know them, or whether the way we know them is actually the way things are. The plates that enclose or open up the 'end and continuation' pursue this ambiguity into the realms of what escapes from what we think we know or see, and what actually occurs, seen or unseen. This ambivalent sense of elements entering or returning into the space of representation or attempting to flee it, occurs most strikingly in public spaces. On plate 81 there are no explicit effects of violence: we get the hints of struggle only in the disembodied interlaced figures of the hovering Titans. Ernst writes: 'tous les vendredis, les Titans parcourront nos buanderies d'un vol rapide avec des fréquents crochets.' This is followed by a restaurant scene on plate 82 where 'rien ne sera plus commun qu'un Titan'. An equally violent and arbitrary

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sequential effect is triggered by ‘la tranquillité des assassinats anciens …’, followed by that of future ones, ‘… et futurs’, on plates 90 and 91. In the ‘tranquility of ancient assassinations’ an avenging androgynous figure is about to pierce a human body that has a dishevelled mesh of long hair instead of a head, whereas in the foreground a man teaches a child the language of the deaf-mute. It is unclear whether it is Ernst’s past that breaks through or from a collective unconscious, or whether it is the popular imaginary that brings up a personal memory. Either way, where and whether the leap from representation into reality occurs remains uncertain. Such is also the case with the ‘future assassinations’ where the neoclassical idealised female figure seems just as oblivious of the stabbings that are about to happen in the background as both perpetrators and victims seem unaware of her. It seems that a violent act breaks through appearances and disrupts the order of representation, just as much as it marks the loss of the subject’s contact with the reality of the referent. Throughout Ernst’s work, violence does not only bear on the conflict between objects and the subject’s will to dominate the external world, but also on a reified subjectivity controlled by things.

The marks of violence in the flight from the space of representation become visible and experienced paradoxically only when ‘la femme 100 têtes’ keeps her secret, as Ernst put it. She does this either at the price of depriving others of the faculty of sight (figure 5), or at the price of violent deaths (figure 6). As the woman slides from view into what may either be a fleeting presence or an imminent absence, language is momentarily silenced. Her secret will not be known, and its trace will remain ambiguously seen or unseen. This secret however, is the evidence of the existence of a reality beyond representation: it exceeds language or rather is irreducible to language alone. This is why Ernst sought to represent violence not only as it occurs in the manifest content of our experiences; violence is the hidden principle that sustains established notions about the nature of reality.

42 See Max Ernst Collages, fig. 319.
43 See Max Ernst Collages, figs. 320-22.
44 See Max Ernst Collages, figs. 349-52.
45 See Max Ernst Collages, figs. 355-6.
With regard to this, referring to the ‘restaurant scene’ in 1930, Desnos stressed ‘ce goût du meurtre, cette saveur de sang’, through which ‘Max Ernst arrache ainsi un lambeau au merveilleux et le restitue à la robe déchirée du réel’.\(^{46}\) What Desnos suggests here is that Ernst integrates a utopian glimpse of the unrepresentable inside the space of representation. Still, this is both redemptive of and ambivalent towards the subject’s ability to attain reality. Desnos’s implied critique of an essentialist view of reality rests on the distinction between an incomplete reality, the inadequacy of representation, and the unrepresentable. The redemption of experiences – ‘le merveilleux’ – that disrupt the system of representation, has formed the basis for positing a retrospective affinity between poststructuralist critical strategies and Surrealist principles.

Drawn on Lacan’s theory of the unconscious, Rosalind Krauss’s notion of ‘the optical unconscious’ is one such instance. In Krauss’s analysis of Ernst’s work, the ‘optical unconscious’ is intended to depict slippages from representation back into reality; these, she argues, become manifest in the subject’s awareness of the discontinuity between sense perception and language. This discontinuity determines the subject’s awareness of its separation from the realm of objects, as well as from a unified and coherent sense of the self. The traces of these slippages are defined as non-subjective, yet not entirely given over to the object either: they are inescapably impure, because of the subject’s and the object’s share in them. As Krauss puts it, in experiencing something as being simultaneously ‘both outside himself and his’, Ernst turns distinct elements – ‘this bric-a-brac’ – ‘into the deictic markers of the subject’s own being, the evidentiary signposts that appear to him the indices of his own history, his own identity, the touchstones of his most intimate connections to the real.’\(^{47}\)

Addressing the experience of time, Krauss writes that these ‘markers’ are ‘erected after the fact to commemorate an event that never happened, an encounter whose traumatic effect on him arose from the very fact that he missed it’.\(^{48}\) Krauss’s point can be read as a gloss on the role of violence in Ernst’s collages, as well as an

\(^{46}\) ‘La Femme 100 têtes par Max Ernst’, Écrits sur les peintres, p. 133, p. 134.


\(^{48}\) The Optical Unconscious, p. 71.
inadvertent gloss on Breton’s point about the ‘dream of mediation’. In describing these ‘missed’ events, following Lacan, Krauss notes that their critical thrust rests with the ‘lost objects’ that produce the ‘gap of the trauma’: this gap is ‘the already occupied meaning of that opening onto a spatial beyond’. She goes on to define this ‘beyond’ as consisting of the different signifiers which are fleetingly identified as the object of the subject’s lack. With regard to this, Ernst’s collages oppose a ‘space of light’ to the culturally-determined faculty of vision. To put it in Breton’s terms, it is the space of the ‘dissemblance’ where desire and the object of desire coincide without being identical to each other. Reminiscent of Aragon’s ‘Surrealist light’, this ‘space of light’ is defined as a space in which the self and the object of fulfilment merge in each other. Krauss pursues this metaphor in order to show the ephemerality of such experiences: ‘caught within the onrush of light’, the subject also ‘blocks the light’. The subject can only stay inside the ‘picture’ at the price of blocking the field of vision and becoming invisible to himself; Krauss stresses that in his inability to see ‘himself, the subject may miss ‘the source of light’.

As Ernst’s work shows, the subject’s psychic and social dependence on these gaps remains intermittently perceived and imperceptible. While his collages stage both conscious and unintended incidents in which repressed signifiers seem open to the subject’s desire, the gap between fulfillment and lack is never filled. In relation to this, Krauss’s argument leaves us with a fundamental uncertainty: in underscoring the potentiality of the marks of the ‘gap’ between the subject’s desire for the object and the fulfillment of desire, Krauss appears to embrace the Surrealists’ own scepticism towards the possibility of breakthroughs from an inadequate reality. While arguing for the liberating impact of the ‘gap’, Krauss’s analysis gives a dystopian twist to the Surrealist approach to the subject’s relation to the world of objects.

Lacan’s theory of the formation of subjectivity corresponds to his theory of the unconscious and his critique of the rationalist view of language. This bears on the discrepancy between subjectivity and the objects in relation to which the subject defines itself. As any instance of identification is imperfect, in identifying itself with

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49 *The Optical Unconscious*, p. 72.
50 *The Optical Unconscious*, p. 87.
the object, the self experiences itself as different. For Lacan, the site of difference – the 'gap' – belongs to the object. This difference informs the dialectic between the Imaginary and the Symbolic stage: the dialectic between the need to find external models for the unity of the self, and the subject's awareness of the reductive character of a unified conception of the self. The Symbolic is the order of representation, and it is defined by the separation of concepts from empirical reality.

Lacan valorised mobility over identification and defined desire as the ongoing process of the realisation of the mobility of the signifier. The self can only perceive itself as caught up in this movement; the split between signifiers and signifieds, and their arbitrary relation to each other determine the subject's relation to the world. The desiring subject and the socialised subject intersect and determine each other in Lacan. As the questions that open Breton's *Nadja* suggest, on entering language, the subject enters into a series of relations with objects/signifiers; it is the realm of the signifier which provides the subject with the objects of desire. In the Symbolic order, the subject assumes any one position without necessarily being aware of the operation of a system which is deceptively manifest and hidden. In response to this, the Surrealists sought categories that aimed at both restoring and disrupting the movement of language. Moreover, the need for identification is marked by aggression towards the object, which is also aggression against the self, a threat that Breton explored in his relation to Nadja. This primary violence, for Lacan, is subsumed in Symbolic relations which assimilate both the need for identification and the need for the destruction of the object of desire. On the other hand, in becoming aware of the gap between the signifier and empirical reality as an inescapable condition of

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51 Peter Dews has approached the problem of 'language' and 'truth' in Lacan with regard to the problematic of the referent: before the disjunction between signifier and signified, '[Lacan] takes the view that the disclosure of the world involves an indissoluble tension between the prereflexive, linguistic constitutions of object-domains and the reflexive assessment of beliefs about the contents of these domains'. As Lacan himself wrote, 'the network of the signified "reacts historically" upon the network of the signifier, "just as the structure of the latter commands the pathways of the former". Peter Dews, 'The Truth of the Subject: Language, Validity, and Transcendence in Lacan and Habermas', in Simon Critchley and Peter Dews, eds., *Deconstructive Subjectivities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), pp. 149-68 (p. 151).
alienation, the subject realises the impossibility of a complete, unmediated experience.\textsuperscript{52}

While Lacan’s theory of the unconscious is consonant with the Surrealist critique of rationalism, it also is a step away from the Surrealist intent to restore unmediated experiences – the Real in Lacan’s system. As discussed, Aragon’s ‘absolute nominalism’ and Breton’s seeking objects for a total, unalienated identification in \textit{L’Amour fou} were intended as correctives to the discrepancy between the real and the projective form of the object of desire. As for Ernst, he inflected this separation through violence: we saw how Ernst’s collages dramatise the necessity of representation and the need to break from it, by depicting the violence that marks the transition from the Imaginary to the Symbolic stage, as well as the latent violence that structures subject/object relations in the Symbolic.\textsuperscript{53}

With regard to the parallel between Surrealist and poststructuralist categories, Renée Riese-Hubert opens her discussion of Ernst’s 1934 collage-novel \textit{Une semaine de Bonté ou les sept éléments capitaux} by referring to Ernst’s own emphasis on principles of rupture:

\begin{quote}
\textit{chacque planche apporte sa faille, cette absence de conciliation possible entre un parapluie et une machine à coudre et octroie au lecteur le plaisir formulé encore plus clairement par Barthes que par Lautréamont.}
\end{quote}

The ironic ‘beauty’ of Lautréamont’s famous encounter of the sewing machine and the umbrella on the dissecting table is seen here as anticipating Barthes’s distinction between \textit{plaisir} and \textit{jouissance}. Criticising the arbitrariness of signifying codes, the principle of \textit{jouissance}, for Barthes, is as symptomatic of the crisis of the subject’s relation to language; just as it is posited as disruptive of the movement of language, it emerges in conscious thought and triggers the violence that fulfils and defers acts of

\textsuperscript{52} For Lacan, the subject’s relation to his social environment is determined by an awareness of its separation from a primal unity: ‘cette forme [primordiale] situe l’instance du moi, dès avant sa détermination sociale, dans une ligne de fiction, à jamais irréductible pour le seul individu, – ou plutôt, qui ne rejoindra qu’asymptomatiquement le devenir du sujet, quel que soit le succès des synthèses dialectiques par quoi il doit résoudre en tant que je sa discordance d’avec sa propre réalité.’ Jacques Lacan, \textit{Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu’elle nous est révélée dans l’expérience psychanalytique}, \textit{Écrits} (Paris: Seuil, collection Le champ freudien, 1966), pp. 93-100 (p. 94).

\textsuperscript{53} On the dialectic of redemption and annulment of subject/object relations, and the Surrealist approach to the violence that marks the entry into the Symbolic, see Timothy Mathews, ‘Surfaces violentes, surfaces immanentes: collage, photographie, texte’, in Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron and Timothy
pleasure. Signifiers constantly enter new and unpredictable relations with signifieds. As Riese-Hubert writes: 'le langage du désir, de la séduction s’inscrit à côté de la répression'. As words in Aragon's 'absolute nominalism' defeat their symbolic function, the text of jouissance outplays the system of language. Riese-Hubert sees Ernst's collages as enacting the moment of jouissance and relates Ernst's work to the utopian moment of poststructuralism, contemplating a flight from socialised meaning. As Lacan's principle of the 'linguistic unconscious', the moment of jouissance is caught in a dialectic of mobility and stasis, and it culminates in its disappearance. To put in Breton's terms, the moment of fulfilment culminates in 'l'expiration de ce mouvement même'. As discussed, the moment of rupture in Ernst's collages, is simultaneously a moment of fulfillment and annulment.

Given this, Ernst's work lends itself to a more pessimistic reading too, since, as discussed, his collages also suggest that what lies 'behind' repression, or beyond representation, or else 'beyond painting' simply might not be there to find. His collages bear both a destructive and a redemptive intent towards experiences thought of as transcendent of either language or empirical reality. In their negating thrust, Ernst's collages are also 'profane illuminations', as Walter Benjamin famously described Surrealist experiences in his essay on Surrealism, in which the violent and fleeting eruption of jouissance is as potent of the promise of a breakthrough as much as it bears its own limits. The reality of the referent, if at all, only fleetingly enters the field of vision, or else flees the system of representation without leaving behind its secret: this can only be glimpsed and maintained beyond language.

As we have seen, the moment of violence does not resolve the tension between objects and concepts: it marks both our entry into and a breakthrough from the Symbolic. Yet as Ernst implies, the experience remains unperceived. Ironically, the dichotomy between the seen and the unseen generates and represses the need for what may or may not lie beyond them. In Ernst's collages, this dichotomy becomes manifest, just as it is repressed through the violence which may simultaneously come

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54 Renée Riese-Hubert, 'Max Ernst entre la bonté et le plaisir', in *Du Surréalisme et du plaisir*, pp. 149-159 (pp. 151-2, p. 153, p. 154).
from the subject and the object of vision. The suspended states that Ernst stages in his collages raise scepticism as to whether this dichotomy could ever be overcome. This ambiguity is not dissimilar to Breton’s ambivalence in *Nadja*; like the manifestations of objective chance or convulsive beauty, Ernst’s collages bear the conflict of their dual intent. In criticising representation, Ernst’s work makes it all the more necessary and inescapable. The equitable relation that Ernst contemplated cannot be prolonged in either the Imaginary or the Symbolic: his collages enact the conflict between a represented reality and an unattainable referent. As Breton’s principles also imply, the encounter with the referent is liberatory just as it aborts the subject’s fulfillment. This is why the ‘dream of mediation’ that would bring about a non-alienating reciprocity between self and world rests on violence; subject/object relations can be restored ‘equitably’ only outside representation momentarily, through and at the price of violence.

As Ernst’s inflection of violence turns pessimism into an element of social critique, the practice of automatism also inflected the dystopian dimension and the utopian promise of language. A device intended to explore the inescapable disjunction between signifier and signified, it involves a problematic similar to that of collage. As a category of experience, automatism tests the possibility of a precarious identity between experience and language. Intended to reveal how the unconscious is becoming manifest in language, the Surrealists tried to sustain automatism as an experience in which the subject is not only subject to the unconscious, but also acts on it. The emphasis on the physical aspect of automatism bears witness to the intent to incorporate reality into signifying codes rather than merely representing it. We might consider Francis Gérard’s description of ‘L’État d’un surréaliste’ in 1924:

> Si on interrompt alors l’écriture, on s’aperçoit que les yeux n’accommodent plus aux objets environnants, les jambes titubent, le corps est las, l’esprit se sent vague et doucement blessé, l’attention est désorientée et, frustrée, se trouve ramenée à des objets de moindre émotion et de matière brute qui lui font obstacle.[…] La pensée comme une tempête passe au dessus des mots. L’existence de ces débris laisse prévoir la possibilité d’une activité libérée. Si l’on pouvait aussi clairement faire apparaître les autres systèmes d’associations du vocabulaire, on dénoncerait outre les consonances, les liens que forment une culture, l’expérience personnelle d’un individu, la géographie de la syntaxe et

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In positing the automatic text as both autonomous and as interacting with its environment, Francis Gérard contemplates a similar condition for the self. In Francis Gérard's description of automatism, in becoming aware of the crisis of subjectivity, the subject also becomes aware of repressive social and psychic mechanisms; yet ironically these mechanisms are also the conditions of the subject's own possibility of liberation.

In the opening of Breton's 1933 *Le Message automatique*, the uncertain autonomy of words triggers a problematic similar to that of the autonomy of the object; Breton recalls an incident in which an unsummoned 'suite de mots' occurs 'en un groupement remarquablement autonome'. (OCII, 375) This can be related to his positing the artwork's intransitive moment as exclusive of external content in his essay on painting: as he puts it, when the artist reaches a 'modèle purement intérieur', the artwork recovers 'un véritable isolant grâce auquel cet esprit, se trouvant idéalement abstrait de tout, commence à s’éprendre de sa vie propre où l’atteint et le désirable ne s’excluent plus'. This again involves the problematic of the nature of reality, as well as the subject's ability to attain it. The 'modèle purement intérieur' reflects the ambiguity of the category of the object, as Breton goes on to say that 'tout milite en faveur de ce qui ne s’était pas encore produit, de ce qui ne se reproduira pas'. Like any contingent object, Breton's 'modèle intérieur' is seen as bearing the potential to defeat the system of representation, just as it triggers the realisation that representation is a mechanism that conceals and exposes its own inadequacy. Like the 'modèle intérieur', the automatic text bears the dichotomy between our means to represent and the unrepresentable. This is why Breton posited the autonomy and the purity of the automatic text/image as integral to its heterogeneity:

Comment s’assurer de l’homogénéité ou remédier à l’hétérogénéité des parties constitutives de ce discours dans lequel il est si fréquent de croire retrouver les bribes de plusieurs discours; comment envisager les interférences, les lacunes; comment s’empêcher de se représenter jusqu’à un certain point ce qui se dit; comment tolérer le passage si égarant de l’auditif au visuel, etc.? (OCII, 380-1)

57 *Le Surréalisme et la peinture*, p. 4, p. 7.
Breton seems willing to both redeem and criticise the deficiencies and the impurity of automatism; neither the obstruction nor the free flow of meaning resolve the dialectic between the reflexive and the referential possibilities of language. Noting the scarcity of ‘automatic texts’, Claude Abastado reframed the problem of automatism at the level of ‘writing’: drawn from Barthes, the notion of ‘writing’ here is posited as an ambiguous ground between subjectivity, language and empirical reality:


It is the process of ‘writing’ itself and not the subject, that is productive of meaning. In displacing the subject as the origin of meaning, the process of writing releases the free play of meaning. Abastado implies that, in the process of ‘writing’, the text may outplay the signifying system. Yet Surrealist automatism involved not only the critique of the rational subject, but also a critique of the production of discourse and the annulment of subjective agency; with regard to this, in automatism, the complementarity of negating and redemptive tendencies is yet again at stake.

As Lacan retrospectively appears to have anticipated the poststructuralist critique of the subject, well before the appearance of distinctly poststructuralist critical categories, Maurice Blanchot has stressed that the simultaneous fascination for and resistance to notions of origins determines the ambiguity of automatism. Blanchot went on to define automatism as a process in which the subject is the vehicle of a lost immediacy; yet like the notion of origin, the role of the subject in the production of the automatic text is self-defeating:

> la richesse à laquelle il touche, cette surabondance de la source, était aussi l’extrême pauvreté, était surtout la surabondance du refus, faisait de lui, celui qui ne produit pas, qui erre au sein d’un désœuvrement infini.  

Blanchot sees automatic writing as an instance in which language reaches its own limits, and negates its representational function. More emphatically than Abastado’s

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argument, this bears witness to the dystopian/utopian dialectic of the poststructuralist critique of language and the impossibility to restore a meaningful relation to reality. 60

With regard to the conflict between reality and representation, Surrealism’s critical potential rests on the fact that the Surrealists were Surrealism’s foremost critics. In his 1925 attack on intellectualism, René Crevel expresses his ambivalence towards the possibility of flights beyond the space of representation. In his ‘Révolution, surréalisme, spontanéité’, he stresses that the movement of thought rests on the will to fixity, the will to redeem appearances through essences: ‘la pensée en mouvement ne désire rien plus que se figer dans une forme, car de l’arrêt marqué naît l’illusion de ce définitif dont la recherche est notre perpétuel tourment’. This is why Breton’s principle of convulsive beauty or Dali’s notion of decay were not ultimately posited as infallible ways to overcome the disjunction between form and matter. On the other hand, since a primary state appears to be self-sufficient and does not need to resort to language – ‘un état premier se suffit à soi-même et ne demande secours ni à la philosophie, ni à la littérature’ – any process of ‘writing’, even ‘une page écrite à plume abattue, sans contrôle apparent de ces facultés domestiques, […] sera, malgré tout, l’aboiement argotique et roublard, mais non le cri assez inattendu pour déchirer l’espace’. As Crevel puts it, ‘spontanément spontanés, nous n’aurions aucune raison d’aimer la spontanéité’, 61 for as long as our sense of immediacy passes through language. A similar ambivalence as to whether a break from a representational system was at all possible, comes up in his ‘À Propos du surréalisme’ of the same year as well:

Le surréalisme pur, […] ne saurait être réalisé autrement que par des dessins aux lignes ni droites, ni courbes, ni brisées, ou par des onomatopées. […] Et encore trouverait-on jusque dans ces onomatopées le souvenir de la plus lucide raison, représenté par le souvenir des mots. Ainsi ne saurions-nous parler de forêt vierge là où l’homme trouve encore la trace des chemins.62

60 From a poststructuralist and psychoanalytic perspective, Hal Foster has responded to the practice of automatism by criticizing the Surrealist search for ‘authenticity’ on the one hand, while on the other, stressing that Surrealism ‘decentred the subject too radically in relation to the unconscious’. This, in Foster’s terms, generates the ‘aporia’ around which Surrealism ‘swirled’, namely, Surrealism’s historical ties to the promises of modernity on the one hand, and to the ways in which Surrealist thought appears to have anticipated anti-foundationalist, poststructuralist critiques. See Foster, pp. 4-5.


62 L’Esprit contre la raison, p. 31.
Crevel owns up to Surrealism’s impossibility of attaining the unrepresentable: even the most reflexive form does not contain its own reality but only refers to it. In a similar vein, his 1933 observations on ‘L’Enfance de l’art’ are a gloss on the Surrealists’ awareness of the ambiguity of their principles. Crevel here describes the condition of our paradoxical dependency and mastery in relation to representation:

Fixer des traits, c’est jeter un filet d’images sur ce qu’on ne veut pas laisser fuir, c’est emprisonner un être, une chose dans un contour, [...] Pour maîtriser il faut connaître, et connaître c’est d’abord décrire, éclairer, d’une lumière qui va les limiter, ces forces dont l’aveuglement multiple eût écartelé, étouffé le descripteur, s’il n’eût mis, entre lui et le décrit, la description avec ses grillages d’écriture, ses barreaux de couleur. Voilà qui protège mais isole de ce dont, justement, on avait cru s’approcher.

Representation is a form of knowledge that dominates reality; at the same time, the subject’s ability to represent comes to dominate the subject itself and separates it from the realm of objects. In a manner reminiscent of Breton’s stressing the necessity and failure of language in ‘Le Merveilleux contre le mystère’, Crevel goes on to posit necessity and use at the origin of representation: ‘le silex autoritaire, […] affirmait d’une pointe véritablement sismographique la volonté – issue de la nécessité – de métamorphoser un sujet d’angoisse en objet d’usage.’ Crevel’s notion of the necessity of representation brings up a negativity which is also implicit in Breton’s notion of *hasard objectif*, the point of reconciliation of external and inner realities. Like the *hasard objectif*, representation for Crevel, is both the subject’s gain and loss; it is a mediating device that simultaneously subsumes and fosters the desire for a reciprocal gaze; a gaze which amounts to a coincidence between two terms, which as pointed out already, is not one of identity. Just like Breton’s notion of mediation, it is negative as it is utopian. Still, despite his pessimism before the ‘anthropocentric and egocentric […] cult of subjectivity’ where ‘chacun se juge seul sujet mouvant dans un milieu figé d’objets’, Crevel is hopeful about how the physicality of Surrealist objects arouses, assimilates and fulfils subjective desire and resolves the alienating space/time conflict:

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63 In his later years, in the 1932 *Le Clavecin de Diderot*, Crevel nuanced his earlier scepticism about language and representation and stressed that language is also the means for criticising how subjectivity is historically and socially determined. *L’Esprit contre la raison*, pp. 159-264.
64 *L’Esprit contre la raison*, p. 298.
Crevel describes ‘les objets surréalistes’ as instances of time: ‘onomatopoeic’ rather than representational or reflexive. This is as reminiscent of Ernst’s treatment of objects in his collages, as it is reminiscent of Aragon’s approach to words in *Le Paysan de Paris*. In both instances, anything may simultaneously become a mediating space, a catalyst for the immediacy, where, in Breton’s words, the perceiving eye – and hence the I – may exist ‘à l’état sauvage’. On the other hand, Crevel’s view of the Surrealist object is also underscored by the realisation that, once fixed into a form, an unmediated experience becomes a semblance of itself.

Artaud’s 1925 ‘Nouvelle lettre sur moi-même’ where the redemption of subjectivity takes the form of the abolition of subjectivity, can be read as the correlate to Crevel’s critique of representation, as Artaud here contemplates the possibility of eliminating ‘la trace des chemins’:

> Je n’ai même pas les idées qui pourraient correspondre à ma chair, à mon état de bête physique, soumise aux choses et rejaillissant à la multiplicité de leurs contacts […] je ne sens plus les idées comme des idées, comme des rencontres des choses spirituelles ayant en elles le magnétisme, le prestige, l’illumination de l’absolue spiritualité mais comme de simples assemblages d’objets. […] Mon esprit s’est ouvert par le ventre.  

Before the discrepancy between concepts and matter, Artaud contemplates the redemption of objects from language, in Surrealist fashion. Artaud sees language as the means with which to separate thought from its contingent content and seeks to redeem materiality from and through concepts: for Artaud, ‘ideas’ are physical rather than mental, yet his alternative is as negative as Crevel’s, for ultimately, neither concepts nor materiality can be redeemed. Derrida’s reading of Artaud seems to integrate both Crevel’s doubt and Artaud’s sense of the liberating discrepancy or identity between subjectivity, concepts and objects. In response to Artaud’s seeing himself as simultaneously inside and outside language, Derrida pursues the irreducible impurity of *différence* in Artaud’s ‘parole soufflée’, a ‘parole’ which

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63 *L’Esprit contre la raison*, p. 301.
mediates as much as it is a manifestation of immediacy. For Artaud, ‘le cri qui déchire l’espace’ is directly expressive of thought; it realises itself and collapses at the same time; as he put it, ‘mon esprit s’est ouvert par le ventre’. In Derrida’s terms, Artaud exposes the gap between ‘writing’ and différence. The notion of différence, like Crevel’s ‘cry’ and Artaud’s ‘ideas’ resists meaning, yet this resistance, disruptive of meaning as it is, does not bear a promise of change. On the other hand, if différence is impure, as opposed to the deceptive purity of essences, is not the moment of différence, as unattainable as Breton’s notions of the marvelous or convulsive beauty?^8

In Surrealism, the synthetic impulse relied on its pessimist corrective: as the contents of projective desire are incommensurable with the external world, the discrepancy between desire and its object is as critical of, and as potent with the promise of change, just as it is revelatory of the inadequacy of both reality and representation. While anticipating the anti-essentialist thrust of poststructuralist critical categories, Surrealism sustained a redemptive intent. The critique of representation takes on a different guise in modernist and postmodernist contexts; as we shall see in the following chapters, in O’Hara and Ashbery, the Surrealists’ critical pessimism takes on the guise of a parodic nostalgia for the loss of a substantive relation between our subjectivity and the external world. In a context in which the dichotomy between the manifest and the hidden, between rationality and the irrational, abstraction and matter is neither substantial nor apparent, the parodic intent is informed by the premonition that a lost contact with reality would bring about a new closure. As we shall see in the following chapters, the resolutions contemplated by Breton are implicitly criticised for being as abortive and totalising, just as they may seem to be historically determined. Still, Surrealism’s negating thrust can be

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68 As Rainer Nägele has demonstrated, Adorno’s notion of the ‘non-identical’ both anticipates and criticizes the poststructuralist critique of metaphysics. For Adorno the ‘nonidentity’ of concepts to things preserves the promise, or rather the desire of truth. In relation to this, what brings his thought closer to Derrida’s, Nägele argues, is that ‘nonidentity has to be thought of not in terms of a concept, but of a differential marker which in fact is the motor of the text’s movement and which in turn points beyond the textual praxis, setting it both apart from and in conflictual relations to political praxis.’ Rainer Nägele, ‘The Scene of the Other: Theodor W. Adorno’s Negative Dialectic in the Context of Poststructuralism’, in Jonathan Arac, ed., Postmodernism and Politics (Manchester: Manchester University Press, Theory and History of Literature, Vol. 28, 1986), pp. 91-111 (p. 99).
seen as anticipating postmodernism's discontents. In Cornell's assemblages, as well as in O'Hara's and Ashbery's poems, the category of the object is an allegory of conflict that simultaneously withholds and demystifies a promise of resolution.
3. Nostalgia for the modern: Surrealism and the Americana of Joseph Cornell

3.1 Mysteries of objects and/or mysteries of forms

During his lifetime and increasingly so in recent years, Joseph Cornell’s personality and work have intrigued his critics who tend to examine his originality as the intersection of an eccentric yet predictable life, and of idiosyncratic yet consistent interests. The keys to unlocking his boxes and collages are sought in the wealth of material on his life and working habits that he himself obsessively accumulated over the years. This is partly the result of his uneasy position in the artistic and intellectual climate of his time. With regard to this, Cornell built up a distinctive eclecticism on both past and contemporary, high and low, mainstream and marginal aspects of American and Continental culture. Much analysis of his boxes and collages draws on varied reference points that reconstruct and follow up his own lifelong attractions to French nineteenth-century Symbolism, English Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, the mystical Americanism of Melville and Whitman, Romantic Ballet, silent movies, to mention some of the most widely discussed among an extensive network suggested by his writings and constructions.\(^1\) Dawn Ades has emphasised how such material illuminates the work and, paradoxically, ‘give[s] the reader the uncomfortable sense of eavesdropping on a very private man’.\(^2\)

Different emphases notwithstanding, the predominant critical approach is one which seeks to echo the personalised and hermetic character of Cornell’s constructions. Diane Waldman concluded her monograph by stressing that ‘mystery is the essence and substance of his work’\(^3\) and in a similar vein, Kynaston McShine also stressed that ‘one must respect the intensity of his vision and the magic with which he invested the ordinary with an eloquent and arresting presence’.\(^4\) Generally, this tendency to retain wilfully Cornell’s ‘mystery’ informs approaches which sustain

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that his professed intimacy with his boxes and collages signposts a quest for a transcendental empathy between the self and world.

In Cornell’s own time, Clement Greenberg bypassed these tensions in opening his 1942 review of Cornell’s and Laurence Vail’s joint exhibition by positing that the decorative, the figurative, and the autonomous are the three guises an art object is likely to assume:

Any free-standing object can be a work of art in its own right and for its own sake. Surrealism continues what Dada was the first to teach by actual examples. Dada stemmed, no matter how deviously, from art for art’s sake, which asserted that works of art are self-sufficient and not required inevitably to be either mirrors of reality or decoration.5

Greenberg does not distinguish between objects in art and art objects: external reference and all traces of use or exchange value are absent from the artwork. With this preliminary, he placed Cornell’s assemblages into the domain of pure form and self-reference: ‘the stuffed birds, thimbles, bells, cardboard cut-outs, and so forth […] please by their arrangement and the unspecified associations they call up, but mean or represent nothing not themselves.’6

Twenty-five years later Harold Rosenberg, in his 1967 ‘Object Poems’, discussed the boxes in relation to the category of the object: appropriated by the artist, elements from mass-produced and popular culture as well as high art ‘take on an entirely subjective character’. This is what, in Rosenberg’s terms, distinguishes Cornell’s work from pop-art where objects remain ‘tokens of the public realm’. Instead, the boxes place the most banal, popular or unpopular commodities and high cultural artefacts on the same plane: the box is the personalised structure in which they all become ‘term[s] of a unique metaphor’. In becoming part of Cornell’s own private mysteries, artworks and dated, banal objects alike, are transformed into ‘unique, untranslatable symbols’; Rosenberg adds that unlike the Surrealists, Cornell works ‘in favor of the suggestive power of real things and lucid placement’.7

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4 Kynaston McShine, ‘Introducing Mr Cornell’ in Joseph Cornell, pp. 9-13 (pp. 10-1).
Starting with Cornell and ending with Claes Oldenburg, Rosenberg argues both
for the former's subjectivist and contrived harmony between high art and popular
culture, and the latter's reverse practice that complements Cornell's as much as it is
demystifying it: in Oldenburg's assemblages, high art symbolically lets itself be
reified and appropriated by mass-produced culture. Where Cornell poeticises,
Oldenburg subverts. Despite the different emphases, on abstract forms and culturally-
circumscribed objects respectively, Greenberg and Rosenberg restate Cornell's own
difficulty in focusing critically on the relation between objects and formal principles:
neither is the most defining aspect of his work.

By turning the boxes into 'a unique means of plastic expression', as Diane
Waldman suggests, the whole dichotomy between the subjective imprint on otherwise
impersonal objects and the abstract qualities of forms is called into question. In
relation to this, Waldman has also suggested that '[Cornell's] major innovation was to
combine the associate urgency of the estranged object with the impacting formal
power of the box' and that in doing so, he started from 'where Ernst had left off in the
transition from collage to construction'. In doing so, as we shall see, Cornell takes
the Surrealist approach to collage a step further: just as he lays emphasis on the
enigmatic autonomy of any one element, he also highlights how he seeks to turn the
box into an integral whole.

Dissociating Cornell's work from Surrealism, John Ashbery emphasised its
'plastic qualities' and the formal dialogue between 'visual' and 'verbal' elements. For
Ashbery, 'each of his works is an autonomous visual experience, with its own natural
laws and its climate: the thing in its thingness; revealed and not commented on.' Yet
as we shall see, such a qualitative change of a culturally-circumscribed object into an
autonomous entity is not always evident in Cornell's boxes as the objects assembled
bear imprints of the collective and individual narratives in which they are entangled.
For Cornell, virtually anything may bear both personal and collective contents and
take on formal qualities at the same time. As he was drawn to objects, which when
invested with collective and/or personal associations become repositories of form, the

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boxes are storehouses of both objects and abstractions, each equally real and imagined.

In general, Cornell works with objects in two seemingly opposing ways: on the one hand, he fights against their contextual particularities and associations by confining them to private, cryptic networks inside sealed environments; on the other, he foregrounds collectively shared symbols in popular culture. In his series of *Homages to the Romantic Ballet* of the 1940s for instance, although often sufficient reminders of context are provided, in becoming part of the box, objects and fragments of objects become private symbols. In a reverse manner, individualised fetishes are turned into symbols of collective icons. For example, in a *Homage to the Romantic Ballet* of 1941, we read the following about the the 'Little Mysteries of the Ballet’ on the lid of the box:

> Into a souvenir-case guarding its sealed treasure of costume fragments from “La Spectre de la Rose” – how explain the intrusion of bejewelled and faded tokens of a ballerina of an earlier day, accented with a renegade blonde hairpin loosened from the chevelure of some Cinderella in her midnight haste .... Reward.

In the 1940 *L'Égypte de Mlle Cléo de Mérode cours élémentaire d'Histoire Naturelle*, (figure 7) the relation between Cornell’s cut and pasted signature, the cut outs that make up the title, the pharaonic context, the substances and small objects inside the labelled jars is as abstract as it is anecdotal. Classified, separated and confined, these elements suggest relations that are as evident as they are cryptic; either way, the taxonomic principle intensifies the effects of form as well as Cornell’s emphasis on content. The appropriation of a collective narrative is often the most manifest mark of authorial intervention. Therefore, it is not only in the mode of production, but in readjusting such narratives, that Cornell aspires to recover the particularity of objects. Decontextualised and integrated in Cornell’s own structures, each element is expected to become irreplaceable and irreducible to another. At the same time, he was persistently ambivalent towards both the private and collective

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10 Construction, $1\frac{3}{4} \times 4\frac{1}{2} \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ in, reproduced in Waldman, fig. 56; see also p. 118.

11 Construction, $4\frac{3}{4} \times 10\frac{3}{16} \times 7\frac{3}{4}$ in, collection Richard L. Feigen, New York, reproduced in *Joseph Cornell*, plate V and in Waldman plate 9.

12 Diane Waldman suggests that the elements and overall effect of construction, as well as the associations Cornell calls up, speak of his abiding fascination with the ballet and his attentiveness to the minutiae that eternalize past lives. Waldman, p. 19.
associations, the afterlife generally of any one element in his constructions, and this is also manifest in his anxiety about the reception of his work.\footnote{See Dickran Tashjian, \textit{Joseph Cornell: Gifts of Desire} (Miami Beach: Grassfield Press, 1992).}

In several instances, a strongly personal element persists, despite the apparent absence of private as well as collective references: in the 1943 \textit{Untitled (Pharmacy)}\footnote{Construction, \(15\frac{1}{4} \times 12 \times 3\frac{3}{8}\) in, collection Mrs Marcel Duchamp, reproduced in \textit{Joseph Cornell}, plate VI and in Waldman, plate 12.} and the \textit{Untitled [Cork or Varia Box]},\footnote{Construction, \(2\frac{1}{4} \times 17 \times 10\frac{7}{8}\) in, collection Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Bergman, Chicago, reproduced in Waldman, plate 13.} the analogies between organic and inorganic elements are formally consistent, yet ironically, this makes his taxonomic principles appear arbitrary. Although effects of symmetry and taxonomy make his constructions hermetic and coded, and their elements reduced to signs with no apparent trace of external reference, they still remain bearers of narrative. In the \textit{Birds} series\footnote{See plates XX-XXVI in \textit{Joseph Cornell}.} of the 1940s, forms, and not objects become uncanny reminders, catalysts for repetition: accumulation and repetition are formal principles of narrative and at the same time they are means through which to come to terms with subjective experience. Although the new contexts that Cornell painstakingly constructs for his objects may seem to outweigh the object, this does not lessen his nostalgia for primary contexts which are evoked in the hope of transcending the contingent ephemerality of his encounters.

The relation between appropriated objects and their contexts is suspended in a space between potential change and static confinement. In the 1939 \textit{A Dressing Room for Gilles},\footnote{Construction, \(15 \times 8\frac{3}{8} \times 5\frac{1}{16}\) in, collection Mr. and Mrs E. A. Bergman, Chicago, reproduced in Waldman, plate 4.} Watteau’s Gilles hangs helplessly against glass and wood patterns suggestive of Harlequin’s costumes. The figure of Gilles is reduced to a surface effect. The depth of the box symbolically absorbs the latency of the associations the viewer might have constructed by latching onto the reference to Watteau. Similarly, in the juxtaposition of visual and verbal elements, the relation between content and form is at stake. The 1946-48 \textit{Untitled (Paul and Virginia)}\footnote{Construction, \(12\frac{3}{2} \times 9\frac{15}{16} \times 4\frac{1}{8}\) in, private collection, reproduced in \textit{Joseph Cornell}, plate IX and in Waldman, plate 18.} combines fragments of printed text, illustrations for the novel by Bernardin de St Pierre and an enclave with straw and nested eggs. Rather than a comment on nineteenth-century popular culture,
the object's most defining element is its structure: the box contains and absorbs objects and forms in an indistinct manner. This structural principle is the token of authorship in an otherwise static environment inhabited by unaltered objects. The relation between codes and structures, the visual effect of the word and the verbal aspect of the image is also brought up in the 1948 *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, where visual and verbal texts colonise the frame that encloses objects as enigmatic as they are inert. In the 1939 *Défense d'Afficher Object* both verbal and visual forms are haunted by a fleeting referent: a ballerina floats against a nondescript black background on the right hand side of the box, while on the left hand side, Cornell inscribes *Défense d'Afficher*. Constructions such as these are reminiscent of Magritte's critique of the inadequacy and arbitrariness of signifying codes, parodying the power of either word or image over the other. Moreover, Magritte saw the interchangeability of words and images as symptomatic both of the arbitrariness and polymorphousness of meaning. Yet unlike Magritte's intention to expose the cultural disjunction of sign and meaning, Cornell does not involve the problem of reference in his boxes; or else, the box is the only referent there is, substitute for and token of the only form of experience there is.

An indecision between objects, forms and structures marks other constructions: his use of planetary charts and constellations is as reductive and resonant with content as the architectural elements that support the constructions in the *Hôtels* and *Observatories* series. In the *Bubble Set Series* of the late 1940s, the maps and diagrams pasted in the interior of the boxes withhold the enigmas of content, and reduce the objects to principles of form. In the *Hôtels* of the 1950s, Cornell still hesitates about which and how much content to include or to efface and to what end; this reflects his ambiguous attitude towards the object. In the 1954 *Hôtel Bon Port*

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19 Construction, 11⅛ x 9⅝ x 6⅛ in, collection Richard L. Feigen, New York, reproduced in *Joseph Cornell*, figure 105.
20 Construction, 8⅝ x 13⅞ x 2⅜ in, collection Denise and Andrew Saul, reproduced in *Joseph Cornell*, plate IV.
(Ann in Memory) the personal reminiscence hinted at in the title is apparently triggered by the most mundane cutout describing the ‘modern’ comforts of the Grand Hôtel Fontaine. In the 1953 Hôtel du Nord, the reference to Marcel Carné’s film is turned into a coded personalised symbol. The figure of a man, in the Auriga constellation, carrying a goat and her kids, with his back turned to the viewer, leaning towards faded paint on a wall, has immediate connotations of decay, suggestive of Cornell’s constant longing for times lost. On the other hand, the scarcity or absence of any specific allusion to a personal experience can also be seen as the result of the fact that together with dated contexts personal reminiscence also declines.

Ultimately, form undermines the contingent aspects of the object only partially, and does so in a limited number of boxes which take on a plastic guise in a manner less equivocal than the majority of his output: the 1946-8 Untitled (Multiple Cubes) and the 1954-56 Untitled containing cubes and balls in three-dimensional grids, provide an abstract blueprint for the Dovecote series, the titles of which bear out ciphered narratives. Such is the case with the mid-1950s Untitled (Dovecote; Hinged Colombier) and “Dovecote” American Gothic. Rosalind Krauss has stressed that the grid is a dual trope, spatial and temporal: oscillating between the abstract and the material, the grid is a device intended to master the aesthetic and the physical, and to contest the identity between reality and representation. The grid’s very separation from what lies outside it, points to the compelling existence of something beyond.

As with other formal principles including the ones derived from Surrealism, Cornell does not seek to turn artforms into self-aware allegories. It is at the expense of form,

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24 We might remember Breton’s and Soupault’s ‘Hôtels’ in Les Champs magnétiques; here, the nostalgic longing for escaping from socialized meaning bears a sense of menacing closure: ‘quadrilatère où l’on étouffe pour jamais, mais à la sortie on sait que le chasseur est là, avec tous ces chiens.’ This is followed by an ambivalent sense of openness and closure: ‘mes deux mains croisées représentent la voûte céleste et ma tête est une oie grotesque et chauve.’ OCI, 83.


and not in order to do away with narrative and subject-matter, that Cornell abstracts objects from their primary environments.27

Parallel to the form/content relation in the boxes, Cornell’s assemblages stage a dialogue between natural and manufactured objects: Cornell treats them both in the same manner, and the enigmatic duality of form and narrative is simulated through disuse or misuse. With regard to Cornell’s attitude to the physicality of the object, Kynaston McShine has noted that he ‘varnished and polished the wood so that it would look antique; [...] on occasion he even placed a box in the oven so that the inner paint would peel and crack, adding to the suggestion of times past’.28 Diane Waldman noted that ‘he took pleasure in destroying a box and then redoing it, as he said “to take up the slack in it”’.29 Similarly, integrating precise instructions about the unmounting of his construction for cleaning it in the verso of ‘Castle’, more than an anti-art gesture, speaks of his resignation to a fastidious involvement with the realm of everyday objects. Therefore, Cornell’s subjecting individual objects and his constructions to natural decay is quite unlike Duchamp’s experiments in weathering conditions for the Large Glass; in Cornell, decay is not suggestive of change, either in process or arrested, but is rather subsumed by effects of form, deceptively impervious to time; for Duchamp on the other hand, ‘the accumulation of dust on [The Large Glass] is a kind of physical index for the passage of time.’30 Sitting ambivalently between process and product, The Large Glass is also a metaphor of how all processes are open to chance. Therefore, Cornell works in a manner reverse to Duchamp’s: for Cornell, the ‘passage of time’ becomes a principle of construction and decay is rarely associated with destructive principles, as in Surrealism.

27 In relation to this, in the catalogue of the 1942 exhibition at Art of This Century, Julia and Lyonel Feininger described Klee’s interest in the object as follows: ‘he loved to collect about him small objects of beauty, in themselves of no importance — such as: wings of butterflies, shells, colored stones, strangely-formed roots, mosses and other growths. [...] More than contributing to his recognition of structure and harmony of color these objects contained a deeper meaning for him. Klee once said that he felt his innermost self related to all things under, on and above this earth.’ Peggy Guggenheim, ed., Art of This Century: Objects — Drawings — Photographs — Paintings — Sculpture — Collages, 1910 to 1942 (New York: Art of This Century, 1942), p. 50.
28 McShine, p. 11.
29 Waldman, p. 29.
On the other hand, Cornell’s attitude towards the physical original is drawn from Duchamp.\(^{31}\) However, reproductions of high art are integrated into his boxes and collages in a manner that does not necessarily problematise identity with or derivation from the original: Cornell elevates the copy to the status of the original. Still, Cornell’s intent towards the ready-made is ambiguous: the tensions between content and form, abstraction and matter, nature and culture, primary and derivative, determine his simultaneous fascination with and resentment of the ready-made or found object. As he said that ‘everything can be used in a lifetime’ and wondered at ‘how does one know what a certain object will tell another’,\(^{32}\) the relations between objects and formal principles in the boxes reflect tensions analogous to the ones between use and narrative. We can then consider his speaking of his ‘inability to encompass all but a small portion of the extra-visual (poetic, emotional, etc. – what he termed “ephemera”)’\(^{33}\) as token of his anxiety in relation to both formal principles and cultural contents which are as repressive as each other. Ironically, his attempt to speak of transcendent experiences through ‘ephemera’ succeeds only in so far as he embraces the deceptive permanence of forms. The biographical mark on the object, which is derided by Duchamp, intensifies the antagonism between a synchronic static space, time, narrative and form.

Generally, the idiosyncratic aspects of Cornell’s work, and the dual attraction of forms and objects are offset by the consistency of his working methods. Although for Cornell, art forms are neither purely a means, nor allegories of intervention, paradoxically his work inflects the much fraught tension between the historical avant-garde’s intent to step back into social life, and the modernist intent to bring about a change in consciousness through the use of abstract forms. It could be argued that ironically his own mystified account of his relation to the world of things as a blending of external realities, personal experience and fantasy, coupled with his meticulous taxonomic habits, makes of those the very sites of the critical possibilities

\(^{31}\) Cornell’s dossier on Duchamp was the subject of a 1990 exhibition. See Joseph Cornell / Marcel Duchamp ...In Resonance (The Menil Collection, Houston Philadelphia Museum of Art, Ostfildern-Ruit: Cantz, 1999).


\(^{33}\) Waldman, p. 24.
of his work. Conversely, it may also be that his idiosyncrasy is his failing, and a symptom of the work’s ambivalent and uncertain relation to its contexts. In his diaries, notes and files, a mystical yearning for sights and things does not appear to be at odds with a matter-of-fact, as well as a sentimental, romanticizing attitude. John Bernard Myers pointed at this link between the mystical character of Cornell’s work, amazement and urban despair. ‘The life of a voyeur sometimes becomes the life of a mystic. Did Blake really see an angel sitting in a tree? How shall we understand the “trances,” the “hallucinations” of Cornell?’ Telling in respect of Cornell’s uneasy relation to his escapist attitude is a diary entry dated May 29, 1956 which reads:

... calm instead of anxiety of getting to dentist with Robert [his invalid brother] [...] one of those visitations or moods just (hovering on deep depression) and exultation in endless unfoldment of city doings [...] nervous kind of reaction sometimes (often) at home that should be the signal for metaphysical work – late snack [...] on the verge of that magical feeling about many things of the past – and healthy sense – not too nostalgic – the changing scene on Third Ave.

Driven by an alienated and exalted response to his environment and his will to capture it and to resist it at once, Cornell recreates dated environments and reconstructs new contexts for his experiences, in a manner that leaves us wondering what matters most, the context or the object, and whether there was a consistent identity to the object in the first place. The object’s material and contingent aspects on the one hand, and its role as a form of representation on the other, gives rise to his anxiety over subjective perception. It is as though Cornell senses objects resisting his willingness to assimilate their particularities to his own private reality which, like the box, is yet another assemblage of feelings, emotions, experiences and imaginary projections.

Analysing the ‘marginal system of collecting’, Jean Baudrillard has stressed that the functionality of objects is being undone in the subject’s appropriation of and attachment to them; he goes on the say that in the tension between the possession of an object and its use, a ‘total integration’ of object and person is always failed. As argued, this integration unfolds at the level of the form/object relation in Cornell’s

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34 John Bernard Myers, ‘The Enchanted Wanderer’, Art in America, 61 (September 1973), 76-81 (p. 80).
boxes: his attitude to the object may be seen as critical, just as much as it is, as Baudrillard suggests about ‘collecting’, symptomatic of a wider cultural malaise. What Baudrillard demonstrates with regard to ‘the marginal system of collecting’ equally applies to Cornell’s sense of the deficiency of form, and the simultaneous sense of the potency and inadequacy of his favourite objects:

Maître d’un sérail secret, l’homme l’est par excellence au sein de ses objets. Jamais la relation humaine, qui est le champ de l’unique et du conflictuel, ne permet cette fusion de la singularité absolue et de la série indéfinie: d’où vient qu’elle est source continuelle d’angoisse. Le champ des objets au contraire, qui est celui de termes successifs et homologues, est sécurisant.  

Given the antagonism between forms, the particularities of objects and their contexts, Cornell’s boxes are ambiguously enigmatic and self-defeating: it is in response to the fact that objects, do not ultimately allow for an integration of the singular and the indefinitely identical, that Cornell’s intention is associative and integrative throughout. In its materiality, the object, as Dawn Ades has pointed out, ‘remains emphatically itself’; this, she adds, is what dissociates Cornell’s work from Cubism and Surrealism, as neither cubist-derived dislocations nor Surrealist-derived transformations are in play. By shifting ambivalently from form to subject-matter in a manner that challenges the utopianism of abstract art on the one hand; by resisting the subversive intent that the Surrealists sought to inscribe in objects on the other, Cornell’s boxes involve the problematic of art’s critical impact in relation to its historical environment, to which we turn next.

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3.2 Cornell’s paradox: uncritical intent and critical art

In 1941, Breton praised Cornell for being one of the artists who still draw on the artery of dream, and wrote that:

Cornell aux confins de la vue stéréotypique, anaglyphique et de la vision stéréotypée, a médité une expérience qui bouleverse les conventions d’usage des objets.  

Breton sees Cornell’s boxes as experiences that involve more than sense perception or imaginary projection and overcome the distinction between sight and vision: experiences in which the conventional appearance and arbitrary function of objects become transparent. Breton emphasises the impact of Cornell’s subjectivity on objects which both assimilate and return our gaze. Yet Cornell was less intent on disrupting habitual perception than on redeeming habitual contents from their datedness and insignificance. This was not at odds with his fondness for ‘looking’, a mark of subjectivity, that on the other hand, as Mary Ann Caws has noted, he sought to ‘exorcize in the boxes’. He noted that all this visual experience was ‘vicarious action’ and sought a coherent curative structure; a need that Frank O’Hara’s ‘sense of neurotic coherence’ (CP, 302) would parody and regret. Since Cornell attempts to leave the implications of seeing outside the box, a critique of the social contents of sight is also not initiated; the self is therefore not necessarily given over to the disorienting effects of the object. Equally, an ambiguous intent determines the use of subjectivity in bringing up the alienating aspects of objects, since Cornell’s sense of a fragmented identity is more cause for anxiety than catalyst for emancipation.

Cornell’s work may lend itself to a different reading: in her discussion of how the ‘Surrealist (Self-)Portrait’ is a critique of the construction of social identity, Elza Adamowicz sees a Surrealist ‘mode of decentring’ identity in Cornell. This has primarily been described as an effect of content and technique: Martine Antle, for instance, Adamowicz goes on, has highlighted how the combination of ‘Man Ray’s solarized portrait of Breton with objects – a postage stamp, an owl, or a cut-out photograph of a diamond-shaped rock-crystal’ [...] decentralize[s] the space that

Breton's figure occupies'. Cornell seems to suggest a dialogue between signifieds and signs in Surrealist fashion: he assembles 'signs and indexes' which are 'similar in function to [Ernst's] Loplop's easel',\textsuperscript{41} [and] [destabilize] the ontological reality of the photograph by displacing the subject from its position as the focus of the composition'.\textsuperscript{42} Thus, Cornell's collages can be integrated in the paradigm of the Surrealist portrait, where 'socially coded' appearances are subject to practices of 'disjunction and displacement',\textsuperscript{43} the self/other conflict is recognised in conflicts inside the self, which rather than attaining resolutions such as the ones contemplated by Breton, remain open to transformation. In the context of the Surrealist critique of subjectivity in conflict with itself, Cornell's treatment of the object, as well as his treatment of the self reveal how 'socially coded' appearances assimilate the defamiliarising elements of objects.

The play between 'signs and indexes' in Cornell is as uncertain as is his attitude towards objects and forms. The 1942 \textit{A Pantry Ballet (for Jacques Offenbach)}\textsuperscript{44} (figure 8) is one such instance where the conflicts between form, cultural narrative and reference are intensified. 'A line of plastic lobsters dressed in cheesecloth tutus' and hanging spoons is set inside 'a stage with a paper-doily curtain', the perimeters of which 'are populated by snails and trilobites, ancillary indicators of the crustacean chorus line': all this adds up to a mixed media collage that parodies the figure/ground distinction, the container and the contained. It is also a most telling instance of Cornell's parallel attraction to Surrealism, to popular culture and the avant-garde – the 'lobster' and chorus theme being a layered reference to Dali, to Léonide Massine's choreography of Offenbach's \textit{Gaité Parisienne} for the Ballet Russe de

\textsuperscript{40} Theater of the Mind, p. 32.
\textsuperscript{41} In Ernst's 'Loplop' series, the fragmentation of the body into its constituents parts and the emphasis on the deictic function of the hand is underscored by a social intent: 'the hand that presents objects there is the \textit{possessing} hand of the pre-industrial era. It atomizes the world into its smallest parts. By acting apart from the body like an abstract symbol of domination and possession, it becomes the sign of a fragmented universe, disassociated into its details'. Werner Spies, \textit{Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the Surrealist Universe}, trans. by John William Gabriel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1991), p. 243; see also plates 77-88.
\textsuperscript{43} Adamowicz, 'The Surrealist (Self-)Portrait', p. 42.
\textsuperscript{44} Construction, $10\frac{1}{2} \times 18 \times 6$ in, collection Richard L. Feigen, New York, reproduced in Waldman, plate 8.
Monte Carlo which Cornell saw in New York, and Georges Balanchine’s 1942 Circus Polka choreographed for the Ringling Brothers Circus at Madison Square Garden.45

The ‘Pantry Ballet’ bears a visual resemblance to Ernst’s c. 1922 Danseur sous le ciel (Le noctambule),46 (figure 9) where a white silhouette, whose shadow falls onto the lower part of the frame is set against a backdrop that looks like the old-fashioned marbling on book endpapers, with painted brickwork in perspective on either side. The Danseur sous le ciel is a more abstract, and uncannily elliptical precedent to Cornell’s stage-like structures. In Ernst, the perspectival effect of the stage and the De Chiricoesque effect of desolation bring up the problematic relation between the self-sufficiency of form on the one side and external reference on the other. Cornell’s box is also determined by this duality as, despite its emphasis on the anecdotal, it is as self-referential as much as it bears external references. At the level of technique, the three dimensional palpability of the ‘chorus line’ in contrast with the flatness of the pasted on represented objects seems to intensify a conflictual dialogue between content and form, as each holds out against the other in the space of the box.

Nonetheless, the Pantry Ballet, and the box as an overall generic category, sit ambivalently in Surrealist contexts as neither are forms and structures intended to transcend context, nor is the object’s particularity a reminder of a repressed referent. In Surrealist works, the wilful discrepancy between media and forms reflects the discontinuity between conflicting contents: form is neither a sublimation, nor a substitute for an inadequate empirical reality but rather part of the very fabric of this reality. We can consider how Ernst dealt with the formal and the narrative aspects of his medium in his two ‘couples’ of the same period as his Danseur sous le ciel: in the 1923 Le couple ou Le couple en dentelle47 where he painted lace and crochet patterns, objects that signify culturally are also menacingly empty and arbitrary. In Le couple

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46 Oil on paper, mounted on cardboard; frame painted by Max Ernst, 18 × 28 cm. Private Collection, reproduced in Max Ernst Collages, figure 226.

47 Oil on canvas, 101,5 × 142 cm, Musée Boymans van Beuningen, Rotterdam, reproduced in Pere Gimferrer, Max Ernst (Paris: Albin Michel, 1983), plate 40; also in Max Ernst: A Retrospective with essays by Karin Von Maur, Sigrid Metken, Uwe M. Schneede and Sarah Wilson (Munich: Prestel, 1991), plate 59; also in Edward Quinn, plate 111, p. 108.
ou L’accolade of the following year, although the expressionist effect of colour seems suggestive of a more unifying intensity compared to the disconcerting qualities of the previous version, the distortion of the human figure and the conflict between the emotionally charged colour and the impersonality of form, maintain the conflict between form and content.

Ernst’s influence on Cornell is most evident in Cornell’s early experiments with collage. In the collages of the early 1930s and, as discussed, in his homage to Ernst for View, much in the manner of Ernst’s own collage-novels, Cornell reflects on the enigmatic autonomy of objects and their contexts. Brought together arbitrarily, or on the basis of intermittently cryptic and explicit associations, the distinct elements of his collages evoke the Surrealist emphasis on perception, the seen and the unseen. Yet when considered in the context of his subsequent involvement with the object, Cornell’s early collages, rather than intended to intensify contradictions internal in the object, are nostalgic for coherence. The discrepancy between the constitutive parts of the collages generates suspended enigmas which are self-referential, while at the same time the object’s representational function is also highlighted.

Among his untitled works of the 1930s, a sewing machine appears alongside a rosebud on a seamstress’s table, while the upper half of a female head appears obliquely at the bottom of the frame. In another (figure 10), a female figure with a corn cob pasted on her lower leg is lying as if suspended beneath the arch of a sewing machine, while a flower emerges beneath the wheel. The explicit allusion to Lautréamont is barely suggestive of violence and irony here and the overall impact is one of a subdued nostalgic sensuality as well as of an anxious relation to objects. Among the most potent references to Ernst’s engagement with violence are ‘objects’ of the mid-1930s in which seamless surfaces are disrupted by the intrusion of physical objects; in an Untitled (Object) of 1933 (figure 11), Cornell directs a dissecting, yet still idealising gaze onto a female profile: knives are pasted on the flat

48 Oil on canvas, 73 × 54 cm, Madame Jean Krebs, Brussels, reproduced in Max Ernst: A Retrospective, plate 80; also in Edward Quinn, plate 134, p. 122.
49 Untitled. 1930s Collage, 5 7/8 × 8 15/16 in, Estate of Joseph Cornell, reproduced in Joseph Cornell, figure 6.
50 Untitled. 1931 Collage, 5 ⅞ × 8 ⅜ in, Estate of Joseph Cornell, reproduced in Joseph Cornell, figure 5; Waldman fig. 42.
surface, and their three-dimensionality contrasts with the face which bears a black patch – an allegory of an unknowable menace.\footnote{41}

Against the backdrop of his early work, Cornell’s shift of interest in the domain of physical objects, only inadvertently intensifies the conflict between the physical, representational and formal aspects of objects. Overall, his treatment of the object suggests an intentional reversal of Ernst’s: throughout Cornell’s work, the technique of collage is a principle of form and less a principle of critique in respect of the nature of subjective experience. Ernst, on the other hand, saw collage as a way of experiencing the world, a means of perception, replicating the discontinuous way in which the world comes to us as well as a way to free the object from its contexts, in its wholeness or in fragments. The collage is both a literal, material process as well as an aesthetic principle.\footnote{42} In the dislocation of related and unrelated elements alike, Ernst’s collages were intended to enact a dialectic of repression and emancipation.

Distinguishing between Cubist collage, which is ‘a formal method’, and Ernst’s technique of \textit{frottage} which is ‘an iconographic element’, Werner Spies has noted that \textit{frottage} ‘is bound up with a new objectivity’. This ‘new objectivity’ is generated from the coincidence between a structure that ‘refers a priori to something unrelated to the pictorial object’ and ‘a pictorial object that has nothing to do with that structure’. The apparent incongruity between the rubbed surface and the represented object creates ‘the curious state of suspension in which Ernst’s figures live. Even when we do not clearly understand the structure, it is not fully integrated with the object’. Werner Spies sees \textit{frottage} as an implied critique of Surrealist automatism, because \textit{frottage} makes manifest how ‘repetition, variation, exchange of systems of relationships within the sheets, one form referring to another transforms the automatically won material into a language [...] [that] doubles the language of things’.\footnote{53}
In Cornell’s boxes, it is the language of things that doubles the language of forms; a step further from the collages, the frottages set up a dialogue between sense perception and representation in order to expose the deceptive aspect of both abstraction and matter. As Ernst’s collages integrate formal principles in processes of change without any apparent mark of modification on the represented object, similarly, his frottages explore the subject’s capacity to bring about a transformation in reality. As Spies writes:

[coupled] [...] completely accessible meanings – usually the realistic portrayal of a being or “natural” phenomenon – with unknown meanings that can only be grasped poetically. Tiny changes make the known monstrous. The individualization of natural things transforms objective seeing into imaginative vision.54

Ernst used different techniques and media in order to bring up the particularity of objects which are irreducible to the subject’s mastery of them. In frottage, like the rubbed surfaces, objects are transformed by losing their physical particularity. In relation to this, Ernst’s collages are also based on the necessity and ephemerality of the closure of form. Each element depends on its relation to the others, while Ernst seeks to create a menacing sense of an impending transition into relations that are unpredictable and unknown. In contrast to this, Cornell uses the principle of collage either as suggestive of relations between forms, or as an evocation, a reconstruction of past experiences.

Ernst’s collages explore how subjectivity is given over to the disorienting effect of the object, and at the same time expose the illusion of empathy that Cornell sought to redeem. For Cornell, the defamiliarising thrust of the new context is an expression of nostalgia for a primary authentic experience. Rather than seeking out the ‘tiny changes that make the known monstrous’, that Ernst’s collages evoke, Cornell takes to ‘accumulated monstrosities that shock the unwary by their resemblance to works or art’, as Adorno pessimistically put it in Minima Moralia.55 While Adorno depicts the decline of subjective experiences in Minima Moralia, Cornell’s equation “Collage=Reality” sublimates an alienated art/life relation.56 The equation can also be

54 Spies, Max Ernst: Frottages, p. xxv.
56 Theater of the Mind, p. 49.
read as an acceptance of the reified reality of the objects which Cornell embraces, for the sake of turning them into refuges for the self.

Therefore, it would be problematic to see the mystery of the box as being exclusively one either of form or of subjective fulfillment. Instead of separating the object from its circumstantial aspects, its context, ultimately, is the only mark of experience. As argued, once incorporated in the box, context also becomes an element of form. Ironically, form and structure, and not the objects that Cornell painstakingly collected, become the correlate of the subject: his persona is bound to be as static as the objects classified and confined. Structures overpower objects and, in its turn, subsumed by structures, Cornell’s subjectivist imprint becomes consistent and predictable and the structure idiosyncratic and unyielding. In their confinement, objects are only deceptively redeemed from their circumstantial aspects and instrumental use.

His work unfolds in paradoxes: it redeems neither abstract forms, nor contingent contents. The boxes express a need both to exclude and to represent what does not go into the box. Ironically, Cornell sublimates forms by painstakingly highlighting the contingent elements in the medium and projecting onto reality and fantasy indiscriminately. He seeks to capture a universal symbolism through a subjectivised, set of cultural fragments which is as dated as it is context-bound. Context is Cornell’s uncanny: his objects, either as part of the seamless flatness of the early collages or as physical, three-dimensional presences in the boxes, intensify, instead of resolving, the antagonism between form and matter, the manifest and the repressed. Content uncannily recurs, not as a catalyst of the closure of form but to exacerbate Cornell’s nostalgia for immediacy. This is still more evident in his bringing together of elements of high art and popular culture: he reinvents their particularity and their collectively shared attributes as tokens of his own individuality. Yet, the more popular culture is invested with private references, the more its collective aspects emerge. In the confines of the box, objects dissociated in mainstream culture in terms of either production or reception get together.
Not only 'a cultural commentator of the first order who freely blended fine and popular art as well as European and American traditions',\(^{57}\) his work is also a symptom of a culture capable of controlling its own antinomies. Although, for instance, we could see his *Hôtel* or *Habitat* series of the 1950s, as critiques of America’s mass cultural utopias and read the box as a form of self-censorship and self-critique, for Cornell, the reader of the *Christian Science Monitor*, they were both a pitfall and a refuge. Similarly, the *Parrot* series of the 1950s are a subdued aftermath of the explicit violence in the 1943 *Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery*\(^{58}\) which, as Carter Ratcliff suggests, may be the sole acknowledgment ‘of the events that drove Breton and company to New York’ and that ‘Cornell’s reaction to World War II was as oblique as Emily Dickinson’s to the Civil War’.\(^{59}\) The *Habitat Group for a Shooting Gallery* can be seen not only as a covert comment on the war, but also as an allegory of the violence involved in the consumption of commodities.

Ultimately, Cornell never made a critical or social intent explicit: when for instance, he urged his friends to go and see ‘a particularly brilliant chewing-gum machine’,\(^{60}\) was it a mass-produced object, a form, or an encounter with the ‘marvelous’ that he had in mind? The same goes for his loyalty to the city: unlike Nerval, whom he so much admired, Cornell is no flâneur.\(^{61}\) He does not attempt ‘to endow [the crowd] with a soul’\(^{62}\) but to come to terms with an estranged, urban self; his errands are never consummated in ‘profane illuminations’, Surrealist experiences that Walter Benjamin famously recognised as potentially subversive of the psychic and social constitution of the individual and the collective under capitalism.\(^{63}\) Largely aloof in his responses to the historical realities of his time, Cornell’s uncertain intent may appear in parts indecisive, indifferent or resistant. Although an attempt to reconstruct any one such intent would impose a biographical perspective, his work


\(^{58}\) Construction, 15\(\frac{1}{2}\) × 11\(\frac{1}{8}\) × 4\(\frac{1}{4}\) in, Des Moines Art Center, Coffin Fine Arts Trust Fund, reproduced in Joseph Cornell, plate XXIII and in Waldman plate 10.


\(^{60}\) Quoted by Rosenberg, *Artworks and Packages*, p. 75.

\(^{61}\) On Cornell’s affinity with Nerval, see Ashton, pp. 8-19.


raises recurring problems in much avant-garde and modernist art. Despite there being no explicit antinomy between intent and outcome, form and content, the tension between the abstract and subjectivist aspects of his constructions brings his boxes into the paradox of modern art, that runs through Surrealism as well, of the critical role of the artwork and its relation to subjectivity.
3.3 Desire for the object and the nostalgia of commodities

In the light of Cornell’s affinity to Surrealism, I have suggested that the ambiguity of his work results from disparities between technique, form and intent. This disparity also determines the conflict between the ephemeral particularities of objects and the presumed permanence of forms. This is still more evident in his anxiety over the intrinsic value of autonomous objects and the subject’s imprint on them within commodity culture. Cornell’s structures involve use and exchange value and stage relations which are enigmatic, in so far as they can be perceived as reified and demystifying at once. In this manner, the boxes inadvertently anticipate O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s approaches to the links between objects and perception in Surrealism, and their ironic sense of the non-contradiction between immersion and detachment.

With regard to the ambiguity with which Cornell faces the alienating effect of the object, his boxes involve the relation between the artwork and the commodity: rather than decoding, Cornell recodes the symbolic function of artworks and commodities alike. Harold Rosenberg described this ambiguity as follows:

[The boxes] [...] are primarily descendants of the slot machines. The tall, narrow portraits in the “Medici” series [...] are kin to reflections in the mirrors of penny-candy dispensers [...]. The candy-slot machine, [...] is both receptacle and contraption, storage space and toy. Offering its contents to all in an apparatus for prompt delivery, it yet isolates them from the crowds of passers-by. It also isolates the customer by engaging him in the game of inserting coins and pulling or turning knobs, and further accentuates his separateness by giving him a glimpse of himself in the glass.64

Rosenberg’s description of the slot-machine can be read as an ambivalent comment on mass culture, as well as an ironic metaphor for Cornell’s contemplative immersion in artworks and popular entertainment alike. Either experience relies on identification and differentiation, on the subject’s attraction to the world of objects. Cornell’s Medici Slot Machines65 can be seen both as ironic allegories of individuality and artistic creativity, and as attempts to reverse the levelling effect of mass cultural experiences.66 In that, he may be seen as a potent critic of much of modernist art’s

64 Rosenberg, Artworks and Packages, p. 75.
65 Joseph Cornell, plates XI-XIII.
66 Cornell’s attraction to late Renaissance art might have been as circumstantial as and as anachronistic as his attraction to slot-machines; moreover, Art News featured illustrations and articles on late
resistance to the complementarity between a reflective individuality and the collective illusions of mass culture. In this sense, the slot-machines may seem attuned to View's attempt to see mass culture given over to the popular imaginary, a step beyond Greenberg's pessimism in the 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' essay, where a reflective individuality was seen as the only antidote to mass culture.

The ambiguity of the slot-machines notwithstanding, the mass-produced object wins out because it falsely promises unmediated involvement, and because despite its repetitive, mechanised operation, it sustains the illusion of individuality. The slot-machines reinforce and undermine such illusions equally, because like the majority of Cornell's boxes, they are underscored by the tension between the subjectivist imprint on the object and the collective associations the object triggers: Cornell blends private narratives with the collective elements that artworks and mass-produced objects have in common. His objects are tokens of his attempt to his personal mark on impersonal, 'socially coded' things; and in response to the need for collective experiences.

In the 1945-6 Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall), (figure 12) for instance, the urban, functional and formal aspects of the construction coexist. Rather than effacing the commodity character of the penny-arcade or the chewing-gum machine, ironically, the semblance of functionality acts as a token of the presumed disinterested nature of entertainment. Moreover, the poised relations between grids, effects of surface and depth, circular and rectangular patterns seem just as ephemeral as the gratification sought in entertainment is ephemeral.

Involving both high and mass culture, the slot-machines are allegories of serial production, a gloss on consumption, gratification and disinterested pleasure. Like artworks and commodities, they become objects of desire: they create mixed feelings of frustration and expectancy in their promise of fulfillment, and exploit principles of identification only in order to sustain an alienating separateness. Half-opened drawers, slanting mirrors, and the decorative symmetry suggested by the smaller compartments containing miniature portraits, and other illustrations, speak of an

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Renaissance art throughout the 1950s.

67 Construction, 20⅛ x 16 x 3⅛ in, collection Mr. and Mrs E. A. Bergman, Chicago, reproduced in Joseph Cornell, plate X. On the construction of the 'Lauren Bacall' box, see Lynda Roscoe Hartigan in Joseph Cornell / Marcel Duchamp in Resonance, pp. 229-30.
ambivalent adherence to the promise of wholeness and closure in the artwork. The antinomy between form and content takes on the guise of a tension between form and function: as function is predetermined and suspended, the anticipated response to the effect of form also becomes predictable and unfailing.

In resembling slot-machines which, unlike artworks, are objects expected to operate in order to entertain, the Medici portraits express nostalgia for art objects destined for subjective immersion. At the same time, assuming the semblance of use, Cornell's slot-machines expose how the sublimation of exchange value in art parallels the loss of use value in reproducible devices. His slot-machines are metaphors for symbolic exchange and as Diane Waldman put it, the box can be read as an allegory of 'the display case of a museum or department store'. In turning the object into a generic category, Cornell's constructions are redeemed through the illusion of artistic autonomy; yet, rather than being a token of self-sufficiency, they are symptoms of the illusory autonomy of the aesthetic object. In the Medici series, high art becomes part of automatised perception and mass-produced objects enter the artist's exclusive realm. On the other hand, consumption determines the identity of objects in so far as their functions were also meant to be collectively identified. Cornell's boxes bear the illusion of redemption, and like mass-cultural experiences, they are intended to satisfy the needs that the aesthetic object sublimates but cannot fulfil. This ambiguity may be seen as a gloss on the conflict between autonomous forms and reproducible serialised objects.

Responding to the structure of repetition and use in mass production and its illusions of uniqueness through choice, Duchamp's ready-mades, as Molly Nesbit points out, took 'the model [...] out of circulation' and gave it 'an absurd title'; 'hung

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68 Waldman, p. 21.

70 Thierry de Duve has spelled out the different levels on which Duchamp's critique unfolds: authorship and originality, the nature of the artwork, the enunciative and the institutional conditions of its existence. Thierry De Duve, 'Echoes of the Readymade: Critique of Pure Modernism', trans. by Rosalind Krauss, in Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, eds., The Duchamp Effect (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1996), pp. 93-129.
in a limbo’, the object is ‘effectively silenced’. As Duchamp realised art’s powerlessness against the commodity, instead of seeking to counter the commodity, he addressed the powerlessness of art.\(^7\) In relation to this, Cornell’s boxes are underscored by a resigned attitude of disassembling and reassembling the given. Detached from both high and mass culture, Cornell seems unwilling to negate and reject either, and the boxes inflect the conflict between use, exchange and purposelessness through an uneasy balance between invention and repetition.

In order to relate this to a Surrealist paradigm, we can remember Aragon’s fascination with the ‘worst’ inventions and the ways in which they bear the paradoxical relation between mechanically-produced devices and aesthetic immersion in the object:

l’invention pure n’est appelée ni par l’emploi que lui réserve l’avenir, ni par une nécessité méditative, mais où l’invention apparaît, s’aperçoit, se lève, elle est un rapport nouveau, et rien d’autre, un délire qui tourne un peu plus tard à la réalité.\(^7^2\)

For Aragon, such ‘inventions’ are only apparently ingenuous, or banal in their superfluous use. Prior to becoming subject to use or exchange value, these inventions evoke an unknown relation which in its purity, becomes an allegory for aesthetic experiences that are neither transcendent, nor universal. Prior to their return or their entry into ‘reality’ in Aragon’s terms – these objects are fleetingly abstracted from a reified reality: in their unspecified and uncertain particularity they are simultaneously contingent and formal. As in Le Paysan de Paris, Aragon here takes to objects laid bare of both concepts and functions:

l’ invention [...] se meut dans l’irréel. Puis elle nie à son tour l’irréel, s’en évade, et cette double négation, loin d’aboutir à l’affirmation de réel, le repousse, le confond avec l’irréel, et dépasse ces deux idées en s’emparant d’un moyen terme où ils sont à la fois niés et affirmés, qui les concilie et les contient: le surréel.\(^7^3\)

The invention, in Aragon’s terms, attains a point where it negates and sustains its subjective and objective components at once. Like Cornell’s boxes, for Aragon, the invention is rather caught up in a movement of realisation and lack. At the same time,

\(^{71}\) Molly Nesbit, ‘Ready-Made Originals: The Duchamp Model’, October, 37 (Summer 1986), 53-64 (p. 61, p. 62, p. 64).

Cornell’s boxes bring to mind these inventions in a reverse manner: they are an allusion to an aesthetic object that is already filled with ‘reality’ and fall short of the synthesis contemplated by Aragon in the interchangeability of the subject’s and the object’s ‘irreality’.

This is also reminiscent of De Chirico’s sense of mystery in the emptiness of objects: for De Chirico, the duality between the external and the inner aspects of objects was a catalyst for revealing repressed contents. Stressing the silent enigmas of inert objects, De Chirico, like Aragon, contemplated the identity between a mental image and the object of perception, however fleeting. The menacing stillness of his desolate spaces, which is often evoked in Cornell’s boxes, and which Breton described in terms reminiscent of Freud’s description of the ‘uncanny’, is the signal of an imminent revelation. Yet when speaking of the coincidence between a mental image and its external manifestation, De Chirico stressed that the mysteries of objects are also deceptive:

Vivre dans le monde comme dans un immense musée d’étrangeté, plein de jouets curieux, bariolés, qui changent d’aspect, que quelquefois comme de petits enfants nous cassons pour voir comment ils sont faits à l’intérieur - et, déçus, nous nous apercevons qu’ils sont vides.

For De Chirico’s sense of paradox, emptiness is the mystery. In relation to this, a sense of suspension which does not always reveal a latent link between the artist’s interiority and the enigma of objects determines Cornell’s nostalgia as well as his attachment to the familiar, which he experiences more as repressive than repressed.

The Surrealists recognised the object’s uselessness and datedness as states in which it outlives its function as a commodity. Only by assuming an ambivalence similar to that of useless commodities, can artistic forms become critical. Suspending

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73 Aragon, ‘L’Invention’, p. 23.
74 ‘Nous sommes-nous assez souvent retrouvés sur cette place où tout semble si près d’être et est si peu ce qui est’, Le Surréalisme et la peinture, p. 13.
75 ‘Une révélation peut naître tout à coup, [...] par la vue de quelque chose comme un édifice, une rue, un jardin, une place publique. etc. [...] Lorsque la révélation résulte de la vue d’une disposition des choses, alors l’œuvre qui se présente dans notre pensée est liée par un lien étroit avec ce qui a provoqué sa naissance’. Cited in Marcel Jean, Autobiographie du surréalisme (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p. 16. This can also be related to Rimbaud’s celebration of becoming used to ‘l’hallucination simple: je voyais très-franchement une mosquée à la place d’une usine, une école de tambours faite par des anges, des calèches sur les routes du ciel, un salon au fond d’un lac; les monstres, les mystères; un titre de vaudeville dressait des épouvantes devant moi’, Arthur Rimbaud, ‘Délires II Alchimie du Verbe’, Poésies Une saison en enfer Illuminations, ed. by Louis Forestier (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), p. 141.
the functional and socially meaningful aspects of objects, Surrealist objects were intended to expose the irrationality of commodity culture as primary site of conflict. Foregrounding the non-functional or the dysfunctional often involved the opposite wish to give to the aesthetic the appearance of functionality; in doing so, the Surrealists equally redeemed and undermined the aesthetic. But although Cornell’s objects involved the relation between the functional and the aesthetic, their datedness was not intended as a critique of the illusion of novelty and the promise of fulfillment in commodity culture. Rather, his Surrealist-derived predilection for dated objects is both a substitute for and correlate of the promise of happiness.

Hal Foster has described how the Surrealist predilection for the strangeness of the outmoded unmasks the precarious adequacy of a functional/rationalised world. Foster has also pointed out that the recovery of the outmoded was complemented by the derision of the mechanical/commodified. The outmoded is ‘dialectically related’ to its other: Surrealist objects opposed ‘to the capitalist rationalization of the objective world the capitalist irrationalization of the subjective world’, a conflict that also determines Cornell’s boxes. Neither social function, nor the hidden essence of the object takes precedence. It is as if, unlike Ernst’s juxtaposing and blurring of human and animal, physical and mechanical elements, which was so influential for the early Cornell, Cornell’s boxes are not meant as a critique of the divides between nature and culture, subjective perception and the realm of objects. Rather than recognising its own reality through the object, the self is subsumed by the object in Cornell. In Surrealist thought, the defamiliarising circumstances of this recognition were seen as potent as the object itself.

In criticising the Surrealist affinity for the outdated, Adorno saw datedness as the mark of repression and not as a threshold beyond it: ‘Surrealism salvages what is out of date, an album of idiosyncrasies in which the claim to the happiness that human beings find denied them in their own technified world goes up in smoke.’ And such was the case with Cornell, whose nostalgic embrace of the contingent as a token of

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76 Autobiographie du surréalisme, p. 18.
transcendence, was antagonistic neither to autonomous art nor to mass culture. Cornell’s tactic of defamiliarising the familiar and domesticating the unfamiliar paradoxically prolongs the repressive mechanism that preserves this dichotomy: in Cornell’s boxes, uncanny recurrences, summoned or accidental as they might be, do not release what the Surrealists saw as the emancipatory thrust of the outmoded.

In recounting revelatory coincidences in real or projective encounters, he stresses how their circumstantial character forces him to seek out the next experience. He subsumes the encounter into his own habitual, coded modes of perception and appropriation of the external world. He made his anxiety at the effect of the encounter explicit when speaking of ‘Berenice’, the protagonist of his Crystal Cage for the 1943 Americana Fantastica issue of View, and noted that:

> these Berenices encountered all and always unexpectedly seen for a few moments and then gone forever – on subways, in a city crowd, that is the crux perhaps if they were seen too often – familiarity breeds contempt – this habit of read[ing] so much into a person on first sight especially an appealing child or young girl.  

Alienated and defamiliarised, popular culture, indigenous traditions, the collective imaginary, share in Cornell’s uncanny Americana, a terra incognita, which, like the real and imaginary Berenice, is nevertheless already known and seen. His ‘fantastic’ Americanist historiography for View is less concerned with making strange a collective imaginary, equivocally repressive and repressed, and more with an insular attempt to appropriate and redeem it. Similarly, his affinity for Transcendentalism and Christian Science is part of a failed attempt to project subjective principles onto an otherwise impersonal world. What unified his attraction to French Symbolism, Surrealism, American Transcendentalism and Romantic empathy was his untheorised faith in the immediacy of sense perception. Sense perception and imaginary projection, for Cornell, are both encompassed by an object world in which one moves indecisively between enduring ephemera. Cornell projected the Transcendentalists’

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80 John Goodwin in his ‘Remarks on the Polymorphic Image’ which appeared in the same issue of View that hosted Cornell’s ‘Enchanted Wanderer’ excerpt from a journey album for hedy lamarr’, referred to Emerson’s yearning for empathy with nature with the following: ‘“From the mountain,” Emerson said, “you see the mountain. We animate what we can see and we see only what we animate.” If we are conscious of the mountain, the mountain must automatically be aware to some degree of us.’
desire of unity with nature onto urban sights, holding onto the power of art to distill the contingent world into transcendent visions. Through his affinity to American Transcendentalism which for Emerson was ‘faith run mad’, he reconciled his Americanness with a need for protective anachronisms, the utopian antidote to everyday existence. For instance, his lifelong adherence to Mary Baker Eddy’s ‘Christian Science’ and spiritual healing can be barely seen as an attempt to turn indigenous alternatives into an expression of cultural dissent as was the case in View.

In Cornell’s Americana, culture is nature and vice versa. By dehistoricising the marvelous and the irrational through his favourite myths such as the tightrope walker Blondin and the escape artist Houdini, Cornell’s summonings are symptoms of repression rather than catalysts for the release of repressed nature and culture. With regard to this, Elizabeth Wright has described as follows the dual effect of the uncanny:

> fantasy can remake reality, and the instrument by which it does is projection. Through projection fantasy discharges itself into the world, but when the object thus singled out fails us, it is experienced as uncanny. [...] The object becomes unheimlich when the repressed impulse breaks through.®

(View, I: 9-10, December 1941-January 1942, 8)

David Porter described Emily Dickinson’s influence on Cornell on the basis of their interest in objects, words and images: he stressed the ‘quintessentially’ American character of two solitary mystics who transformed fragments of the objective and natural world into transcendental visions and elements of the inner self. David Porter, ‘Assembling a Poet and her Poems: Convergent Limit-works of Joseph Cornell and Emily Dickinson’, Word and Image, 10: 3 (July-Sept. 1994), 199-221.

Cited in Donald N. Koster, Transcendentalism in America (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), p. 3. Emerson was sceptical of collective action: reform to him was less a social matter and more an ongoing attempt to reach the reality of the self. See pp. 18-24.

That Cornell must have been drawn to Mary Baker Eddy’s teachings out of personal frustration as well as out of his affinity for ‘American eccentrics’ does not, however, offset his indifference to The Christian Science Monitor’s Cold War agenda to respond to ‘the need, urgent for Americans, to reduce the all-too-prevalent misconception that they are dedicated only to material goals, that their society is tasteless and immoral, and that they are unfit for world responsibilities. [...] The need to demonstrate bolder, more courageous and imaginative leadership in all the free societies. [...] to respect the dignity and honor of all individual men everywhere, recognising their aspirations and according them their full stature as sons of God. The need to believe and act upon the tenets of free society with even more zeal and skill and persistence than the Communists devote to Marxism’. Erwin D.Canham, Man’s Great Future: From the Fiftieth Anniversary Edition of The Christian Science Monitor (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1959), p. xi. Cornell referred to a fusion of Christian science and Surrealism in a 1946 letter to Mina Loy: ‘My Science and healthy thoughts about the unconscious in Surrealism (about which I knew nothing) combined to give me extraordinary emotions’, cited by Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, ‘Joseph Cornell: A Biography’, in Joseph Cornell, pp. 91-119 (p. 99).

Cornell's projections sublimate a lost immediacy: therefore, the uncanny is more repressive than emancipatory. Whereas in Surrealist thought, the recovery of the repressed was expected to oppose alienated social relations in order to restore them as primary, yet subject to change, in Cornell, the uncanny is mediated second nature. In order to enter the box, the irrationality of objects is cut off from the rationality that produced them in the first place, unlike the Surrealist object which was meant to explore how rational and irrational principles contain each other. Cornell's sense of the arbitrary in juxtaposing distinct elements is not irrational. This takes us back to the parallel with Ernst: unlike the boxes, Ernst's collages stage a dialectic in which objects are both destructive and reconstituting of subjectivity: the intrusion of the outmoded— in the form of historical objects or subjective fantasies—laid bare the reversibility of the rational and the irrational, the manifest and the hidden. An object of the past becomes irrationally erratic and violent in a new reconstructed context. Cornell's escaping inside, rather than outside the boxes is also reminiscent of the regressive side of the uncanny.

Moreover, it is at the inflection of the object through its contexts that Cornell's work clashes with the Surrealist precedent and brings up Surrealism’s historicity. Faced with the problem of resolving the emancipatory process, the Surrealists turned the object into an allegory of destruction. As any context is likely to become as habitual as the one that has already been unmasked, every such instance has to be superseded in its turn. As discussed, this led the Surrealists to stress the duality of the object as transcendent form on the one hand, and as a physical, material entity on the other. Cornell's boxes, on the other hand, challenge Surrealist objects as vehicles of liminal experiences between nature and culture, as sites of the unconscious, bearer and destructive of subjectivity. Ironically, whereas potentially the more rapid the succession of changes in commodified environments, the more the outmoded could be critically exploited, in reality the opposite was the case: like the Surrealists in New York during the previous decade, Cornell found himself ill-prepared to respond to the rapidly changing scape of New York in the late 1950s. When his favourite dimestore shops declined, Kynaston McShine notes that ‘he lamented ‘the dwindling of his
source materials, both objects and printed matter and gradually his production of boxes slowed'.

As the deceptive aspects of mass culture are resisted and embraced in a manner that also reveals art’s self-deception, Cornell’s work exposes the historicity of the Surrealist critique of commodity culture. In relation to this, revising Adorno’s position that modernist and avant-garde art resist consumer society precisely by adapting to its law of newness, Peter Bürger has suggested that ‘the category of the new is not a substantive but merely an apparent one. Far from referring to the nature of the commodities, it is their artificially imposed appearance that is involved here’. Cornell’s work sits ambivalently in this paradigm, as he holds onto subjectively reconstructed and ‘artificially imposed’ appearances alike, while he is ready both to accept and negate that ‘what is new about the commodities is their packaging’. Is this a wilful deception or a pessimistic critique? His resistance to the introduction of sound in film, for instance, may result from his having found himself equally ill-prepared to respond to a new structure, the impact of which was more ‘substantive’ than ‘apparent’, to use Bürger’s phrase for the commodity. By the same token, the earlier Surrealist tactics of perceptual disruption would have to be rethought if they were to apply ‘materialistically’ and ‘anthropologically’ to any urban scape.

Overall, his eclectic attitude towards cultural artefacts and narratives equally mystifies and resists commodity fetishism. Abstracted from collective fetishism and placed back on display as private and cryptic referents, Cornell’s objects are divested of emancipatory promise. Like all reproducible artefacts, the boxes are ephemeral symbols that, as Cornell’s anxiety over their reception also implies, can be redeemed only when they are protected from misappropriation. Ironically, the subject’s ability to comprehend the object materially and conceptually in the space of the box confirms the primacy of the mass-produced object over the contingent subject.

Confined and encaged, threatened and protected, Cornell’s objects remain intact in either their physical or implied wholeness. Objects remain fetishes reflecting

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ciphered associations whose irrationality is not emancipatory. Cornell, for whom ‘a necklace from Woolworth’s had as much value as one from Fabergé, and became the souvenir of a Romantic Ballerina who danced for a highway man on the snow while crossing the Steppes of Russia’, redeems the commodity’s circumstantial aspects into a vicarious transcendence. Unlike Duchamp’s ‘ready-made originals’ and unlike Surrealist objects, Cornell’s boxes bring back subjectivist and transcendent illusions. In this way, the boxes preserve their deceptive integrity: similarly, his predilections, fantasies and working methods are also integral part of the reality of the boxes. Cornell approaches the object as if seeking to make the sign and the referent identical. Therefore, in Cornell’s collage-films, the stills are fragments of culture, which rather than assuming a disconcerting autonomy, taken individually, they are substitutes for sublimated wholes; they are reassembled for the sake of a new precarious and protective unity.

A dialectic between the semblance of wholeness on the one hand, emptiness and lack on the other, subsumes the Surrealist dialectic of repression and emancipation. This dialectic, like the uncanny in Cornell, replicates the logic of the commodity: familiar as much as it is disconcerting and enigmatic, accessible in proximity or at a distance like the artwork. In relation to this, we may remember how a painted floral still life on the side of a delivery wagon reminded him of Jan Van Eyck’s *Adoration of the Lamb*; he wrote that ‘upon contemplation ‘the Van Eyck slow[ed] as a beautifully realized, metamorphosed sublimation of the original commercial enseigne of the experience’. As inner visions are interchangeably related to external realities, artworks and commodities – ‘metamorphosed’ or not – interchangeably become reminders of a flawed reality that Cornell seeks to sublimate.

Moreover, in seeking to come to terms with the past, Cornell reverses the dichotomy between the past and the presumed immediacy of the present; for Cornell,

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90 Cited by Ades, p. 33.
the present is already and always a thing of the past. As Mary Ann Caws has put it, Cornell drew from ‘a past that was a repository of his cultural obsessions’; this involved ‘incessantly [recycling] his experiences’.\textsuperscript{91} His nostalgia is interpreted as a yearning for a lost childhood innocence, as the lingering effect of missed realisations of the self or of his art. Dore Ashton sees his nostalgia as that of the ‘authentic Romantic soul’,\textsuperscript{92} and Carter Ratcliff has stressed how nostalgia becomes a central trope in Cornell’s ‘mechanics/poetics of the ineffable, a compensation for absence and lack; ‘even the most self-contained box is itself a fragment, a nostalgic emblem of departed wholeness, purity, innocence.’\textsuperscript{93} Yet this nostalgia is not only a manner of coming to terms with the past. It is a working premise for Cornell as much as it is a cultural trope with which he sifts through his material, and may appear as regressive as much as it can be utopian, complicit as much as detached. It bears the conflict between the utopianism and the dystopianism of his boxes which are semblances of imaginary spaces. Rather than contemplating how the present contains the past, Cornell confines the present inside the past. Unlike Aragon who expected the ephemeral to disappear and resurface anew, Cornell seeks to arrest the ephemeral and preserve it from extinction. His ‘ephemera’, rather than disruptive, are cohesive principles. Seeking to redeem the present through the past as much as he seeks to recover a lost past through the present, Cornell’s nostalgia is neither materialist, nor historical in a Surrealist sense. Cornell is nostalgic about an anachronistic future that will redeem an unfulfilled past.

Nonetheless, Cornell’s nostalgia suggests a certain ambivalence towards commodity culture, although his anxiety over his ‘scraps’ speaks of his attachment to artefacts of whatever kind. This is why the distinct elements of the boxes are not just allegories as in Benjamin’s notion of ‘isolated reality fragments’ whose meaning ‘does not derive from the original context’; for Cornell attempts to revert them back into ‘organic symbols’.\textsuperscript{94} It is as if he wishes to prolong rather than unmask the illusion of intimacy and familiarity in the commodity.

\textsuperscript{91} \textit{Theater of the Mind}, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{92} Ashton, \textit{A Joseph Cornell Album}, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{93} Ratcliff, in \textit{Joseph Cornell}, p. 44.
\textsuperscript{94} Bürger, \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}, pp. 68-73.
As argued, Cornell’s boxes are expressions of our alienating relation to both high art and mass culture; they are ambivalent allegories of repression and redemption, and lend themselves to a dual reading: their closure is a metaphor of wholeness and integration of self and world, as well as a metaphor of the impoverishment of experience. Dystopian and utopian at once, the boxes still offer a redemptive insight into the discrepancy between subjectivity and the object world. In distinguishing between ‘LIFE versus esthetics’, rather than proposing a wilful separation between the two, Cornell comes to realise and accept the impossibility of sustaining art in life or life in art.

If Cornell’s works have a critical element, it is one of indifference towards and retreat from an alienating reality. Distanced from the Surrealist precedent as he was from the heroic, dramatised appearance of Abstract Expressionist art, Cornell inadvertently expresses the avant-garde’s discontent. For Cornell, the first man was neither an ‘artist’, as Barnett Newman put it, nor was the poet ‘a seer’: man, rather, becomes mystic only when surrounded by the banality of everyday objects which are ultimately divested from that duality which Benjamin recognised in Aragon’s ‘mythical’ perspective on the object: ‘in this dream, under the spell of capitalism, desire and objects of fulfilment are authentic and distorted at the same time.’

Cornell’s boxes enact the depoliticisation of nostalgia and desire that Adorno regretted in Surrealism’s ‘album of idiosyncrasies’. He recovers a past which is doubly curative and traumatic; instead of seeking to initiate an active engagement with the past against the present, he turns the present into an illusion of the past. Is this escapism or critique, or can this escapism become critical? Escapism is critical and Cornell’s boxes offer a critical perspective on Surrealism by not being escapist enough, by not being as escapist as his favourite peepshows or circuses. The same applies to Cornell’s sublimation of the artwork and the commodity in order to sustain their promise of fulfilment as a compensation for lack. This promise is not premised on negation, but rather on acceptance of the subject’s alienated relation to objects.

95 Theater of the Mind, p. 166.
In concluding, we can remember the early Surrealist optimism about commodity culture. In his 1923 parable on Ernst, Desnos warned against:

voyageurs peu clairvoyants, nos contemporains ne sentent pas la beauté des panneaux réclames faisant la haie le long d'une voie ferrée ou miraculeusement disposés au centre d'un glacier. Le mot "Cadum", lumineux attestateur d'éternité mieux que les chênes perclus, la bouteille "Mercier", "Citroën", dans les nuages, mythologie neuve, ont transformé l'horizon.\textsuperscript{97}

This was an expression of optimism as to the dialectic of gratuitousness and necessity, contingency and fantasy in the production and reception of artworks and commodities. In 1919, when Aragon came up with the idea of naming a Surrealist publishing house 'Au Sans Pareil', a sign popular among provincial shops for the latest fashion (OCI, 1065), Breton, in letters to Aragon and Fraenkel, voiced his enthusiasm for publicity and advertisement signs as they could kill and replace the 'poem'. (OCI, 1152) Although the boxes, as we have seen, have no oppositional intent either against high art or consumer culture, they expose and reproduce the paradox of the very concept of culture: mystifying and resistant, it also creates the conditions for its decline. Cornell's weak promise of utopia is aborted by the world that it embraces. The boxes enact this movement with indifference or regret, conditions that inflect the duality of immanence and transcendence into more recent experiences of complicity and resistance which we will discuss in the following chapters.

\textsuperscript{79} (p. 67).
4. Surrealism and the poetry of Frank O’Hara

4.1 Frank O’Hara’s poems as things: inside and outside Surrealism

"Two things," he said "two things have changed my life. Do you believe in destiny, Mr Griffin? Paul, you know, heard a voice from the sky and spoke with it. But I heard a voice and I saw a light. It was in a pet shop in Maspeth. The pet shop had white walls...." his voice faded "... what happened I can’t describe. And the second thing was on West Fifty-second Street. I saw Fanny Cerito on top of the Manhattan Storage Warehouse."¹

Whether contrived or in earnest, regretfully incongruous or involuntarily self-parodying, Cornell’s account of the self’s realisation in the city, at the intersection of the banal and the contingent is underscored by a fundamental uncertainty about the nature of perception and experience. Unlike Paul’s returning the gaze, Cornell awaits no response and takes it onto himself to see the unseen and hear the unspoken. The anxious and urgent desire to reconstitute and preserve these moments in the space of the boxes stems from the precarious character of this ability. Like Cornell’s, O’Hara’s attention is also arrested by ‘the Manhattan Storage Warehouse, which they’ll soon tear down’. His reason for regretting its passing, is that he ‘used to think they had the Armory Show there’. Yet, unlike Cornell, the sight of the building does not provoke any visions; on the contrary, he passes it by on his way ‘back to work’ with his ‘heart,’ – Reverdy’s poems – inside his pocket. (CP, 258)

That everyday life in the city is O’Hara’s main inspiration and site of empathy, the space where his personas are lost and found, simultaneously dispersed and held together, is a recurring theme in the growing body of criticism on his work. Charles Altieri saw the city as O’Hara’s ‘perfect metaphor for [his] sense of the value in [...] details’, the space of fleeting presences without much ‘underlying significance’. He argued that this becomes evident in his way of ‘naming’ incidentally and without any background detail, in a manner that makes his stories necessary tokens of ‘superficiality’ and ‘pain’.² It is quite ironic that while Cornell’s distilled experiences

were precisely intended as antidotes to ‘superficiality’ and ‘pain’, O’Hara, conversely, indiscriminately ‘names’ anything coming his way. Even when, like Cornell, he ‘can’t describe’, his voice never ‘fades’. Be that as it may, it is at the level of the means and contents of perception that O’Hara’s poems can be equally related to and dissociated from Cornell’s way with things, as well as from earlier Surrealist paradigms; either way, the experiential and representational validity of the poem is at stake.3

Like Cornell, O’Hara emphatically affirmed his alertness to external sights as being the most vital token of selfhood. As he famously put in the 1954 ‘Meditations in an Emergency’:

My eyes are vague blue, like the sky, and change all the time; they are indiscriminate but fleeting, entirely specific and disloyal, so that no one trusts me. I am always looking away. Or again at something after it has given me up. It makes me restless and that makes me unhappy, but I cannot keep them still. (CP, 197)

That ‘restlessness’ is, for O’Hara, the only viable response to the urgency of things is symptomatic of his anxiety about the difficulty to recover and sustain an immediate contact with the world. This is why perception is ‘specific’ and disloyal’ to its objects and in return, the objects ‘give up’ a subject that disillusioned, is ‘always looking away’.4 It is telling that, speaking of his changing the earlier title ‘Meditations on Re-emergent Occasions’, he noted that the friend and fellow poet ‘Kenneth [Koch] had to talk me out of ‘Meditations on an Emergency’ and into ‘Meditations in an Emergency’. (CP, 532) It is because of, rather than despite the stated anxiety to be inside, instead of writing about his experiences, that O’Hara’s ‘indiscriminate’ encounters historicise Surrealism and negate attempts such as Cornell’s to isolate instances of unadulterated contact with objects. This stems from his consistent hesitancy to posit either subjectivity or the object as catalysts for his experiences.


3 Altieri, p. 199.

4 It is interesting to remember Paul Bowles’s earlier response to the potential of contemporary music in View in relation to O’Hara’s anxiety of seeing: ‘ophthalmic migraines don’t result from a walk along Park Avenue or Hollywood Boulevard. Sight is catered to like a big brother in the family of the senses.’ Instead, ‘the ear-poet has to deal in his public with a sense which has as yet to be developed […] less connected with the intellect than sight is – more visceral and infinitely less differentiated.’ (View, III: 1, 28) Critical of the deceptions of both high and low culture, Bowles also recognizes a
There are only ‘things’ which ultimately betray expectations such as Cornell’s, and through which O’Hara neutralises the Surrealist theory of the role of subjective perception in transforming ‘things’ back into potent objects. Rather than seeking to redeem ‘things’ loose or to break from their habitual aspects, O’Hara confronts ‘things’ for what they already are, and not for what they could be. He made this explicit from his early poems on, such as the 1950 ‘Today’ where he wrote:

Oh! kangaroos, sequins, chocolate sodas!
You really are beautiful! Pearls,
harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins! all
the stuff they’ve always talked about

still makes a poem a surprise!
These things are with us every day
even on beachheads and biers. They
do have meaning. They’re strong as rocks. (CP, 15)

Gregory Bredbeck has discussed ‘Today’ as characteristic of O’Hara’s camp attitude. Bredbeck analyses ‘camp’ as a catalyst for immediacy that involves the problem of reference. Things are signs ‘forced to signify where [they] can find no “natural” referent, the sign is “eaten” by the context, digested and used. The space between énoncé (the statement) and énonciation (its field) collapses’. On the basis of this, he opposes Perloff’s claim in relation to the Surrealist influence on ‘Today’ which she describes as an effect of form. In Bredbeck’s terms, camp is the ‘difference’ that breaks ‘this lineage of influence’. A catalyst for ‘immediacy’ and ‘eroticism’ in the poems as the ‘camp’ attitude might be; but O’Hara’s dialogue with Surrealism, on the other hand, is the catalyst for demystifying his desire for immediacy. Anything can get in the poem, unlike Cornell’s boxes, and this allows O’Hara to take anything in: as he ironically noted in an early ‘Poem’, ‘everything will take care of itself, / it got along without us before.’ (CP, 41) Yet this may also be read as a reverse wish to release the poem from the incursion of things. This reading takes a still more ambiguous twist in the 1951 ‘Interior (with Jane)’ [Freilicher]:

critical margin, unlike O’Hara whose ambivalent attitude of nostalgia and acceptance speaks of a resigned discontent.

The eagerness of objects to 
be what we are afraid to do

cannot help but move us. Is 
this willingness to be a motive

in us what we reject? The 
really stupid things, I mean

a can of coffee, a 35¢ ear 
rings, a handful of hair, what

do these things do to us? We 
come into the room, the windows

are empty, the sun is weak 
and slippery on the ice. And a 
sob comes, simply because it is 
coldest of the things we know. (CP, 55)

On the one hand, O’Hara fears that subjectivity might entirely be taken over by 
objects; on the other, he realises that our failure to grasp adequately what things ‘do 
to us’ is paradoxically the only reminder of subjective life, the ‘sob’ which ‘is the 
coldest of the things we know’. James Breslin also noted that O’Hara, in his 1950 
‘The Three-Penny Opera’ (CP, 32-3), exposes how ‘our inability to make objects 
into mere extensions of our will becomes at once scary and funny’. 6

A similar tendency informs his most markedly Surrealist-derived compositions as 
well as his later emphatically reflexive ones. In the 1952 ‘Easter’ (CP, 96-100), 
O’Hara comes up with verbal collages that stage visually startling images, or 
differently put, montage effects in which words are the vehicles or substitutes for 
images. Speaking of ‘Easter’ in the same year, Kenneth Koch described it as 
‘burst[ing] on us all like a bomb’, ‘wonderful, energetic, and rather obscene […] a 
procession of various bodily parts and other objects across a vast landscape’ 
reminiscent of Lorca and Whitman. He noted the incongruity of the title – only 
halfway through the poem, O’Hara exclaims ‘it is Easter!’ – which suggests that the 
poem was after all ‘about death and resurrection’: this turns the poem into ‘inspired

irrelevance which turns out to be relevant’. (CP, 526) Kenneth Koch, however, does not describe what perpetuates O’Hara’s life/death thematic cycle.

‘Easter’ opens with the distorting effects of the self’s imaginary projection onto the world. In the self’s attempt to leave its mark on the world, the reality or unreality of either the inner self or the external world is at stake:

The razzle dazzle maggots are summary
tattooing my simplicity on the pitiable.
The perforated mountains of my saliva leave cities awash
more exclusively open and more pale than skirts. (CP, 96)

The flow of images stages the self/world conflict, and the proliferation of arbitrary juxtapositions comes to match rather than oppose the incursion of things into subjective life. The contents of the unconscious mind and the irrationality of the contingent are ambivalently interchangeable. Moreover, at the expense of visual perception, O’Hara insists on tactile and olfactory impressions. What may be palpable is not necessarily visible and, conversely, the visible does not necessarily come across through sense perception:

O the glassy towns are fucked by yaks
slowly bleeding a quiet filigree on the leaves of that souvenir […]
floods of crocodile piss and pleasures of driving […]
when the world, smutty abstract, powders its pearls […]
a hardon a sequoia a toilet tissue
a reject of poor people
in squeezing your deflowered eyeballs
all the powdered and pomaded balloon passengers
voluntarily bringing their orifices to a cinder […]
a muff of mosquitoes in the walking dark
pouring demented chinchillas
trumpets fell, many the virulent drapery lids
the murdered raining softly on yellow oranges
violating the opaque sexual privileges of twilight. (CP, 96-97)

Any image from such a sequence from ‘Easter’ might as well have appeared as a caption to a collage by Ernst, elliptical and fragmentary indication of how reality erupts into appearances and of how appearances assume the guise of reality. O’Hara’s lines in their continuous, unobstructed discontinuity, expose how consciousness and

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7 Among O’Hara’s Surrealist-inflected poems, the images of decay in ‘Easter’ are the most reminiscent of View’s emphasis on destruction and violence; we might remember the unsigned series of images akin to O’Hara’s, in View’s 1942 questionnaire: ‘Amidst all the spume, the rancid goat’s milk, the cracked eyeballs, […] the sawn-off buttocks, the caged gynaecologists, the viscous eumuchs.’ (View, I: 11-12, 10)
the unconscious have become interchangeable and how language assimilates the irrational. This implies a similar interchangeability between the external and the intrinsic aspects of objects. Moreover, the effect of speed, rather than means to distort or break through the mediation of signification, ends up replicating the speed with which signification assimilates arbitrariness.

The attempt to break from rational meaning would presuppose a notion of the poem as a metaphor of active intervention into the contents of subjective experience; however, this is not necessarily and consistently the case with O'Hara: actual or imagined, things remain things, as O'Hara has no intention or entertains no illusion that it could have been otherwise. He makes this even more explicit in his 1953 'Second Avenue' (CP, 139-150) where reflexivity and the need for indiscriminate perception at an uninterrupted speed alternate. As he put it: 'I suffer accelerations that are vicarious and serene.' (CP, 140) Mutlu-Konuk Blasing sees the Surrealist influence on O'Hara as informed by a 'form-content opposition' and therefore 'unfortunate'; she goes on to suggest that, unlike Surrealist experiments, the effects of randomness in poems like 'Second Avenue' 'resolve into an order'. This, she notes, results from the way in which O'Hara 'exploits the tension between poetic and cultural “orders”.' Valid as this is, it still remains to be seen how O'Hara's poems redeem principles of change and process.

From the opening of the poem on, O'Hara cryptically addresses the paradox of his longing for immediacy from inside a mediated reality, with metaphors of surface and depth, opacity and transparence, mobility and stasis:

This thoroughness whose traditions have become so reflective,  
your distinction is merely a quill at the bottom of the sea  
tracing forever the fabulous alarms of the mute  
so that in the limpid tosses of your violet dinginess  
a pus appears and lingers like a groan from the collar  
of a reproachful tree whose needles are tired of howling. (CP, 139)

Decay and temporal delay – the 'pus' that visibly 'lingers' – rather than acting as premonitions of latent and repressed violence, are symptomatic of exhaustion in an interminable mobility. O'Hara immerses himself in appearances – indiscriminately.

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subjective or objective. Violence in that way is assimilated by verbal play reminiscent of Roussel — ‘your face […] is the velour of Lesbian sandals with nails in the toes’ (CP, 140) — or of Breton’s and Soupault’s ‘pneus pattes de velours’ in Les Champs magnétiques. (OCI, 65) As the illusion of physical immediacy in sense perception is parodied, things assume and shed off a mystifying and a defamiliarising function indiscriminately:

Grappling with images of toothpaste falling on guitar strings,
your lips are indeed a disaster of alienated star-knots
as I deign to load the hips of the swimming pool, lumber!
with the clattering caporal of destiny’s breast-full,
such exhalations and filthiness falling upon the vegetables!
You will say I am supernatural! (CP, 140)

Banality and fantasy, tale and autobiographical narrative, space and time all collide in ‘Second Avenue’. In a less exalted and less parodic vein than the poem, in his ‘[Notes on Second Avenue]’ of the same year, although hesitant as to whether ‘subject-matter’ can be identified, and since ‘meaning’ — if meaning there is — cannot ‘be paraphrased’, O’Hara attempted to reconstitute an ‘attitude’. (CP, 495) He highlighted some ‘scenes’ from the poem and ended up thinking that breaking it down in constitutive parts ‘makes it seem very jumbled, while actually everything in it either happened to me or I felt happening (saw, imagined) on Second Avenue’. (CP, 497) He wondered, for instance, whether a woman in ‘Second Avenue’ was a woman from a de Kooning painting or whether a woman actually seen on the street. In fact, either on the street or on the canvas, what matters is that he recognises both in the same manner. That O’Hara cannot or will not distinguish between imaginary projection, sense perception and verbal play is symptomatic of his anxiety about the very validity and reality of experience. This is not dissimilar to his anxiety over the possible failure in the subject/object interaction in ‘Meditations in an Emergency’.

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9 In his review of ‘Second Avenue’, Kenneth Koch wrote: ‘To speak historically, I think Second Avenue is evidence that the avant-garde style of French poetry from Baudelaire to Reverdy has now infiltrated the American consciousness to such an extent that it is possible for an American poet to write lyrically in it with perfect ease.’ ‘Review of Second Avenue’, Partisan Review, 28 (January-February 1961), 130-132, reprinted in Frank O’Hara: To be True to a City, pp. 9-11 (p. 10). See also Marjorie Perloff’s discussion of how O’Hara uses Surrealist principles in the poems, Marjorie Perloff, Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), pp. 66-74.
Such anxieties determine his ambivalent intent towards a culture that seems to level the margin between the manifest and the repressed. Throughout, the longing for immediacy is matched by the realisation of the illusory aspect of the difference, or the sameness, between the contents of subjective consciousness and that of the external world.

In like manner, the fragmented self in O’Hara is staged as participating in a predictable and predetermined dispersal; he emphatic effect of a disseminated self is also a token of indiscriminate excess in contemporary culture. In this respect, ‘Second Avenue’ sets the tone for further variations on O’Hara’s projective identifications, inside and outside the dichotomy between life and text:

or are you myself,  
indifferent as a drunkard sponging off a car window?  
Are you effeminate, like an eyelid, or are you feminine,  
like a painting by Picasso? (CP, 142)

It seems that he turns to the creative act because contingent life fails him. Rather than in the end product, O’Hara contemplates how the work’s external and internal elements, the real and the represented coincide fleetingly only in the process of making. Only then, the work assimilates and exceeds life on ‘Second Avenue’. Hence the following flight inside the space of Grace Hartigan’s painting:

and when the pressure asphyxiates and inflames, Grace destroys  
the whirling faces in their dissonant gaiety where it’s anxious,  
lifted nasally to the heavens which is a caroussel grinning  
and spasmodically obliterated with loaves of greasy white paint  
and this becomes like love to her, is what I desire  
and what you, to be able to throw something away without yawning (CP, 149)

O’Hara’s projection onto the painting may equally be read as a description of what his poems cannot fulfil. Unlike Hartigan’s painting, his own ‘Second Avenue’ ends ambivalently with an allegory of the constraining self-containedness of the space of the poem: addressing the problem of form, O’Hara writes:

“You’ve reached the enormous summit of passion  
which is immobility forging an entrail from the pure obstruction of the air.” (CP, 150)

‘Second Avenue’ is one of O’Hara’s most explicit allegories of the conflictual relation between self and world, symptom of both openness and closure in language and experience. These are states his later poems recurrently assumed: the 1956 ‘In
Memory of my Feelings' (CP, 252-56), the 1958 'Ode to Michael Goldberg ('s Birth and Other Births') (CP, 290-298) or the 1962 'Biotherm' (CP, 436-448). Just as his experiences shift ambivalently inside and outside the spaces of his poems, in his encounters O’Hara nostalgically dismisses or parodies coincidences between life and the creative process, such as the one in Grace Hartigan’s painting just described. As we shall see in the second part of this chapter, that the poems shatter the polarity between inside and outside, immersion and distance, is an expression of his awareness that things could not be otherwise.

Shifting between indifference and regret in relation to subjective experiences unaided by the poems, the poems ultimately become the primary catalyst for O’Hara’s experiences. Meant not to represent, the poems are the only experience there is. In this respect, while being as intent as Cornell on unmediated experiences, O’Hara demystifies Cornell’s illusions of transcendence. Not only an expression of his sense of loss of self, token of irony as either empathy or detachment, his poems dramatise his inability to step outside his cultural context. Like the box for Cornell, the poem operates as a generic category, the structure that encompasses both self and world, the form and content of his experiences. O’Hara’s sense of self does not exist outside the poems and they do not exist without it: the poem is a representational and experiential device, the only mode of subjective perception there is, which however, fails life:


Rather than capturing life itself, the poem can only represent by taking on the semblance of life. That ‘mere presence changes everything’ and ‘thoughts disappear’, in his 1959 ‘Poem’, can be read either as a wish to abandon the ‘poem’ and as an expression of his awareness that the ‘poem’ is the only token of life – the ‘breathing’ that will always remain outside it. In an early ironic aside in his mock-surrealist ‘Oranges: 12 Pastorals’ of 1949, he wrote: 10

10 Marjorie Perloff has drawn formal and thematic analogies between O’Hara’s ‘pastorals’ and
By direction we return to our fulfilling world, we are back in the poem. [...] 
O my posterity! This is the miracle: that our elegant invention the natural world redeems by filth. (CP, 8-9)

His 1958 ‘Ode on Causality’ (CP, 302-3) is another expression of his recurring indecision and doubt as to whether another reality exists outside the poem. This uncertainty, at times, makes his intensified projection onto the contingent as agonising as Cornell’s, since it is not ‘that simple’ to know whether a reality other than the reality that goes in the poems exists:

There is the sense of neurotic coherence

you think maybe poetry is too important and you like that

suddenly everyone’s supposed to be veined, like marble

it isn’t that simple but it’s simple enough

the rock is least living of the forms man has fucked. (CP, 302)

Like his anxiety over perception, ‘the sense of neurotic coherence’ results from O’Hara’s ambivalence towards his empathy with his poems and his immersion in a life which hovers paradoxically between a sense of excess of content and lack of critical distance. O’Hara nonetheless dwells on the contingent; on the other hand, the recurring conflict between language and experience in the poems, inflects O’Hara’s anxiety over a reality that remains as unchanged as ‘abstractions’ do. In the 1956 ‘Like’ he wrote:

It’s not so much, 
abstractions are available: 
the lofty period of the mind 
ending a sentence while the pain endures: 
departures, absences. [...] 

And now the ship has gone 
Beyond come, sheets, windows, streets, telephones, and noises:

Surrealist poetry and concluded that O’Hara’s early Surrealist experiments are ‘partial failures because they present a hothouse world under glass, a world cleverly organized around a particular set of images but too remote from the reader, “Memorial Day” succeeds because it fuses the colloquialism and natural speech rhythms of Williams with the dialectic of Dada and Surrealism’. Frank O’Hara, pp. 38-49.
to where I cannot go,
not even a long distance swimmer like my self. (CP, 246)

Whether as precarious and as contingent as life, whether, like Cornell’s boxes, the poem is a self-defeating means to represent, a reminder of fleeting impressions of flights out of time; it is O’Hara’s most consistent and explicit statement on the paradox of experience and the deceptive sense of space. This awareness informs for instance his 1958 reflexive parody ‘A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island’ where the ‘Sun’, knowing that O’Hara ‘loves Manhattan’, reminds him not to lose his ability to take in as much as possible:

always embrace things, people earth
sky stars, as I do, freely and with
the appropriate sense of space. (CP, 307)

O’Hara both embraces and negates Surrealism in respect of how a poem can encompass and express temporality and space; in relation to this, James Breslin distinguishes between the 1956 ‘In Memory of My Feelings’ and a Surrealist poem as follows: unlike the latter, which ‘characteristically works by startling imagistic transformations [...] O’Hara offers not metaphoric transformations but likenesses – not identifications but resemblances’. Breslin develops his discussion of this difference at the level of form: ‘the poem, then creates a dynamic field of proliferating resemblances among parts which, in turn remain independent of each other; they are not pulled together into some full, spherelike form.’

In respect of how O’Hara’s elliptical fragments take on the guise of autobiographical metaphors, expressive of his anxiety over the fact that language is our only means of expressing experience, Breton’s, Eluard’s and Char’s 1930 Ralentir Travaux (OCI, 757-74) constitute an interesting precedent: ironically reflexive, pessimist as to the necessity of language, and optimist in seeing language also as a means of transcending rational meaning.

In ‘In Memory of my Feelings’ O’Hara parodies his own nostalgia for substantive experiences; his allegories of violence, rather than metaphors of disruption, are also expressions of regret. The poem famously opens with a series of metonymic transfers: a series of self/world encounters where mobility subsumes identity and resemblance:
My quietness has a man in it, he is transparent
and he carries me quietly, like a gondola, through the streets.
He has several likenesses, like stars and years, like numerals. (CP, 252)

As in ‘Easter’ and ‘Second Avenue’, O’Hara represents how signs are
interchangeably filled and empty. Neither the self, nor objects can be redeemed, as
O’Hara’s different ‘memories’ bear no difference in kind. Hence his sense of the
superfluity of the metonymic or the metaphoric devices altogether, another reminder
of how resemblances are as deceptive as identities. Sensing an inability to restoring
time as catalyst for either difference or identity in sense perception, O’Hara can only
ambivalently assimilate self-perpetuating appearances:

My transparent selves
flail about like vipers in a pail, writhing and hissing
without panic, with a certain justice of response
and presently the aquiline serpent comes to resemble the Medusa. (CP, 253)

Throughout the poem, form and content, narrative and experience clash. O’Hara’s
metaphors of violence are parodies of how the instance of experience has already
failed, and the instantaneity of comparison already narrativised; hence, his itinerary
from ‘Borneo’ where he went before his ‘[grand-aunt’s] vessels rushed to the surface /
and burst like rockets over the wrinkled / invasion of the Australians’,12 to the
‘Grand Hotel / where mail arrives for [his] incognito’, his adoration for ‘Roman
copies’, or his ‘looking for his Shanghai Lil’. (CP, 253-5) O’Hara’s imaginary
itinerary through time is a metaphor for his consecutive ‘likenesses’ in space and vice
versa. Being explicit about the fact that his ‘likenesses’ are and can only be
ambivalently deceptive – ‘the conception / of the masque barely suggests the sordid
identifications’ (CP, 256) – he implies that deceptive appearances are inescapable and
necessary: ‘memories’ of what we lack or have lost, urging O’Hara to move in space
in search of time. As he put it, ‘to move is to love’ (CP, 256): a movement which,
however, ends equivocally with a sense of lack and imminent closure:

And yet
I have forgotten my loves, and chiefly that one, the cancerous
statue that my body can no longer contain,
against my will

11 Breslin, p. 245.
12 Images still reminiscent of the early years of Surrealism; in ‘Le Pagure Dit’, in Les Champs
magnétiques, Breton and Soupault in ‘Commandements’ wrote that ‘Il y a tant à lire dans ces passages /
Nos veines éclatent fusées belles fusées’. OCI, 102.
against my love

become art, [...]
and I have lost what is always and everywhere
present, the scene of my selves, the occasion of these ruses,
which I myself and singly must now kill
and save the serpent in their midst. (CP, 257)

Like the reduction of objects to things, the collapse of agency is also a metaphor, or simply an effect, of the disjunction between signifier and signified. O'Hara sees that the break from the compactness of the sign has an equally liberating and repressive effect: in breaking from the chain of signification, signifiers fail to recover new repressed contents and remain empty and filled at once. In seeing subjectivity as the product of language, O'Hara parodies the subjectivist illusion of mastery over the world yet regrets that the limits of language are the limits of subjective experience. Similarly, O'Hara denies less the destructive principle than he negates its totalising thrust; his poems may be violent, yet they are not destructive, for they are contained by a seemingly non-causal and open-ended, associative chain. The following instance of O'Hara’s ephemeral and ‘disloyal’ identifications in ‘Second Avenue’ reveals how ‘resemblances’ may be empty precisely because they are interchangeable and already filled with content:

I must bitterly reassure the resurgence of your complaints
for you, like all heretics, penetrate my glacial immodesty,
and I am a nun trembling before the microphone
at a movie première while a tidal wave has seized the theatre
and borne it to Siam, decorated and wrecked its projector. (CP, 140)

O'Hara does not contemplate ‘resemblances’ as tokens of change and ambivalently accepts that they may be as predictable as they are deceptive, as all appearances seem identical. They are ‘independent’ from each other, as James Breslin suggests, only in so far as they fail to alter each other. O’Hara’s reflection on the apparent identity between the poem and subjective experience in ‘Easter’ – identified with a sense of excess and closure – anticipates the ‘resemblances’ in ‘In Memory of my Feelings’:

When the world has walked the tightrope that ties up our eyes
when the world has stretched the rubber skin of sleep
when the world is just a cluttered box for your cluttered box
and charges through the cream of your smiling entrails (CP, 98)

A parallel with Breton’s 1940 ‘Fata Morgana’ allows us to see how ‘identifications’ and analogies are not necessarily ‘pulled together’ in a self-fulfilling manner in
Surrealism; their unity – what James Breslin’s notion of ‘a spherelike form’ implies – is the token of constant interaction and change, and the relation between such ‘parts’ is intended as a temporal, rather than spatial principle. Against the economy of either use or exchange, subjective perception, for Breton, maintains the uncertain distinction between the intent and accident, transformation and identity; like the distinction between the intrinsic and the external, the Surrealist image is equivocally material and abstract:

Ce matin la fille de la montagne tient sur ses genoux un accordéon de chauves-souris blanches
Un jour un nouveau jour cela me fait penser à un objet que je garde
Alignés en transparence dans un cadre des tubes en verre de toutes les couleurs de philtres de liqueurs
Qu’avant de me séduire il ait dû répondre peu importe à quelque nécessité de représentation commerciale
Pour moi nulle œuvre d’art ne vaut ce petit carré fait De l’herbe diaprée à perte de vue de la vie. (OC II, 1185)

Breton’s participation in the urgency and the menacing apathy of objects signposts ‘Fata Morgana’: autobiographical narrative, series of imaginary projections, stage for the dissemination of the subject in a series of equivocal ripostes with the objects of desire. Elliptical and profuse, cryptic and reflexive, ‘Fata Morgana’ is a gloss on the reality and unreality of experience and on the subject’s participation in objects. The arbitrariness and inner logic of any one way in which the world comes to us are at stake. Yet what distinguishes Breton’s experiences and his memories of undefined or specific objects from O’Hara’s, or from Cornell’s experiencing ‘upon contemplation’ of Jan Van Eyck’s _Adoration of the Lamb_ ‘as a beautifully realized, metamorphosed sublimation’ of a ‘painted floral still-life on the side of a delivery wagon’ in 1944,¹³ is not only the intent to alter the structure of experience. It is also that the objects that enter, or spring from, Breton’s esoteric analogies, as well as contingent objects such as Cornell’s “original commercial enseigne of the experience” may or may not exist. The reality or unreality of subjective experience which is the cause of Cornell’s and O’Hara’s anxiety over the ephemeral is the cause of Breton’s euphoric sense of a

contagious potentiality. At the same time, Breton’s synthetic yearning is not devoid either of anxious irony over the inescapable link between language and perception, hence his phonetic and visual play in ‘à perte de vue de la vie’ at the beginnning of the poem: vision’s vanishing point may also be the limit of subjective experience.

‘Fata Morgana’ is an allegory of the dialectic and tentative reconciliation between space and time: through verbal play, anachronism or projective desire, Breton seeks to recover ciphers of esoteric revelation. Interchangeably, words and sense perception suspend and perpetuate the analogical process. In the stream of the diverse things that ‘there are’, in the midst of which the ‘it’ and the ‘I’ alternate, Breton adds ‘Comme c’est joli qu’est-ce que ça rappelle’ (OC II, 1186); a reminder of the non-contradiction between empathy and distance followed by ripostes where the ‘you’ and the ‘I’ are both same and other. In ‘Fata Morgana’, complementarity and antagonism cancel each other out:

Si j’étais une ville dis-tu Tu serais Ninive sur le Tigre
Si j’étais un instrument de travail Plût au ciel noir tu serais la canne des cueilleurs dans les verreries. (OC II, 1186)

Further along in the poem, some other day ‘this’ – which can be more than any one thing, said or unsaid, experienced or not – makes him think of an ‘object’ ‘kept’ by Wolfgang Paalen, a table of nautical knots that has outlived its use value. (OC II, 1187) Such analogies are generated throughout. At the same time, Breton is under no illusion that ‘Fata Morgana’ is no substitute for reality, it rather is an ambivalently subjective and objective token of experience. Unlike O’Hara’s poems, ‘Fata Morgana’ becomes an experience to the extent that it is about it. Like the whirlwind that restores the illusion of childhood where everything exists for the ‘self’ only, until we begin to distinguish and relate ‘what is written on us’ to ‘what we write ourselves’; the poem is a metaphor of Breton’s seeking a ‘grid’ whose intrinsic and external blueprints cease to be juxtaposed to each other. (OC II, 1187) It may be that the analogies generated by a bed that fights against changing skies at high speed (OC II, 1188-9) are such instances where the blueprints coincide. This is paralleled in Breton’s blending of autobiographical circumstances and allegories of erotic union, in turning fantasy into an allusive allegory of memory. Therefore the following is not
only an instance of imagined projection, or an incantatory recurrence of the mummies that Breton must have seen in the *Musée égyptien* in Marseilles:

C'est toi c'est moi à tâtons sous l'éternel déguisement
Dans les entrelacs de l'histoire momie d'ibis [...] 
Je suis Nietzsche commençant à comprendre qu'il est à 
La fois Victor-Emmanuel et deux assassins des jour-
naux Astu momie d'ibis (OCII, 1192-3)

Whereas Breton sought to counter the paradox of the excess and emptiness of signs by turning to experiences that may be irreducible to language alone, O'Hara sought refuge inside language: ironically, the openness of his poems is the token of the closure of culture. Embracing anything from mass-produced objects to states of consciousness, O'Hara's assemblages, like his 'eyes', are more 'indiscriminate' than irrational. As discussed, he confronts the indiscriminate mobility of self and things, by negating the dichotomies between the identical and the different, sense perception and language. Conversely, analogical thought is the only guise a utopian flight out of such closures may take, and that Breton can recognise and identify with. O'Hara demystifies the potentiality of objects and dwells on their unchanged and unchanging aspects, even in the most incongruous encounters. At the same time, his projective fantasies and textual play are invested with an urgency for release from the realm of things. That O'Hara sustains neither identity nor discrepancy between self and world, and that his 'resemblances' rather than disruptive, are symptomatic of the mobility of language can be read as an implied critique of Surrealism.

While seeing language as the unconscious driving force of his poems, he also came to realise that this process is also repressive because it is inescapable. Although O'Hara predicated his Surrealist-derived works on the dialectic between process and end product, he no longer sees the object as a cipher. While in Cornell's boxes, accident takes on the appearance of a ciphered purpose, accidental appearances in O'Hara, or else manifest content, is all there is. If the box was intended as experience distilled, O'Hara's excessive and cumulative experiences symbolically dismantle the box back into its file/dossier status. O'Hara embraces the undesirable and alienating contexts that Cornell, after all, can only partially shed off from his boxes. Like Cornell's exhaustive and detailed descriptions of the making of his objects and of the 'ephemera' that do not go into the box, O'Hara's reflexive poems can also be seen as
a sublimation of a repressed longing for process. In that, his lists are reminiscent of Cornell’s obsessively assembled files; the collage effects in his juxtapositions are as rational as Cornell’s taxonomic principles are irrational. In either case, the cumulative principle may also be read as a critique of a saturated culture. O’Hara emphasises the surrogate function of any object/catalyst for a lost immediacy: he reduces defamiliarising devices to mechanisms which can only bear disillusioned and deceptive memories of such immediacy. In his poems, process, origin and end product are interchangeable yet distinct, and Surrealist categories are historicised forms of projective desire for an impossible transcendence. By implicitly opposing the Surrealist paradigm, O’Hara is critical of any possibility of seeing resistance, complicity and detachment as opposed. As discussed, this applies equally to the role of subjectivity and to the subject’s relation to the object. In his poems, accident and chance are not only principles destructive of rationality, critical of the ways in which the world comes to us, but the regulating principles of our experiences. His poems parodically reenact how the manifest or covert violence in our encounters with the world has been confined into relations of exchange. In historicising Surrealism, O’Hara reminds us how violence and the free play of signs is integral to a culture of consumption: his poems are allegories of exchange and not of rupture. As we shall see next, through his ironic mastery of the symptomatic character of his poems, O’Hara also negates the possibility of critique.
4.2 O'Hara’s critique of Surrealism and the negation of critique

O my coevals! embarrassing
memories! pastiches! jokes!
All your pleasuaunces and
the vividness of your ills
are only fertilizer for
the kids. [...]  
I,
at twenty four, already
find the harrowing laugh
of children at my heels—
directed at me! the Dada
baby! [...]  
O my coevals! we cannot die
too soon. Art is sad and
life is vapid. (CP, 38)

O’Hara’s ‘embarrassing memories’ in his 1950 ‘Night Thoughts in Greenwich Village’, ironic as they are, may also be an expression of regret; regret for artworks and experiences valued for defamiliarising us – ‘the harrowing laugh’ – from ‘a vapid life’. In this instance, O’Hara’s parodic intent – ‘art is sad’ – is as curative and traumatic as Cornell’s, recalling the lack of allegories of opposition while refusing to deplore their loss.

Throughout his work, O’Hara addressed the historicity of the avant-garde with a disillusioned, yet still regretful, irony. As he allusively put in the 1952 ‘Jane Bathing’:

Day out on the bus we read headlines ALL THAT’S NEW FITS so we don’t fight. We’re sneaky enough to stick together, the sky so splendidly compromising in powder puff tweed green. O the glances like nipples! And in every other wave all the we don’t desire screaming with envy. Not fear drapes the testy two; a welling in the pupils of the strangers. (CP, 90)

Both the defamiliarising potential of the urban scape, and the intention to ‘fight’ seem trivial and devoid of any shock-value. O’Hara came back to this in his 1965 interview with Edward Lucie-Smith, where, in response to the value of novelty, he said: ‘western civilization, however, has really put a, laid an awful load on that thing because so many things have already been done. What would you do that would be different and not boring?’ 14 In the light of this, as we shall see, his approach to the

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14 Frank O’Hara, Standing Still and Walking in New York, ed. by Donald Allen (Bolinas, California: Grey Fox, 1975), p. 9
critical import of his poems, as well his encounters with artworks and things alike, is informed by an ambivalence which he often resists, yet which appears necessary.

In his analysis of O’Hara’s affinities with the visual arts, Surrealism and commodity culture, Charles Molesworth stressed O’Hara’s own wish that his poems ‘assume the status of things, and […] run the risk that they would sink to the level of commodities’, in keeping with his ‘refusal to mark off clear aesthetic patterns’ and ‘his insistence that the poems bear all the marks of their occasional nature, and his deliberately non-purified language’. Yet this ‘risk’ is what allowed to posit ‘aesthetic patterns’ and the structure of the commodity as interchangeable.

Charles Molesworth also suggested that O’Hara faces the irrationality of the everyday through ‘the more directly surrealist mode’, which consists in ‘common objects perform[ing] fantastic maneuvers, where transformed memories and bizarre projections erupt in counterpoint against an almost relaxed, reflective structure’. Through collage-effects and objets trouvés, what Molesworth calls ‘the mode of “surreal serendipity”, he ‘maintain[s] a level of interest commensurate with the world of objects’. He describes the way in which ‘idiosyncrasy’ gives way to ‘anonymity’ as reminiscent of ‘the scraps of printed matter in a Schwitters collage or the disjecta membra of a Cornell box […] floating between the ultimately arbitrary and the ultimately determined’. Yet as the subjectivist mark in Cornell resists rather than liberates the alienating potential of objects, anonymity and idiosyncrasy do not clash in O’Hara: they are as elusive and deceptive as each other.

Molesworth concludes that ‘a sharp dialectic of freedom and obsession energiz[es] the poems; in spite of their desire to be objects, they retain numinous possibilities […] [they] finally do assert a set of values’. With regard to the possibilities of objects, as argued in the first part of this chapter, O’Hara’s affinity to Surrealism is formal as much as it is a matter of standpoint: in assimilating Surrealist categories, he questioned the paradoxes of his own poems. Surrealism becomes a defense mechanism, a tentative device that sublimates the ‘common objects’ that he

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16 Molesworth, p. 215.
ultimately fails to alter and the repressed ‘immediacy’ of which he fails to restore. If so, Molesworth’s contention that O’Hara seeks ‘the object-status for his poems in order to preserve their ‘immediacy’, so that they do not become vehicles of a ‘truth’ of whatever kind needs to be nuanced.\(^{18}\)

Moreover, in a manner that would make Cornell’s heightened responses to artworks and everyday objects seem inadvertently parodie, O’Hara presents his affinities as coincidental, trivial and idiosyncratic at the same time. In relation to this, John Lowney, in his discussion of O’Hara’s ‘Memorial Day 1950’, has noted that O’Hara involves the formal aspects of avant-garde techniques in order to question ‘the polarity of creation and destruction’ and, we might add, his Surrealist affinity: he ‘portrays the postmodernist representation of the past as a mode of bricolage’ through forms that primarily ‘transform our perceptions of past forms’. Lowney goes on; the ‘parodic play on modes of rebellion underscores the complex historicity of any aesthetic, including (and especially) that of its own’.\(^{19}\) Famously, in his ‘Memorial Day 1950’, O’Hara credits Picasso for making him ‘tough and quick, and the world; / just as in a minute plane trees are knocked down / outside my window by a crew of creators.’ (CP, 17) It is neither the distinction between reality and form, nor Picasso’s way of relating one to the other that are at stake here, but rather how O’Hara’s poems assimilate historical reality and form by disempowering the defamiliarising potential in either:\(^{20}\)

Through all the surgery I thought
I had a lot to say, and named several last things
Gertrude Stein hadn’t had time for; but then
the war was over, those things had survived
and even when you’re scared art is no dictionary.
Max Ernst told us that. (CP, 17)

This awareness was anticipated in the 1949 ‘The Muse Considered as a Demon Lover’ (CP, 12-3) where he parodied Ernst’s hallucinations. His insight into the historicity of Ernst’s forms is underscored by a disillusioned indifference towards the loss of the qualitative distinctions between art and life, representation and experience:

\(^{17}\) Molesworth, p. 224.

\(^{18}\) Molesworth, p. 221.

\(^{19}\) John Lowney, ‘The “Post-anti-esthetic” poetics of Frank O’Hara’, Contemporary Literature, 32: 2 (Summer 1991), 244-64 (p. 250, p. 251).
At that time all of us began to think with our bare hands and even with blood all over them, we knew vertical from horizontal, we never smeared anything except to find out how it lived. (CP, 17)

We can find out how things 'live' only deceptively, as there always seems to be something missing in any attempt to define what is distinctive about life or art, or conversely what levels the dichotomy altogether. At the same time, O'Hara is playfully uneasy towards the discrepancy between concepts and things, a discrepancy which also acts as a metaphor of the discrepancy between life and art:

I don't need a piano to sing, and naming things is only the intention to make things. A locomotive is more melodious than a cello. [...] Now my father is dead and has found out you must look things in the belly, not in the eye. (CP, 18)

While exposing the notion of the artistic autonomy, O'Hara tends to abstract artworks from the ambivalently mystifying and demystifying aspects of things: we might remember how in his projection onto Grace Hartigan’s painting in ‘Second Avenue’, he tentatively contemplated the artwork as undermining the system of representation, willing as he was to see the object/image as the catalyst for immediate experience.

With regard to this, O'Hara often seems to posit visual forms as more apt both to share in and be dissociated from external reference at once; he playfully projects onto the visual what the verbal medium can only feign. This is not devoid of a sense of paradox, evident in the ironic relativism of his art criticism which, as he put it, rests on his response to ‘individual qualities’, since after all ‘it’s all in the same environment which I live in'; to which he added: ‘there is good painting and there’s bad painting and there’s indifferent painting and there’s superficial painting and there’s frivolous painting’. It all depends ‘on the individual artist’ and what matters most is ‘taking a responsible attitude towards the medium’. 21

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20 See also Lowney’s discussion of ‘Memorial Day 1950’, 250, 251, 252.
21 O’Hara in a 1965 interview to Edward Lucie-Smith, Standing Still, p. 6, p. 7, p. 8. We might note that Duchamp had made a similar statement in a 1956 article for Art News where he wrote that ‘what I have in mind is that art may be bad, good or indifferent, but whatever adjective is used, we must call it art, and bad art is still art in the same way that a bad emotion is still an emotion’. Unlike O’Hara’s emphasis on the ‘attitude towards the medium’, Duchamp dissociated the work from the artist’s intent, stressing that the artwork is a form of personal expression that is, however, complemented and altered by its reception. See Marcel Duchamp, ‘The creative act’, Art News, 56: 4 (Summer 1957), 28-9.
In the 1956 ‘Why I Am Not A Painter’, O’Hara presents what painting does as what his poems cannot do. On the other hand, the reason why O’Hara is a poet and ‘not a painter’ is because visual and verbal forms and codes are as arbitrary as they are distinctive from each other. This he illustrates with an anecdote about Michael Goldberg hesitating between an iconic or verbal representation of ‘sardines’ and his own idea of writing a line about the colour ‘orange’. His impulse resulted in ‘twelve poems’ called ‘ORANGES’ just as Goldberg’s resulted in a painting ‘called SARDINES’ which he subsequently saw in a gallery.\(^{22}\) (CP, 262)

Moreover, his descriptions of instances of empathetic immediacy are not devoid of critical distance. In his widely discussed ‘Digression on Number 1, 1948’ of 1956, artworks are as quantifiable as commodities:\(^{23}\) in ‘a fine day for seeing’, O’Hara lists what he has seen, one after the other – ‘ceramics, during lunch hour, by / Miró […] the sea by Léger; / light, complicated Metzingers / and a rude awakening by Brauner / a little table by Picasso, pink’. After all these matter-of-fact encounters, in a Cornell-like manner, he seeks refuge in Pollock’s paintings:\(^{24}\) his otherwise reified relation to the artwork and the commodity is sublimated in the description of the creative act:

\[
\text{Pollock, white, harm} \\
\text{will not fall, his perfect hand} \\
\text{and the many short voyages. They’ll never fence the silver range.} \]
\]

(CP, 260)

O’Hara equivocally presents his immersion in the contingent and his immersion in artworks in terms of illusory glimpses of immediacy. Marjorie Perloff has analysed O’Hara’s formal and biographical relation to Abstract Expressionism on the basis of the effect of ‘immediacy’: she has drawn a parallel with Pollock, and noted that ‘when these syntactic and prosodic devices […] are used in conjunction, we get a poetry of great speed, openness, flexibility, and defiance of expectations’. Like an

\(22\) In a vein opposite to our reading, Marjorie Perloff sees the poem as ‘a profound jest […] For in fact, Frank’s art turns out to be just like Mike’s. […] the original word or image merely triggers a chain of associations that ultimately leads straight to its demise’. \textit{Frank O’Hara}, p. 112.

\(23\) It is interesting to note that Meyer Shapiro, in his 1956 lecture on ‘The liberating quality of avant-garde art’, noted that although the avant-garde works in opposition to the mainstream, ‘paintings are the most costly man-made objects in the world’. Overall, his views on Abstract Expressionism are not dissimilar to O’Hara’s, although Shapiro’s tone is at a considerable remove from O’Hara’s demystified attitude; Shapiro states the paradox and concludes that ‘painting […] helps to maintain the critical spirit and the ideals of creativeness and self-reliance, which are indispensable to the life of our culture’. \textit{Art News}, 56: 4 (Summer 1956), 41, 42.

\(24\) On O’Hara’s affinity with artworks and Abstract Expressionism in particular, see Perloff, \textit{Frank
“all-over” painting by Pollock, an O'Hara lyric seems ‘intentionally deprived of a beginning, middle and end; it is an instantaneous performance’. In Perloff’s terms, the visual and verbal medium produce similar effects and O’Hara’s ‘syntactic energy’ is posited as ‘the equivalent to the painter’s “push and pull”.’ She sees ‘the rapid cuts from one spatial or temporal zone to another’ as complementary: ‘everything is absorbed into the NOW’, the now of self-presence, or of its textual nature. Yet, as argued, the fact that O'Hara seeks to integrate temporality in the spaces of his texts questions the very possibility of doing that either through visual or verbal forms, and also questions whether a temporal break from such self-contained spaces can actually occur. O'Hara is left with the apparent discontinuity or the deceptive identity between the work and his perception of it.

Reminiscent of the resemblances in ‘In Memory of my Feelings’, in his 1958 ‘Ode to Michael Goldberg (‘s Birth and Other Births)’, the birth of the poem and the painting are indistinct:

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to “return” safe who will never feel safe
and loves to ride steaming in the autumn of
centuries of useless aspiration towards artifice
are you feeling useless, too, Old Paint?
I am really an Indian at heart, knowing it is all
all over but my own ceaseless going, never
to be just a hill of dreams and flint for someone later
but a hull laved by the brilliant Celebes response,
empty of treasure to the explorers who sailed me not. (CP, 296)
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We cannot fail to notice the reference to Ernst’s 1921 Célébes ou L’éléphant Célébes; a painted collage comprising a metallic zoomorphic construction of an elephant occupying the greatest part of the painting, an abstract geometric construction on top of the elephant, a construction of superimposed tubes on the right, a headless female nude figure on the bottom right and a flag-pole held by the

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25 Perloff, Frank O'Hara, p. 133. This parallel was not meant to contradict the fact that, as Perloff notes, ‘as a poet, O’Hara displays a certain ambivalence to the great Abstract Expressionists, an ambivalence that creates interesting tensions in his art criticism’, p. 85. In respect of O’Hara’s affinity to Abstract Expressionist painting, in the introduction to the reedition of her 1977 monograph, she notes that with hindsight, the parallel would have to be reassessed in the light of the gendered aspects of O’Hara’s writing. Frank O’Hara, pp. xi-xxx.
26 Oil on canvas, 125 x 107 cm, Tate Gallery, London, reproduced in Pere Gimferrer, Max Ernst (Paris: Albin Michel, 1983), plate 35; also in Max Ernst: A Retrospective with essays by Karin Von
elephant’s tusks on the left. The name Celebes is thought to be derived from obscene school rhymes from Ernst’s childhood. The painting is generally interpreted as a critique of bourgeois values and male sexuality, integral to Ernst’s critique of the authority of the Father; the blurring of organic and mechanical elements is seen as an allusion to the First World War. Rather than contextualising the work in a historical or psychoanalytic frame, O’Hara for his part leaves the reference puzzling and gives no clue that would outdo another. Beyond any link to the fact ‘that the elephant’s gigantic hollow shape comes from an illustration of a Sudanese corn bin’, or to Apollinaire’s use of the fable of the Biblical Behemoth, which was depicted as an elephant in ‘L’Enchanteur pourrissant’, he only alludes to the hollowness of Celebes. What is made explicit, is that O’Hara resents having never become ‘flint for someone later’, and that his self and his poems remain a ‘hull’ flowing along surfaces and never breaking into depth. It is telling of his faith and disbelief alike in the creative act that he deleted the following from the poem:

Well Mike, are you still listening?  
and do you still believe a little what I am telling you about my life  
or have I drifted upward into falsehood? (CP, 541)

In its autonomy, the artwork bears the imprint of subjectivity, which here O’Hara describes as being at odds with the presumed intrinsic truth of form. Following on from this, in his 1957 ‘Ode to Willem de Kooning’, O’Hara still seeks to come to terms with his difficulty in establishing a sequential order between art and reality:

Stars of all passing sights,  
language, thought and reality,  
“I am assuming that one knows  
what it is to be ashamed”  
and that the light we seek  
is broad and pure. (CP, 284)

He is as nostalgic for the organic artwork as much as he is anxious to dismiss it altogether. Like his anxiety over perception, his uncertain attitude towards form is an expression of his indecision over the conflict between autonomy and closure; this is manifest in his concern about the form/content relation in his own poems:

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Maur, Sigrid Metken, Uwe M. Schneede and Sarah Wilson (Munich: Prestel, 1991), plate 66; also in Edward Quinn, plate 98, p. 85.

Now please tell me if you think these poems are filled with disgusting self-pity, if there are "holes" in them, if the surface isn't kept "up", if there are recognisable images, if they show nostalgia for the avant-garde, or if they don't have "push" and "pull", and I'll keep working on them until each is a foot high.  

Parallel to his anxiety over form, O'Hara's totalizing embrace of contingent content is also an attempt to overcome it: when Mayakovsky, de Kooning or Pasternak 'come in' the poem, O'Hara acknowledges that the delusion of aesthetic autonomy is necessary for the redemption of the mundane. Both Mayakovsky and de Kooning, he writes, have done 'works as big as cities where the life in the work is autonomous (not about actual city life) and yet similar'. (CP, 497) This similarity is as comforting as it is worrying since it is seen as a correlate to the form/content dichotomy in his own work:

the verbal elements [...] are intended [...] to keep the surface of the poem high and dry, not wet, reflective and self-conscious. Perhaps the obscurity comes in here, in the relationship between the surface and the meaning, but I like it since the one is the other (you have to use words) and I hope the poem to be the subject, not just about it. (CP, 497)

In the first part of this chapter, we have seen how O'Hara sets up 'resemblances' against principles of either identity or difference; similarly, the indecision between form and content redeems the poem as a means to come to terms with the world. It is the logic of non-contradiction, and not a misguided formalism, that leads O'Hara to believe that 'in the relationship between the surface and the meaning [...] the one is the other.' (CP, 497) Therefore, his denial of the discrepancy between content and form, 'surface' and 'meaning', is not at odds with his affected rejection of technique. Given the simultaneous effect of materiality and abstraction in the medium, technique may also potentially defeat content. Therefore, in leaving Surrealism and the historical avant-garde behind, O'Hara takes a step further from both Cornell's false redemptions and from the Abstract Expressionists' sublimation of action in form.  

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28 From a letter O'Hara wrote to Larry Rivers in 1957, which Rivers incorporated later in a collage; cited by Perloff, in Frank O'Hara, p. 22, pp. 204-5n.  
29 The parallel between O'Hara's poems and Abstract Expressionist art on the basis of their complicity with the cultural politics of the Cold War has been noted. John Strand in his 'Do You Remember the Fifties?', contrasts the Existentialist notions of alienation and angst to the American principle of action as symptomatic of 'America's fit of self-absorption [which] was present, too, in action painting's "total engagement of the spirit in the expression of meaning" as Frank O'Hara defined it in speaking of Pollock's technique'. O'Hara's poems share with Pollock's paintings a similar ethic of a negating distance and self-reference. John Strand, 'Do You Remember the 1950s?', Art International, 4
Moreover, O'Hara's empathetic attitude to art determines his attitude towards principles of production. Like Cornell’s boxes reflect an illusory self-sufficiency, O'Hara’s poems reflect on the autonomy of culture. In the 1965 interview, speaking of artworks he said that ‘what really makes me happy is when something just falls into place as if it were a conversation or something’. This is what links his long Surrealist-derived compositions and his conversational ‘I do this, I do that’ poems. Sights, sounds, a piece of news, his lunch, his free associations, a book of poems by Reverdy, his friends’s paintings, all fall into place in a system of exchange, geared towards gratification, only seemingly unintelligible and gratuitous.

As any one artefact and any one concept – as was the case with sardines and oranges – blurs the relation between production and consumption, the poems integrate the logic of the commodity in a reverse manner: instead of erasing the traces of process, the making of the poem is on display and adds to the attraction of the poem. This is at a considerable remove from the Surrealist paradigm: in Surrealist collage, the act of cutting and pasting was a metaphor of the violence underlying our relation to the commodity: its attractiveness lies in the effacing of all traces of the process of their making. Ernst’s collages turned this most fundamental aspect of the commodity, the effacing of the process that went into its production, against itself: the seamless appearance of the collages was meant to intensify the incongruity between the objects brought together in the most unpredictable contexts.

While Cornell’s boxes enact the affinity between the autonomous artwork and the commodity, O’Hara integrates the avant-garde work and avant-garde intent at large into the structure of the commodity by displaying process and accident. As allegories of commodification of external and inner realities, the poems share in a process in which the traces of cause and effect are indistinct. His parodic descriptions of the most mundane experiences and of artefacts alike, like Cornell’s boxes, involve the antinomy between the aesthetic and the functional, purposelessness and exchange. Like Cornell’s objects, O’Hara’s poems are patterned on modes of consumption rather than in the unresolved relation between process and end product.

(Autumn 1988), 6-12 (p. 11).
30 Standing Still, p. 21.
As the object in Cornell is filled with cultural narratives and at the same time remains essentially itself, the conflict between the external and the intrinsic aspects of objects are neutralised, or else unresolved in O’Hara. Ironically, the random succession of objects in the poems, like Cornell’s painstaking arrangement of objects in the boxes, is equally a subjective mark and symptom of how the inner self and the world of things are no longer distinct. O’Hara’s indiscriminate empathy with his own poems, artworks, and commodities, is complex and transparent, and the non-contradiction between autonomy and openness is, as argued, recurrently at stake.

As Mutlu-Konuk Blasing had pointed out, in keeping with O’Hara’s ‘personist’ wish for the poems to be as sexy as a pair of pants ‘tight enough so that everyone will want to go to bed with you’ (CP, 498), the poems take on functions of either use or exchange ambivalently. He reminds us that ‘while [he] was writing’ a poem for someone he was in love with, he realised that he could ‘use the telephone instead’, if he wanted. Such irony might leave us wondering whether automatic writing, or verbal simulation of pathological states, could occur over the phone or whether they were (and here Breton’s and Éluard’s irony turns against them) only possible when immaculately conceived? A poem ‘over the phone’, O’Hara goes on, is ‘put […] squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style’; ‘the poem is correspondingly gratified […] at last between two persons instead of two pages. In all modesty, I confess that it may be the death of literature as we know it’. The ‘poem’ is gratified in the subject’s delusion of gratification. Instead of turning the violence involved in consumption against commodified experiences, like Cornell’s boxes, O’Hara’s poems never escape from instrumentality. Yet this does not mean that his demystifying cynicism is devoid of a social intent; he notes how ‘glad’ he is for having got to the ‘end of literature as we know it’, ‘before Alain Robbe-Grillet, and for the fact that his personism, ‘like Africa, is on its way’. (CP, 499)

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31 See also Blasing, p. 31.
32 Rather than token of O’Hara’s anxiety for agency, Bredbeck sees O’Hara’s poems as ‘like Lucky Pierre, materially constituted in the present by his ability to straddle (among other things) the exclusionary binary of top and bottom, the text as trick straddles the binaries of object and agent, of inertia and activity’. Bredbeck, 279.
Still, O'Hara’s parodies are liberating and playful; be that as it may, the anxiety to represent and to restore life inside and outside art, inside and outside his autobiographical circumstantial narratives, determines his distance, resistance and complicity. It may also be that through parody, he resists the inadequacy of his own poems, which are as parodic in relation to themselves as they are of the larger culture of exchange. Similarly, the way he integrates earlier avant-garde tactics in historicised formal mannerisms suggests both his most incisive insight and the limit of his critique.

We might remember at this point that parodic reversal was characteristic of early Surrealist experiments with language, in the form of puns and in syntactical and semantic play which exposed the tension between subjective intentionality and the socialised production of meaning. The discrepancy between different forms, signifier and signified, codes and contents was at stake. The ironic denial of meaning in Éluard’s and Péret’s 1924 152 proverbes mis au goût du jour is an example. By ‘updating’ cultural contents, Éluard and Péret expose the arbitrariness of signs as playfully as O’Hara. Meant to defamiliarise us from manifest contents, unlike O’Hara’s, Éluard and Péret’s irony does not negate the oppositional potential of the arbitrariness of signs:

Quand un œuf casse des œufs, c’est qu’il n’aime pas les omelettes. […]
Un crabe, sous n’importe quel autre nom, n’oublierait pas la mer. […]
User sa corde en se penda n. […]
Je suis venu, je me suis assis, je suis parti.^^

O’Hara’s parodies of cultural contents show the gaps in signification closing, rather than deepening: his entries in his 1961 ‘Biographia Letteraria’ (CP, 464-5) can be seen as such parodies of the Surrealist intent. It is a verbal assemblage where he mockingly signposts the banality of intellectual affinities:34 CHARLES DICKENS ‘hated pretense. He was the founder of Social Security’; when it comes to TERESA

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34 Such precedents are also to be found in View: André Masson’s Pages from a Notebook in the April 1943 issue of View, where Masson signposts his affinities in a reflexion on art, are at the opposite end of O’Hara’s demystified parodies. This goes as far back as Breton’s and Aragon’s playful ‘Treize Études Cherchez Monsieur’ of 1918, OCI, 25.
OF AVILA, his ‘ink is hardly dry upon the page’, and for SAINT PAUL, ‘The light that failed.’ That his ‘Biographia Letteraria’ and his ‘Lines for the Fortune Cookies’ are unlike Éluard’s and Péret’s ‘proverbs’ is a matter of intent as much as it is a matter of context. Ironic as they might be, his parodies do not necessarily imply that things could have been otherwise. Hence his playful complicity with improbable comic trivia – ‘You will marry the first person who tells you your eyes are like scrambled eggs’ – or that ‘Your first volume of poetry will be published as soon as you finish it’. (CP, 465-6) In all of the above and in a context where anything – and not only Joan Mitchell’s wedding – can be any of the following, it is hard to see Surrealism at work:

It’s so
original, hydrogenic, anthropomorphic, fiscal, post anti-esthetic,
bland, unpicturesque and William Carlos Williamsian!
It’s definitely not 19th Century, it’s not even Partisan Review, it’s new, it must be vanguard! (CP, 265)

O’Hara’s parody starts from where Cornell’s nostalgia leaves off. The ‘post-anti-esthetic’ is ironically directed at both his own poems and the role of the contemporary avant-garde. Occasioned by her marriage to Joe Hazan, as John Lowney has noted, in the ‘Poem Read at Joan Mitchell’s’, O’Hara ‘self-consciously reflects on the poem’s own place in the “tradition of the new”. The description of the marriage as ‘post-anti-esthetic’ among other things, ‘combines economic and aesthetic terms, situating this poetic act within the cultural politics of representing the “vanguard”. With regard to this, Mutlu-Konuk Blasing has also stressed that O’Hara’s postmodernism is radical, precisely because it is complicit. This she illustrates by showing how his works and views on art are critical of the equation between aesthetic and political avant-gardism. As shown, this can be nuanced through his Surrealist affinity, which rather than a historicised avant-garde idiom, can also be read as an implied critique of O’Hara’s ‘post-anti-aesthetic’ against the grain.

In the context of O’Hara’s hesitancy between complicity and opposition, Surrealism emerges as a reminder of the complementarity that underscores O’Hara’s antinomies: O’Hara embraces a paradox, the logic of which is transparent. O’Hara

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35 Lowney, 244.
36 Blasing, pp. 30-66.
accepts the paradox whereby any alienating device reflects and is interchangeable with instances of alienation in culture; any form of critique replicates that which it seeks to oppose. This is why his intense sense of the physical aspects of artworks also questions the possibility of getting to know anything outside the medium.

On the other hand, as argued, O'Hara's acceptance of the poem's link to its cultural context stems from his refusal or inability to contemplate self and things differently. As he does not see an alternative to the structure and appearance of his poems, his poems exist as expressions of a self-consciousness laid bare, an awareness that forms are empty with no intrinsic qualities of their own, independent of their content. Still, O'Hara is 'needed by things' - as he ironically and poignantly put it in 'Meditations in an Emergency': 'I am needed by things as the sky must be above the earth' - (CP, 197) as much as he needs his own poems. In his '[Statement for The New American Poetry]' he wrote with both irony and earnestness: 'I am mainly preoccupied with the world as I experience it, and at times when I would rather be dead the thought that I could never write another poem has so far stopped me.' (CP, 500) At the same time, he recognises that the need to write a poem is as overdetermined as the most mundane needs - for a sandwich, a phonecall or a coke - 'needs' that keep O'Hara's poems going. In realising that 'Having a Coke with You' 'is even more fun' than all kinds of things, he also realises that 'the portrait show seems to have no faces in it at all, just paint / you suddenly wonder why in the world anyone ever did them [...] it seems they were all cheated of some marvelous experience / which is not going to go wasted on me which is why I'm telling you about it'. (CP, 360)

As I have discussed, Cornell and O'Hara share similar dilemmas: whereas Cornell seeks to rescue objects from a demystifying and increasingly self-conscious culture, O'Hara consistently negates such false redemptions. Whereas Cornell seeks to elevate banality, O'Hara takes banalities at face value precisely because they are anti-climactic and because they reveal a self-indulgent order, simultaneously transparent and opaque. Cornell sublimates the public in the private, and O'Hara works through the private in public. In relation to this, in their yearning for transcendance, the boxes seem ascetic and hermetic; in O'Hara's poems on the other hand, the urge for
Immediate gratification is integral to an impervious immanence. In O’Hara’s long and intricate compositions as well as in his oral, uncontrived ones of the 1950s, the duality of the rational and the irrational collapses only in order to integrate the contingent in a paradoxical instrumental gratuitousness. O’Hara builds up an anti-elitist elitism by ultimately dismissing anything intrinsic in either the material or the formal by putting his poems and artworks alike on the same level as artefacts in which the traces of production are taken over by consumption.

In O’Hara’s poems, the dichotomy between a negating and a complicit attitude is not easily resolved. In parodying the autonomy of form and by demystifying the avant-garde intent to close the gap between life and art, he also turns against the legitimacy of his own poems. His writing sublimates the modernist illusion of formal autonomy, just as it undermines the avant-garde dialectic between subjective intent and objective change. Given this, how are we to justify O’Hara’s will to preserve the poem?

As argued, although O’Hara negates the promise of change, his poems rest on his sense of temporal urgency; like Cornell’s boxes, his poems are closed systems whose semblance of limitless openness withholds no promise, but it offers only its own limitations. While he sees the contingent aspects of any one form or content as susceptible to obstruct habitual perception and the production/consumption cycle, O’Hara does not so much deny their potential, as confront the impossibility of realising such potential in the first place. His poems navigate a mobile yet closed space, the vastness of which comes across as a deceptive openess. A claustrophobic sense of space haunts O’Hara’s open compositions.

Moreover, similar to Cornell’s sense of the urgency of objects, the expansion of the poems parallels and offsets the proliferation of things. That ‘the hideaway was made secure against the hares’ (CP, 324) – referring to the collection of Breton’s poems, Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares – reveals his frustration at the predictable randomness of his own chance finds and encounters; encounters which, like his poems, are parodic, or nostalgic. Correcting Williams’s optimism in View, his own poems are symptomatic of what Williams regretted and redeemed in Breton: ‘[a] world whose end we think we see–and see nothing clear–nothing but change without
reference to THINGS, of which the world is made. Until we learn through such as Breton how to apply our senses anew. With regard to this, O'Hara's perspective on Surrealism exposes the historicity of forms, and demystifies illusions of projective immediacy like Cornell's. O'Hara and, as we shall see, John Ashbery are haunted by semblances of selfhood that proliferate uncontrollably: in the proliferation of things, O'Hara and Ashbery recognise the movement of the self. Excessive and diffuse, the self, like the poem, replicates saturated cultural spaces.

Ultimately, it is not the lack of a critical intent but rather the 'system's' resistance — which Ashbery also parodically confronts — that determines O'Hara and Ashbery's historicisation of Surrealism. Their implied critique of Surrealism reverses the Surrealist intent: while Surrealist techniques sought to expose reification, reified relations become paradoxically critical in the face of the inefficacy of disruptive devices. At the same time, in exposing how either reflexive or representational principles assume contingency only inadequately, they recurringly bring back their anxiety about how both the poem and life fail them. In O'Hara, negating and totalising, the Surrealist alternative is assimilated into the illusions that an unnameable order generates and represses. In its negativity, his irony, shows the destruction of the boundary between his poems and the reality outside his poems as deceptive, yet experienced as the only reality there is; a reality that O'Hara does not wish to transcend or alter, wishing rather to remain 'a step away' from Cornell's indecision between empathetic yearning and distance. In positing his poems and the things that go into them as indistinguishable, O'Hara relativises any possibility of opposition; such an inverted resistance also informs Ashbery's encounter with Surrealism to which we will turn next.

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5. Surrealism and the poetry of John Ashbery

5.1 Language and experience: cultural complicity and textual dissidence

Thought
must somehow touch these larger links
& not relax at movie references to the Sphinx. […]
Thus the formula for 100% cognition
is 60% true tribulation 40% anxious ebullition, […]
the stars will move sensibly, as our food
or as if we had fallen into a mirror, […]
Again we’ll be free to puzzle the event
but we’ll pay respect to the alleged glory
of Unknown, thought and worded in this Allegory. (CP, 16)

O’Hara’s parodying of poetic attempts to encompass the ‘event’ in his 1950 ‘An 18th Century Letter’ can be read as an anticipation of Ashbery’s own response to the tensions between language and experience. ‘Thought’ cannot be content with ‘movie references to the Sphinx’, but instead seek ‘larger links’ that transcend mundane particularities. Negating the possibility of establishing meaningful relations between the contents of experience, O’Hara arbitrarily splits ‘cognition’ quantitatively and qualitatively, into its component parts, ‘tribulation’ and ‘ebullition’. Ashbery’s poems dramatise O’Hara’s playful derision of subjectivist illusions of immediacy. In consistently reminding us how experience is inescapably couched in language, Ashbery seems to be drawing on both Cornell’s resigned acceptance of his reified relation to subjective experiences, and O’Hara’s parody of our misguided ‘freedom’ to shape our experiences, our illusory freedom ‘to puzzle the event’. Ashbery’s texts are allegories of such reversals in which ‘events’ come to us ‘already-puzzled’, rather than ‘puzzling’, events abortive of all possibility of our ‘freedom’ to participate in ‘the alleged glory of [the] Unknown’.

In a 1977 interview with Joe David Bellamy, Ashbery said that he wrote ‘for escapist reasons’; to which he added:

I don’t know what my life is, what I want to be escaping from. I want to move to some other space, I guess, when I write which perhaps was where I had been but without being fully conscious of it. I want to move in and out of it, while I’m writing.

Referring to the critical reception of his work, he noted that his poetry:
[is] either dismissed as nonsense or held up as a work of genius. Few critics have ever accepted it on its own terms and pointed out how I’ve succeeded at certain moments and failed at other moments at what I was setting out to do.¹

Ashbery speaks of his work as having a life of its own, while remaining indelibly linked with personal experience. This almost sounds like a description of Cornell’s sense of the inadequacy of his longing for escaping inside rather than outside the spaces of his boxes; it may be that ‘the space’ of his writing is as enclosed and static as Cornell’s boxes. On the other hand, Ashbery’s resistance to giving up the reality he is escaping from and to mapping out the shifting, undefinable ‘other space’ of writing, is reminiscent of O’Hara’s anxiety in response to the levelling diversity and saturated openness of his own poems.

In Ashbery’s early work, we come across parodies of subjectivist projections onto the world. The parodies of such protective illusions are metaphors of the impossibility of extricating both sense perception and experience at large from language. The poem ‘The Instruction Manual’² from the 1956 collection Some Trees, wilfully untheorised and unconceived as it is, sets the precedent for the recurring emphasis on the inadequacy of language. In the poem, Auden wrote, ‘Mr. Ashbery contrasts his historically real but profane situation, doing hackwork for his living, with his sacred memories of a Mexican town’. (ST, 13) Ashbery’s anti-climactic irony, ‘how limited, but how complete withal, has been our ex-/perience of Guadalajara!’, (ST, 29) is also an expression of regret about how the abstraction of language is separated from life, while discourse deceptively becomes more palpable than life.

‘The Grapevine’ of the same collection is a more self-aware and ironically affected take on the emptiness of language and its inability to recapture the particularity of our experiences:

Of who we and all they are
You all now know. But you know
After they began to find us out we grew

Before they died thinking us the causes
Of their acts. (ST, 31)

Describing how Marcel Duchamp uses 'indexical signs' in order to integrate the instance of utterance in his works, Rosalind Krauss has stressed that 'indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents'. Such is not the case with 'The Grapevine': Ashbery's use of pronouns seems intended to contest the possibility of establishing such a 'physical' relationship between the sign and the referent. Ashbery's use of pronouns simultaneously empties and fills their potential as shifters, as elements anchoring language in lived experience. In relation to this, in a 1972 interview on the occasion of the publication of *Three Poems*, he said:

The personal pronouns in my work very often seem to be like variables in an equation. "You" can be myself or it can be another person, someone whom I'm addressing, and so can "he" and "she" for that matter and "we." ... my point is that it doesn't really matter very much, that we are somehow all aspects of a consciousness giving rise to the poem.

Although Ashbery goes on to say that the desired effect is one of 'polyphony', this multiple, enlarged 'consciousness' bears an elliptical effect. As Cornell systematically arranged and readjusted his experiences to fit the structured coherence of his boxes, as O'Hara enveloped the self in the open poem, so Ashbery's assemblages are premised on a similar paradox: the cumulative effect comes about by means of a series of omissions. The elliptical effect stems from omissions as much as it is an effect of loss, a sense of void rather than a sense of an enigmatic tension between lack and fulfillment:

Now we'll not know
The truth of some still at the piano, though
They often date from us, causing
These changes we think we are. (ST, 31)

Change is what 'indexical signs' are expected to reveal, yet this change is deceptive, and as he put it in 'The Picture of Little J.A.. in a Prospect of Flowers', 'change is horror', (ST, 41) because difference and sameness are evasive and cannot be pinned down in the poem. The 'Grand Abacus' can be read as a gloss on the sense of 'horror' in change: synaesthetic effects bring up only confusion – 'The eyes - / Wait, can't

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you see them pattering, in the meadow, like / a dog?’ and the poem ends cryptically
with a scene that could be read as an allusion to Ernst’s *Deux enfants sont ménacés
par un rossignol*: ‘The / birds fly back, they say, “We were lying, / We do not want
to fly away.” But it is already too late. / The Children have vanished.’ (ST, 44-5)

Rather than based on latency, Ashbery’s ellipses are symptomatic of a deceptive,
vicarious givenness which annuls the violent effects of Ernst’s techniques of
perceptual disruption. The opening of ‘The Pied Piper’ is a good example: ‘Under the
day’s crust a half-eaten child / And further sores which eyesight shall reveal / And
they live.’ (ST, 79)

Throughout *Some Trees*, the paradoxical sense of both incompleteness and
 closure in the commonplace, nostalgic as it is of the distinction between the cryptic
and the banal, is more a symptom of the exhaustion of signs, than it is a promise of
change. The mock parable on ‘The Young Son’ opens with the following: ‘These
things wakened denials, thoughts of putrid reversals as he traced the green paths to
and fro.’ (ST, 53) ‘These things’ unspecified as they are, do not alter the subject’s
impoverished experiences: the putrid reversals bear a sense of closure and not of
change.

Generally, the elliptical inconclusiveness of the poems in *Some Trees* is met with
indifference and anxiety. As Ashbery puts it in ‘A Boy’, all one can have is an
uncertain and apathetic sense that ‘it had been raining but / It had not been raining. / No one could begin to mop up this particular mess’. (ST, 32) Any representational
device, visual or verbal, cannot encompass or tease out ‘this particular mess’. Moreover, the interplay between question and affirmation is an expression of an
anxious expectancy in emptiness, as in the ‘Hotel Dauphin’ where Ashbery
‘remember[s] / Dreaming on tan plush the wrong dreams / Of asking fortunes, now
lost / In what snows?’. The ‘Hotel Dauphin’ opens with a sense of the incongruity of
an insignificant and unspecified wish, reminiscent of how experiences ambivalently

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5 Oil on wood with wood construction, 69.8 x 11.4 cm, The Museum of Modern Art, New York,
reproduced in Pere Gimferrer, *Max Ernst* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1983), plate 40; also in *Max Ernst: A
Retrospective* with essays by Karin Von Maur, Sigrid Metken, Uwe M. Schneede and Sarah Wilson
(Munich: Prestel, 1991), plate 77.
recur and decline in Cornell's *Hôtels*: 'It was not something identical with my carnation-world / But its smallest possession—a hair or a sneeze— / I wanted.' (ST, 63)

Throughout *Some Trees*, the particular is more a token of lack than a disquieting catalyst for renewed perception. Arbitrary juxtapositions in Ashbery's poems, are simply symptoms of the subject's failure to interact with a reified reality. This also becomes manifest in his semantic games and errors of syntax, or in contrived allusions to incidents and images parodically reminiscent of Lautréamont's famous encounter: we may consider encounters with 'heads borne in peach vessels', and the sight of 'The sun [pissing] on a rock'. (ST, 77) Overall, in Ashbery's arbitrary juxtapositions, a demystified attitude towards the particular neutralises any effect of collage. Rather than the generic category of the object or the poem, unlike Cornell and O'Hara, Ashbery explores the relation between words and images throughout. In 'The Picture of Little J.A.. in a Prospect of Flowers' and the 'Pantoum', words and images are seen as the only tokens of the particularity of our experiences: on the other hand, the poems also come across as assemblages of empty signs, parodying the nostalgia for meaning.

In relation to this, Mutlu-Konuk Blasing has argued that Ashbery's poetry is a self-aware and self-critical symptom of how any strategy of resistance is, and can only end up, consonant with the 'larger cultural economy'. Given this, she writes, Ashbery's 'real novelty consists in '[registering] the changing cultural function of techniques of resistance'. It is not the potential of collage or assemblage as forms of experience or as means of change that is at stake, but rather their inefficacy as elements of critique. The alienating and defamiliarising impact of avant-garde techniques is also a symptom of alienation. Thus, what has been described as the effect of indeterminacy and undecidability in Ashbery, can be seen as a reified avatar of the irrationality of Surrealism.  

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In registering ‘the changing cultural function of techniques of resistance’, Ashbery criticised the deceptive directness in which the world comes to us. In the 1962 collection The Tennis Court Oath, the disjunctive effects of collage are explored in juxtapositions of things, fragmentary perceptions and narratives. A step further from Cornell’s boxes, the poems level the distinction between collective and private experiences, between the intrinsic and the external components of objects. Moreover, Jacques-Louis David’s The Tennis Court Oath from which the collection takes its name, is the first in a series of allusions to artworks, with varying degrees of stated empathy and identification with the contents of the works. The Tennis Court Oath was followed in 1966 by the reference to De Chirico’s The Double Dream of Spring; the sustained dialogue with Parmigianino’s Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror in 1973; and the reference to Ernst’s 1920 collage Here Everything is Still Floating in the 1980 Shadow Train. It is unclear whether Ashbery approaches these works as bearing forgotten narratives, as significant encounters, catalysts for a renewed perception, or as reasons for regretting the loss of a reciprocal or antagonistic relation between the artwork and the world. Only the opening of ‘The Tennis Court Oath’ may be seen as an address to a painting where Ashbery wonders: ‘What had you been thinking about / the face studiously bloodied / heaven blotted region / I go on loving you like water but.’

The poem is an assemblage of addresses to an unspecified ‘you’ within a series of unclear impressions and memories. The syntactical inconsistencies are not merely reminiscent of the disjunctive thrust of collage but in equal measure symptomatic of impaired perception. The sense of fragmentation and discontinuity results from the subject’s difficulty of matching these impressions with the means available to express them: we are left with the equivocal sense that either external realities merely match our means of assembling our perceptions, or that conversely, our means cannot match what lies beyond them:

You were elected president, yet won the race
All the way through fog and drizzle
When you read it was sincere the coasts
Stammered with unintentional villages the

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Horse strains fatigued I guess . . . the calls . . .
I worry. (TCO, 11)

Ashbery responds to the inefficacy of defamiliarising principles with a refusal to see a promise in arbitrary relations. However, this not devoid of a social intent: we need to remember how the incoherence of ‘America’ is critical of the anxious pursuit of coherent cultural narratives, parodied in “They Dream Only of America”. Making his intent more explicit, *The Tennis Court Oath* sets a recurring concern over the role of narrative, the inescapable way in which the world comes to us, and the relation between reference and language. In a manner reminiscent of O’Hara’s parodic longing for substantive experience, Ashbery evokes repressed marks of experience; in this manner, he seeks to expose deceptive meaning, while also regretting the loss of substantive meaning. Hence the following from ‘Rain II’:

> I urge the deep prune of the mirror
> That stick she carries
> The book—a trap

> The facts have hinged on my reply [...] 
> Eyes of forest
> Memory of cars

> You buried in the hot avenue: and to all of them, you cannot be and are,
> naming me. (TCO, 30)

The awareness of the impossibility to restore a transitive relation with the world through language alone because things can be named yet they ‘cannot be’, is matched by the subject’s anxiety over time; because ‘It is the time / We do not live in but on’, life becomes as abstract as language, and words take on the semblance of change and decay. The conflict between representation and reference comes to determine Ashbery’s poems all the more manifestly: as he ironically put it in ‘Two Sonnets’, ‘The body’s products become / Fatal to it. Our spit would kill us, but we / Die of out heat. / Though I say the things I wish to say / They are needless, their own flame conceives it. / So I am cheated of perfection.’ (TCO, 20)

‘The Lozenges’, ‘The Ascetic Sensualists’, ‘A Last World’ and ‘The New Realism’ of the same collection are reminiscent of O’Hara’s compulsive immersion in any imaginable content: ironically, this only reveals all the more emphatically that our contact with the world becomes steadily more abstract and not the opposite. Like O’Hara’s ‘Easter’ and ‘Second Avenue’, these poems are most suggestive of
Surrealist images which, however, rather than bringing together distant realities, suggest relations between empty signs; or put another way, as much as they explore *relations* between signs, these images expose the *distance* between signs and referents. This is also expressed in a mock-confessional manner in ‘The Ticket’, where ‘the experience of writing you these love letters ...’ is related to the futile attempt to fend off the incursion of things by ‘Automatically taking the things in, that had not been spoiled, sordid’. (TCO, 43)

Ashbery’s distortions of perspective and meaning are more pessimistic than O’Hara’s, and unlike the Surrealists’ projection onto the protean aspect of word and image. ‘The New Realism’ amounts to an awareness that the structure of experience inside language cannot be altered: it is an awareness of the loss of contact with the referent. The sense of the arbitrary mobility of things is matched by nostalgia for materiality, similar to O’Hara’s in ‘Easter’; hence the longing for violence and decay, while we are warned about the loss of ‘the beautiful dreams that enlisted on waking, / cold and waiting’:

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The blond headdress is soggy
The ray carried your picture away [...] 
A small dancer decorated the coverlet with gore
A perforated cravat assumed
That the center cravat was the right one [...] 
You see you cannot do this to me
Why, we were differing
The eyes and clitoris a million miles from
The small persistent tug.
The tree streamed with droppings (TCO, 59)
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A similar longing for violence and decay is also persistent in ‘The Ascetic Sensualists’ where the sense of abstractions and the sense of materiality in things are indistinct, producing an elliptical effect which is still a symptom of excess: the necessity of words is felt like a necessary violence done to reality, rather than as providing a possibility of disrupting discourse and returning its violence. Like O’Hara’s, Ashbery’s poems are allegories of confinement in a seemingly open-ended discursive space.

The 1966 collection *Rivers and Mountains* tests the effects of collage and free association yet again; questioning the meaning of experience, the poems set
themselves against the fact that, as O'Hara put it, only 'abstractions are available'. In relation to this, the longer compositions like 'Clepsydra' or 'The Skaters' are not unlike O'Hara's. The effect of speed and the obstruction of movement inflect discrepancies between particularities that always end up indistinct. Rather than a token of disruption, the excess of the particular is a symptom of a deceptive coherence. Instead of being the catalyst for the break from the abstraction of language, the particular becomes the token of the impossibility of stepping outside language. 'These Lacustrine Cities' are allegories of confinement within a private mental scape, as well as within an inescapable and undefined historical context: they are 'the product of an idea: that man is horrible, / for instance', just as much as they may also be the product of an improbable arbitrary coincidence like the following:

They emerged until a tower  
Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back  
Into the past for swans and tapering branches,  
Burning, until all that hate was transformed into useless love.⁹

Although syntactic play seems to be upsetting the otherwise meaningful sequence of the most mundane incidents, as in O'Hara, things remain as they are. In relation to this, it is not in their obscure and allusive moments, or in their anti-climactic literalness, that Ashbery's poems are most reminiscent of the Surrealist parody of meaning; the lessons of Surrealism are felt in more playful and less introspective moments. The poem 'Into the Dusk-Charged Air' is one such example; natural elements parade, rivers playfully meet mountains and each other on the page or in the mind's eye.

Still, the growing anxiety in respect of the fact that textual play ends up being a refuge from the decline of meaningful experiences is brought up in the 'The Recent Past'; rather than a liberating sense of play, arbitrariness bring up a sense of temporal confusion, and regret for the loss of meaning:

In the stars  
There is no longer any peace, emptied like a cup of coffee  
Between the blinding rain that interviews. (RM, 23)

As the title suggests, 'Clepsydra' also addresses our experience of the passage of time and the paradox of language: 'each moment / Of utterance is the true one; likewise

none are true’. (RM, 27) Even if ‘truth’ there was, the truth of perception and the
truth of things would still be irreconcilable: the poem then, is premissed on the gap
between the space of the text and the space outside it:

A recurring whiteness like
The face of stone pleasure, urging forward as
Nostrils what only meant dust. But the argument,
That is its way, has already left these behind: it
Is, it would have you believe, the white din up ahead
That matters: unformed yells, rocketings. (RM, 27)

A white noise is a metaphor for what both language and sense perception fail to
grasp; the poem can only convey the difficulty of integrating the experience of time
inside the space of writing. Still, it is the process of writing itself that makes us realise
‘that it / Wasn’t a dream your only clue to why the walls / Are turning on you and
why the windows no longer speak / Of time but are themselves, transparent guardians
you / Invented for what there was to hide’. (RM, 33)

‘The Skaters’ elaborate the time/text disjunction in a more painstaking manner –
the poem is substantially longer than others in the collection. Objects, impressions,
descriptions of trivial incidents, a discontented irony towards a smug culture,
introspection, and a mock, semi-fictional, semi-confessional autobiographical mode
intersect; associating freely, assembling or collaging, the text ‘seesaws’, taking in the
most disparate elements, seemingly unaided by dissociative or integrative principles
altogether. The erratic guise of the poem however, is not the result of accidental
coincidences; on the contrary these coincidences are as erratic just as they are
artificially constructed. Arbitrariness does not eliminate the distance between the
subjective mind and the external world; the poem is more about the loss of the
boundary between the self and the world altogether. This is again expressed through
the blurring of senses throughout: we see sounds, hear images, touch abstractions. It
is worth pointing out that it is just such disorientating effects that Cornell attempted to
dispel by salvaging disparate objects in the boxes:

How much of any one of us survives?
The articles we’d collect—stamps of the colonies
With greasy cancellation marks, mauve, magenta, and chocolate,
Of funny-looking dogs we’d see in the street, or bright remarks. (RM, 34)
Dissociated from objects and from the subject's interiority, like Cornell's boxes, words become a dystopian refuge. The poem is an entity that seeks to take a dynamic all its own and break from the excess and the insignificance of things; things which here are also metaphors for words reduced to empty signs:

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Labels on bottles
And all kinds of discarded objects that ought to be described.
But can one ever be sure of which ones?
Isn't this a death-trap, wanting to put too much in
So the floor sags, as under the weight of a piano,
or a piano-legged girl
And the whole house of cards comes dinning down around
one's ears! (RM, 38)
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Obscure, fragmented, imagined or mundane, things are the token of impoverished experiences. Ashbery's poems, profuse and wanting at once, proceed in a manner both similar and reverse to Raymond Roussel's, whose writings and life had fascinated Ashbery in the 1960s. Roussel's detailed descriptions of mundane and improbable objects were matched by equally mundane and improbable intricacies of linguistic play. Whereas for the Surrealists, this seemed as a means to distort our ordinary perceptions, as in O'Hara, in Ashbery's poems, the disconcerting effect results from the fact that the trivial remains unchanged. By increasingly questioning how language and reality are interrelated, Ashbery's writing reflects the impact of the Rousselian text, to which I will return in the second part of this chapter; Ashbery's poems question the centripetal and centrifugal tendencies of Roussel's writing, the possibility or the impossibility of such a dual movement.

The 1969 collection *The Double Dream of Spring* stages the irrationality of a rationalised world where the most mundane particularities become abstract and subjectivity incapable of pinning down anything specific. Most reflexive and critical of reflexivity at the same time, it is an allusive account of our use of words and images at large. It is a gloss on the relation between signs and signifiers, between organic symbols and allegories. The implied affinity with De Chirico inflects these relations; as with his approach to the principle of collage, Ashbery reverses De Chirico's approach to reality and representation: rather than seeking the repressed enigma of objects, he witnesses how objects remain reified. His view of the violence of objects and images is dystopian; the violence of Ashbery's images is self-
defeating. On the other hand, for De Chirico as well as for Ashbery, the unfathomable unreality of time entails uncanny links to subjectivity. This is why Ashbery dwells on the traumatic effect of time. The passage of time is experienced as an irreversible process that excludes the subject. As he put it in ‘The Task’ which opens the collection:

It was only
Cloud-castles, adept to seize the past
And possess it, through hurting. And the way is clear
Now for linear acting into that time
In whose corrosive mass he first discovered how to breathe. [...] 
And there are reaches to be attained, 
A last level of anxiety that melts
In becoming, like miles under the pilgrim’s feet.  

Throughout the collection, Ashbery’s dialogue with De Chirico’s *The Double Dream of Spring* is rooted in an experience of time, and as with O’Hara, we are often left with the impression that words, unlike images, fail the immediacy of sense perception. This for Ashbery seems to be the most fundamental deficiency of the poem: unlike Breton’s theory of the image which encompassed both visual and verbal signs, Ashbery appears to be distinguishing between the visual and the verbal image. The allusion to De Chirico seems underscored by nostalgia for the power of visual images that cut through the linear concept of time, images that release the past from duration and restore a sense of urgency, lost in thought. On the other hand, one’s own subjectivity can only be recovered in terms of duration, rather than as a break from time. Triggered by the painting, Ashbery’s poems are premised on the effort to prolong the present – or else the instance of utterance – in the text. At the same time, the subject’s inadequate sense of temporality is reflected in the discrepancy between syntactical continuity and ellipsis in ‘The Double Dream of Spring’:

Mixed days, the mindless years, perceived
With half-parted lips
The way the breath of spring creeps up on you and floors you.
I had thought of all this years before
But now it was making no sense. And the song had finished:
This was the story. (DDS, 41)

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This culminates in longing for the suspension of time, as depicted by De Chirico in images where motion is about to be released or has already been suspended:

And now amid the churring of locomotives
Moving on the land the grass lies over passive
Beetling its “end of journey” mentality into your forehead
Like so much blond hair awash
Sick starlight on the night
That is readying its defenses again
As day comes up (DDS, 41-2)

Overall, Ashbery’s *The Double Dream of Spring* bears the enigma of a repressed wish rather than a promise of fulfillment. The collection ends with ‘The Fragment’, an allusive narrative of a finished relationship. ‘The Fragment’ is also an allegory for an unfinished work, for an unfulfilled contact with the reality outside the text: it is an expression of nostalgia for wholeness, for the lost links between ‘language, thought and experience’, to recall O’Hara’s turn of phrase. The ‘fragment’ here is posited as an alienated mode of experience and not as a defamiliarising effect of form. Our sense for both fragmentation and continuity are as deceptive as each other; as in ‘The Task’, our blurred sense of temporality is reflected in the discrepancy between syntactical continuity and ellipsis.

Ashbery’s narrative-like ‘fragment’ demystifies the redemptive promise of any form meant to break from its dependence on meaning. On the other hand, unlike language, it is substantive experience that fades inside the text:

This page only is the end of nothing
To the top of that other. The purity
Of how hard it is to choose between others where
The event takes place and the outside setting. (DDS, 78)

Here, the interchangeability of internal and external realities is only cause for anxiety, as it was for Cornell. A similar anxiety stems from the inadequacy of both visual and verbal forms to capture subjective experience, to which we will return in the next part of this chapter:

Thus your only world is an inside one
Ironically fashioned out of external phenomena
Having no rhyme or reason, and yet neither
An existence independent of foreboding and sly grief. (DDS, 81)

Memory is equally alienated as narratives can only be discontinuous, and the need to recapture the past is meant to compensate for lack, rather than to restore a repressed
mystery hidden in the object of our experiences. The following lines could be seen as a reading of Cornell’s boxes rather than as akin to De Chirico’s melancholy and nostalgia:

The pictures were really pictures
Of loving and small things. […]
Stories of the past: separate incidents
Recounted in touching detail, […]
Murmured confusingly, as though the speaker […]
had forgotten
The reason why he was telling the story.
It was these finally that made the strongest
Impression (DDS, 83-4)

Ultimately, language fails experience as much as experience fails language: therefore, to blur the distinction between language and experience altogether come to pass as the only viable alternative. By reproducing how language works, by making language all the more reflexive, paradoxically language is productive of reality. This awareness is voiced through ‘Some Words from the French of Arthur Cravan’ which warns us that:

Life is not at all what you might think it to be
A simple tale where each thing has its history
It’s more than its scuffle and anything goes (DDS, 61)

Words give way to things yet again in The Vermont Notebook, where, as Douglas Crase said Surrealism ‘had a field day’. Throughout, list-like juxtapositions reminiscent of Dada and Surrealist experiments alternate with larger descriptions of mundane incidents reminiscent of the bleakness of Pop-art. Lists of locales, corporate companies, public events, names of friends, fellow-poets, artists, critics, colours, criminal offenses, places, newspapers, fabrics, short narratives of private and mundane anecdotes, personal memories, introspective, meditative and descriptive fragments are brought together in a manner which is ambivalently and parodically presented as meaningful and gratuitous. At the level of technique, Ashbery approaches collage as a means with which to put together a poem, as a process of bringing together related and unrelated elements alike. Similarly, the dialectic of selection and displacement, appropriation and decontextualisation takes on the guise of a dialectic between a cumulative and an elliptical effect. The ‘notebook’ opens with an indication of time, ‘October, November, December’, an indication that
sounds equally specific and nonspecific, followed by a similar list-like indication of place, ‘The climate, the cities, the houses, the streets, the stores, the lights, people’. This effect is repeated in yet more lists of varying size, in the words of one of Ashbery’s critics, these lists are ‘scandalous catalogues [which] represent a Steinian assault on the sensibilities of a reading public desensitized by commodity culture, and from whom as the last page of the book indicates, the poet feels himself seriously distanced’. As mentioned, anything can go into these lists: ‘roller rinks […] drag racing, […] war memorials, […] supermarkets […] Colgate, […] General Motors, […] Paraphernalia […] the Eighth Street Bookshop, […] amber, russet, outremer, […] arson, rape, grand larceny, […] Charlottesville, Washington, […] The New York Post, […] Pollock and de Kooning, Adrienne Rich, Jerome Rothenberg, McDonalds, suede, tweed, ‘season, solstice, many’. (VN, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21)

In the first instance, Ashbery's lists seem to be a gloss on the constant accretion of consumer goods. Yet at the same time the omnipresence of commodities and commodified experiences in the lists is also an expression of anxiety about the fact that they seem to be endlessly replaceable and constantly recurring. The incongruity or the similarity of the juxtaposed elements is more the effect of repetitiveness than arbitrariness. It seems as if they are somehow divested of the dated strangeness of the objects encountered by Max Ernst in commercial catalogues and teaching aids. The experiences and the things that populate The Vermont Notebook do not enhance our visionary faculties; this is most poignantly described in the short narrative fragment To the Hard Bam Road Caffeteria: things remain exactly as they are; things are not there to evoke something other than what they are. Even in our reminiscing, things remain unchanged, dissociated from the text and from the life outside the text. The following passage can be read as yet another gloss on the consistent attraction of banalities, as well as a comment on the effect of collaged or assembled elements of any kind:

Here nobody is taking any chances on recognizing or being recognized. They all look like faces on Wacky Package stickers or a klutz in Mad Comics, tortured

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past reason and exploding in a human, all too human display of facial fireworks.  
[...] The scenery looks as though it was painted on cork. (VN, 75)

Throughout The Vermont Notebook things seem to be giving way to words just as words give way to things, in a manner that reveals the distance that separates the text from the reality that goes into it. It is reality that becomes all the more unreal, arbitrary and irrational, rather than the reconfiguration of this reality in a collaged text. Following the first long set of lists, Ashbery inflects the effect of the assembled text through visual and verbal play:

The book I read is the dump it is printed in dump letters. As the wind on dump light so the acid red light of wells of dump leaves. I tell the old story of the dump. I work on the story to be the real story of the dump which is never telling. If it ever was telling it would not be the dump which it is. The dump escapes the true scape of the telling and in so doing it is its own scape—the dump dumped and dumping. As I swear the dump is my sweet inner scape self so do I condone the dump for having nothing left for me only the will to go on dumping creating it out of its evacuation. I will go to the dump. I am to be in the dump. I was permanently the dump and the dump is me. (VN, 31)

Both phonetic and visual, the repetitions are a gloss on the plurality and scarcity of meaning, a defense against the superfluity of language. The play with both form and meaning here underscores the paradox of openness and closure in the conflict between language and silence; the lists seem like an attempt to oppose the proliferation of signs and the waning of signals in a culture as claustrophobic as O'Hara's. As was the case with Cornell and O'Hara, Ashbery's Surrealist affinity here inflects the problematic relation between form and content, social and aesthetic intent. Is the dump an allegory of the text, of the elements that go into it, or of the reality that remains beyond it? Is it an allegory of a text that blends in with sense perception? Or conversely, a parable on how language assimilates or fails sense perception; on how the text discards reality, or on how reality discards the text? Rather than generating new meanings, word play here comes across as a gloss on the superfluity and the scarcity of meaning. Moreover, the repetitive effect, and the interplay of phonetic, visual and semantic effects is symptomatic of how the different elements that enter into any one collaged text paradoxically seem to have become indistinct. Rather than assuming a particularity lost in their conventional context, they become as interchangeable as they are indistinguishable. Rather than assuming a new enigmatic autonomy, they blend into the text. Moreover, the cut and pasted material
has a defamiliarising effect just as it comes across as a symptom of the fragmented way in which we process our experiences. As mentioned earlier, anything may become raw material for *The Vermont Notebook*, just as *The Vermont Notebook* may become raw material for some other assemblage later. This is most manifest in the juxtaposition of snippets of inconclusive experiences and ready-made patterns of social interaction:

Little Johny ran in the house. The man in the hall. The red spider against the pane. How dark the furniture in his brain ticked off against the crisscrosses of apology trying to happen against the strangeness of invented circumstances. [...] Her only food in five days: a dead chicken that floated by her on the water, which she ate raw. (VN, 51)

By assembling, disassembling and reassembling words on the page, by cutting and pasting ready-made sensations, one becomes aware of the sameness and the 'forced familiarity' (VN, 69), rather than the strangeness of it all. Formally, rather than based on a tactic of openness and availability, the notebook rests on a passive willingness to let anything inside the text. Because 'all things are secretly bored' (VN, 37), their forced or arbitrary coexistence not only questions the devaluing of meaning or our impoverished experiences but also how a collaged text distances us from such an alienating reality. Conversely, the process of sifting through an amorphous repository of memories, experiences and objects also explores the text's possibility to redeem this reality. This may nuance the view that the last page of the book indicates how the narrator feels himself seriously distanced from the contents of his assemblage:

If I don't hear from you again, I shall wonder whether or not you got so wrapped up in your 'canning and freezing' that you are either somewhere on a shelf full of preserves with a metal lid on your head or hoping up with the frozen peas in your freezer compartment, from life to something else swiftly translated. Be of good cheer.

Beverly (VN, 101)

Just as it is dictated by the need to appropriate reality, overall, the 'notebook' is a token of loss, a symptom of the closure of the text. Unlike its historical precedent, the assemblage is not intended to confer any intrinsic value to the insignificant; unlike the Surrealist *objets trouvés*, 'a shelf full of preserves with a metal lid on your head' is no longer there to be redeemed, or to be transformed 'from life to something else swiftly translated'. It is in this sense that Ashbery brings together the letter of Surrealism with the spirit of Pop-art. Contrary to the Surrealist view of collage that sees the
discrete elements of the assemblage endowed with new significance, in Ashbery's notebook the insignificant remains unaltered.

It is at this level, that Ashbery's collaged text suggests an interesting dialogue with the Surrealist exploration of the limits of language and the potential of ready-made material. Throughout The Vermont Notebook, words become substitutes for images and these images in their turn seem to be the only token of the existence of things outside the text. This brings us back to the critical value of collage in Surrealism and in the avant-garde aesthetic in general: are collaged elements to be read symbolically in order to estrange us from social values inscribed on them, or are they to be taken at face value? The Vermont Notebook is a collaged text just as much as it can be read as a gloss on collage; as both a way in which the world comes to us, and as a way to approach the world. In The Vermont Notebook it is the reality of the contingent and the value of our perception of all the ready-made material that is available to us that is being questioned, in showing that objects in which traces of subjectivity are inscribed, have disappeared without a trace.

Ashbery’s way in The Vermont Notebook and in the much earlier Three Madrigals of 1958 is a reappraisal of the consistent attraction of banalities, that also marked the early years of Surrealism, both formally and thematically. We can remember Breton’s and Soupault’s 1920 dialogues in ‘Barrières’: injunctions and mock-incentives, affirmative statements, negations or questions about the most insignificant and mundane pretexts are parodies of meaning without Ashbery’s sense of closure. (OCI, 74-81) Instances such as ‘Mrs Threnody was having Madam How and Lady Why In’ (VN, 43) are reminiscent of Breton’s collage poems, Aragon’s montages, or Desnos’s visual and phonetic play. Similarly, Ashbery’s ‘Permeation, ventilation, occlusion’ (VN, 37) reads as an anti-climactic echo of Ernst’s ‘perturbation’ and ‘germination’ in La Femme 100 têtes. Both Ashbery’s and O’Hara’s poetry provide many such intertextual paths; yet most significantly, such resonances seem underscored by the wish to grasp some lost link between signs and contents.

See La Femme 100 têtes, plate 72 ‘Vivant seule sur son globe-fantôme, belle et parée de ses rêves: perturbation, ma sœur, la femme 100 têtes’. Werner Spies, Max Ernst Collages: The Invention of the
As argued, Ashbery’s writing is informed by a dual problematic: the dissonant, alien and yet familiar effect of the relations that populate his poems is posited as symptomatic of the indeterminacy of signs, and not of the revolt of content. Like Cornell and O’Hara, Ashbery has to address not whether ‘ready-made’ sensations and objects can be revealed to be potent signals, bearers of an undefined emancipatory promise, but rather how we may deceive ourselves in thinking that such potential exists.

As we shall see next, a similar awareness underscores his affinity with visual forms: as visual forms seem to bear both the reflexive and the mimetic moment, they tentatively legitimise the possibility of restoring the intransitive character of poetic language. Paradoxically, this seems to be the only way of preserving any hope in the intrinsic value of the reality outside the text. This possibility is both sustained and denied, in keeping with Ashbery’s tendency to highlight how language constructs reality and how at the same time, ‘the event’ defies representation. In the next part of this chapter, I will first turn to ‘The Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ where Ashbery reflects not only on the poem’s representational and reflexive function, but also on how visual forms may arrest the experiences that language cannot; I will then move onto the 1972 Three Poems, Ashbery’s most contradictory and ironic response to the relation between ‘language, thought, and experience’ and to the subject’s impossibility to restore a meaningful contact with the ‘event’ through language alone.

5.2 Nostalgia for the referent: vision and language

In ‘The Picture of Little J. A. in a Prospect of Flowers’ in Some Trees, Ashbery reflects on the attempt in an earlier ‘picture of [his] small self in the bank of flowers’ to escape the sequential relation between reality and representation. The poem also dramatises the viewer’s futile attempt to avert the unspecified ‘hard stare, accepting / Everything, taking nothing’. By freezing the fleeting moment, the ‘picture of Little J. A.’ deprives us of a sense of duration; ‘As thought the rolled-up future might stink / As loud as stood the sick moment / The shutter clicks’. On the other hand, images, like ‘lost words’, are presented as all there is. (ST, 40-1) With regard to this, throughout his poetry, Ashbery engages in an exploration of how ‘pictures’ immobilise, yet preserve the actuality of subjective experiences – ‘the rolled-up future’ and the ‘sick moment’; this is linked to a reflection on how ‘lost words’ are our only means to come to terms with images and on how images affect the perception of our experiences.

In ‘The Painter’ of the same collection, Ashbery poignantly parodies ‘the painter’s attempts to paint ‘the sea’s portrait’, and the expectation that the sea might ultimately take over the canvas. This sounds reminiscent of Ernst’s parodic account of how his father’s faith in the principle of identity between representation and its external models led him to suppress a tree in one of his paintings and to remove the actual ‘innocent’ tree from his garden, because it disturbed the composition. 14 In Ashbery’s parable, the distinction between a changing reality and our means to represent it breaks down. Difference and identity cancel each other out not only at the level of the relation between reality and representation but also within reality itself: ‘the sea devoured the canvas and the brush / As though his subject has decided to remain a prayer’. (ST, 65-66)

These early poems constitute an interesting precedent to the much later reflection on visual representation in the ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’. Throughout the poem, Ashbery elaborates a parallel between the poem and the image. Yet beyond the implied affinity between poet and painter, Ashbery’s dialogue with Parmigianino’s

14 See Chapter Two, p. 97.
1523-4 painting\textsuperscript{15} of the same title questions not only visual representation but also the cognitive value of language.

The poem opens with a description of Parmigianino's painting, followed by a citation from Vasari:

\begin{quote}
"Francesco one day set himself
To take his own portrait, looking at himself for that purpose
In a convex mirror, such as is used by barbers . . .
He accordingly caused a ball of wood to be made
By a turner, and having divided it in half and
Brought it to the size of the mirror, he set himself
With great art to copy all that he saw in the glass,"
Chiefly his reflection, of which the portrait
Is the reflection once removed. (SP, 68)
\end{quote}

Rather than directly addressing the reality of a reflection twice removed from its origin, Ashbery engages with this problematic in a different way. In its ability to capture our experiences, the image can also confine its maker; because the image can capture the fleeting moment – 'the time of day or the density of the light'–, the soul has to stay where it is, [...] Longing to be free, outside'. Parmigianino’s enigmatic expression in the portrait – ‘there is in that gaze a combination / Of tenderness, amusement and regret’ – is marked by the realisation of the dual power of the image. It is as if Parmigianino’s ‘self-portrait’ divests reality of its enigmatic nature and assumes a new reality all its own. Ultimately, it is reality that comes to fit the image and not vice versa: the ‘soul [...] has no secret, is small and fits / its hollow perfectly’.

At the same time, just as the convex mirror reveals, so the mirror-image is not identical to its source. Implicitly, the same goes for Ashbery’s contemplative immersion in the painting: ‘the postures of the dream’ and of the imagination are suggestive of a motion ‘with no / false disarray as proof of authenticity’. (SP, 68, 69)

\textsuperscript{15} On the cover of a recording of Ashbery’s reading of ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’, Ashbery describes his fascination with Parmigianino’s painting as follows: ‘I began writing “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” during a month’s residence at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown in February, 1973. I had always wanted to “do something” with Parmigianino’s self-portrait ever since I saw it reproduced in the New York Times Book Review in 1950, accompanying a review of Sidney Freedberg’s monograph on the painter. This half-conscious wish was reinforced when I saw the original painting in Vienna in 1959. Then one day when I was walking around Provincetown during my stay there I passed a bookstore with an inexpensive portfolio of Parmigianino’s work displayed in the window – the self-portrait was illustrated on the cover. I bought the book, took it back to my studio and slowly began to write a poem about it, or off it.’ John Ashbery, Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror with a foreword by the poet and an essay by Helen Vendler on the cover. (San Francisco: Arion Press, 1984).
We might remember here O'Hara's sense of confinement in mobility, and how, in O'Hara's poems, 'motion' is a token of closure.

To get back to Ashbery's 'self-portrait', we are constantly reminded that the poem reaches out to merge with the life outside it; a similar urge, Ashbery writes, made Parmigianino 'make the hand loom large', reaching out for 'the body of which it seems / So unlikely a part'. (SP, 69) Ashbery goes on to describe how this hand is wavering, in its inability to assume its own reality beyond the image. It is as if the way in which Parmigianino represented his hand in the 'self-portrait' was intended to highlight the gap between the painting and the reality outside it:

Francesco, your hand is big enough
To wreck the sphere, and too big,
One would think, to weave delicate meshes
That only argue its further detention. (SP, 70)

Ashbery's address to the painting dissolves into a subtle identification with Parmigianino's attempt to contain the contingent circumstances of the painting within a finished product which is defined by its autonomy in relation to the reality that went into it. Ashbery at this point, begins to wonder whether images can not only arrest a fleeting moment but also bear process and change: 'the turning seasons and the thoughts / that peel off and fly away at breathless speeds'. (SP, 71) This triggers a similar questioning of the expressive power of the poem, as the visions and perceptions that went into the poem seem to lose their particularity:

merging in one neutral band that surrounds
Me on all sides, [...] 
And I cannot explain the action of leveling,
Why it should all boil down to one
Uniform substance, a magma of interiors. (SP, 71)

It is unclear what brings about such a levelling effect, and this indecision is conveyed again through Ashbery's response to Parmigianino's painting; just as much as Parmigianino's hand seemed to reach out beyond the painting, the 'self-portrait' is also seen as an attempt to leave out the contingent: "with great art to copy all that you saw in the glass" / So as to perfect and rule out the extraneous, / Forever.' (SP, 72) The intense effect of form – 'the velleities of the rounded reflecting surface' – is now understood as a token of dissociation between contingent content and its representation. At the same time, the appeal of form results ironically from the
looming of ‘the shadow of the city [which] injects its own / Urgency: Rome where Francesco / Was at work during the Sack’. (SP, 74, 75) Parmigianino’s painting ambivalently seems to resist its historical moment and at the same time encompass realities beyond the reflected image. Yet again, the image is ambivalently posited as simultaneously identical and different from its model.

Like Parmigianino’s painting, Ashbery’s poem seeks to both convey and resist its context; this is why the reciprocity between the poem and reality is caught up in a cycle of ‘inertia’ that ultimately defeats both our experiences and our perceptions of them:

\[
\text{inertia that once} \\
\text{Acknowledged saps all activity, secret or public:} \\
\text{Whispers of the word that can’t be understood} \\
\text{But can be felt, a chill, a blight. (SP, 75)}
\]

The varied guises of the relation between the poet, the painter, the convex mirror, and the reality outside the mirror, are all metaphors of the deficiency of our means of expression to break through ‘the present we are always escaping from / And falling back into’. (SP, 78) Overall, in Ashbery’s ‘self-portrait’, the relation between reality, the painting, and the poem, on the one hand, as well as the relation between the self and the mirror image on the other, can be mimetic, only in a destructive, or distorting, ironic and evasive way. What the painting and the poem are shown to reveal is that the instance in which identification and differentiation may coincide remains unfulfilled. To the extent that Ashbery’s poem is an account of his own encounter with the ‘convex-mirror’, it is symptomatic of such a failed moment: the poem does not convey the reality that Parmigianino’s painting ambivalently contains and fails to.

Therefore, in the context of the poem, Parmigianino’s mastery of his own image in a convex mirror reveals the paradox of a passive agency. Ashbery’s poem reflects this paradox as it rests on the impossibility to recover the ‘event’ despite our ability to represent it:

\[
\text{It may be that another life is stocked there} \\
\text{In recesses no one knew of; that it,} \\
\text{Not we, are the change; that we are in fact it. […]} \\
\text{Today has no margins, the event arrives} \\
\text{Flush with its edges, is of the same substance,} \\
\text{Indistinguishable.} \quad \text{(SP, 76, 79)}
\]
Towards the end of the poem, Parmigianino’s ‘unidentified’, ‘precisely sketched studio’ becomes a reminder of ‘another life’, different to the life of the painting itself, and different to the life of the poem too. Owning up to the pointlessness and the necessity of reminding ourselves of the existence of ‘another life’, Ashbery concludes by ‘beseeching’ Francesco to ‘withdraw that hand’ because there will always be a segment of life beyond its reach:

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each part of the whole falls off
And cannot know it knew, except
Here and there, in cold pockets
of remembrance, whispers out of time. (SP, 82-83)
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Throughout, Ashbery projects the anxiety of closure in his own poem onto the visual image: like the words on the page, the image is also a space that speaks of its distance from reality. The convex mirror is seen ultimately as a device that dispels any illusion that our representations can be identical to their model. As Parmigianino’s ‘self-portrait’ reveals, in grasping what reality does to us, we also come to realise that, rather than bringing about a change in reality through our ability to represent it, it is ‘us’ who are shaped by reality, as well as by our representations of this reality.

In L’Art magique in the mid-1950s, Breton has drawn our attention to how Parmigianino’s Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror distorts and expands pictorial illusionism, testing the limits and the potential of vision. Breton refers to Parmigianino’s painting as exemplifying how in ‘les autoportraits déformants […] c’est en quelque sorte le spectateur qui devient l’image brouillée à la boule de cristal’. To the extent that Ashbery’s reading of Parmigianino’s ‘self-portrait’ is defined by anxiety in relation to the instances of identification with and differentiation from the reflected image, his poem also seems to be questioning whether the reciprocal moment that Breton refers to is at all possible. Surrealist ‘self-portraits’ on the other hand, explored the ways in which the represented image alters,

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16 Ross Leckie has also stressed Ashbery’s preoccupation with the unresolved art/life relationship in the poem and notes that ‘the uncertain quality of the poem’s conclusion on what could appear to be the aesthetic assertions of a postmodern humanism results not so much from the desire for a connectedness to the world both of the present and the past, but from a sense that there may be an art that can achieve such a form of connectedness’. Ross Leckie, ‘Art, Mimesis, and John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”, Essays in Literature, XIX: 1 (Spring 1992) 114-31 (p. 124).

just as it is altered by the viewer's perception of it; Surrealist 'self-portraits' involved
the dual movement that had fascinated Breton in Parmigianino's 'self-portrait'. By
exposing how identification rests on difference, both the representational and the self-
referential value of the portrait is undermined. Describing this process, Renée Riese-
Hubert has referred to Man Ray's 1944 Autoportrait; in his 'self-portrait', Man Ray
stages the relation between the image and the reality outside it in a manner similar to
Parmigianino's: in Man Ray's picture, an index pointing at the portrait touches the
index inside the portrait; this disrupts the relation of equivalence between the model
and the image, in both conceptual and physical terms. 18

On the basis of the questioning of self-representation, Mary Ann Caws has drawn
a parallel between what she describes as the 'preparation of the aesthetic attitude' in
Surrealism and Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'. An attitude based on the
principle of contradiction, it rests on the simultaneous unfolding and communication
of opposites, assimilated by a poetic mind which both reflects and interacts with the
life outside it. In this way, she writes, Surrealist contradictions are 'a fruitful source
of the poetic, its language as its vision'. She goes on: 'the triumph of the Surrealist
imagination' is manifest in the 'triumph of the detail' which is also 'that of poetry
itself' since poetry 'requires acceptance of division, reversal, transferral, and all-
inclusiveness'. Mary Ann Caws argues that Ashbery's poetry draws on a similar
principle. Yet as shown in the first part of this chapter, Ashbery's poems expose not
only the distinctions, but also how the links between the formal aspects of the text and
the contingent aspects of subjective life are as unfathomable as they have become
neutralised. Mary Ann Caws on the other hand, has described Ashbery's 'self-
portrait' as pointing 'to the centre of the experience about to be, after the recognition
of a new language [...] capturing double the narration as it does the narrator'. 19

18 Riese-Hubert writes: 'Le regard en biais, sinon torve, du portrait ne touche pas celui du portrait
présumé situé hors du cadre, fait à la ressemblance du cadre ou de quelque personnage. [...] la main
creuse qui pointe son index correspond tout au plus au bois peint qui se désagrège.' Renée Riese-
Hubert, 'L'Antiportrait surréaliste', in Mary Ann Caws, ed., Théorie tableau texte, de Jarry à Artaud
(Le siècle éclaté 2, Dada, Surréalisme et Avant-Gardes, 20th L'icosathèque 5, Paris: Lettres Modernes,
Minard, 1978), pp. 67-82 (pp. 70-1).
19 Mary Ann Caws, 'A Slant on Surrealism: Aesthetics as Preparation', in Claudio Guillen, ed.,
Proceedings of the Xth Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association, vol. II
Just as it appears to suggest a resolution of the otherwise irreconcilable difference between life and text, this analysis could also be read as describing Ashbery’s difficulty of recovering experiences unaided by the text. The principle of contradiction in Ashbery’s poems is an aesthetic principle just as much as it is a demystifying trope: rather than reestablishing the link between life and the poetic mind, contradiction in Ashbery’s poems is the symptom of the loss of such links. Life and text are interrelated in a manner that regrets the loss of the ‘aesthetic attitude’ that Parmigianino’s ‘self-portrait’ redeems: by contrast, in Ashbery’s own ‘self-portrait’, the subjective life of the poetic mind comes across as already perceived, seen or written. Ashbery’s poetry expresses this in terms of an anxiety in relation to the referent.

Just before starting “doing something” with Parmigianino’s self-portrait in early 1973, in the 1972 Three Poems, Ashbery explored the mutually undermining interplay of forms and contents. With regard to this, Three Poems and ‘Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror’ stand in an enlightening relation to each other. In Three Poems, Ashbery ironically addresses how our immersion into language amounts to loss of both a sense of self and of our contact with the external world. At the same time, the only redeeming aspect of language is the arbitrariness of its signs and the ways in which this arbitrariness exposes the lag between signs and things. Consisting of narratives, fictional introspection, prose poems, verse poems, aphorisms, Three Poems are a reflexive and ironic gloss on the unresolved divide between life and text, loss and recovery of meaning.20 ‘Parodies of spiritual progress’, in David Shapiro’s words, they express regret at the loss of ‘the centre of the experience about to be’.21

The tripartite structure of Three Poems – ‘The New Spirit’, ‘The System’ and ‘The Recital’ – can be seen as an allusion to the tripartite structure of Raymond Roussel’s La Vue: in ‘La Vue’, ‘Le Concert’ and ‘La Source’, Roussel put language in the service of the faculty of sight. In a reverse manner too, sight caters to a

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20 Marjorie Perloff draws a parallel between Barthes’s Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes and Ashbery’s Three Poems and ‘As We Know’; both Barthes and Ashbery, she argues, stage the ‘zero degree of genre’ by giving over the text to the play of signification, which at the same time is the only way to negate the order of the signified. Marjorie Perloff, Poetic Licence, pp. 267-84.

repository of words and verbal tropes that become the means that substantiate fantasy. Roussel seeks to envelop reality in words, and the power of words constructs worlds more real and impenetrable than reality.

Ashbery’s ‘The New Spirit’ on the other hand, opens with an expression of indifference towards both a dissociative and an integrative intent with regard to our perception of self and world through either words or images:

I thought that if I could put it all down, that would be one way. And next the thought came to me that to leave all out would be another, and truer, way.\(^{22}\)

Either by embracing or leaving out things, the truth of the self is as deceptive as the truth of things: things are as empty just as they are filled with meaning, as they also were in Cornell’s boxes. Not only language here, but sense perception too, ironically blocks the reciprocation between self and things: ‘To formulate oneself around this hollow, empty sphere . . . To be your breath as it is taken in and shoved out’. (TP, 5)

Throughout Three Poems, Ashbery’s approach to experience bears the imprint of Roussel: our experiences seem insignificant and insubstantial because they can only occur inside language; on the other hand, they remain unfathomable because in a reverse manner too, language also fails experience. In Ashbery’s Three Poems, only the reminiscence of breakthroughs into life remains:

We must remember to keep asking it [life] the same question
Until the repeated question and the same silence become answer
In words broken open and pressed to the mouth
And the last silence reveal the lining
Until at last this thing exist separately. (TP, 6-7)

Ashbery’s questioning of the physical element in words, and the way this bears the possibilities and the limits of language is again underscored by an allusion to Roussel’s linguistic experiments. The ‘lining’ is another reference to Roussel, this time to the 1897 La Doublure,\(^{23}\) which can mean either ‘The Understudy’ or ‘The Lining’; in Three Poems, ‘the lining’ seems to suggest both that language is a

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\(^{23}\) La Doublure was written when Roussel was nineteen, in a state of creative ecstasy which he late confided in Pierre Janet. Obsessed with an exalted sense of universal glory, Roussel was enigmatically aware and deluded at once. He is reported to have described to Janet how, when he went out in the streets after his fit of creativity; realizing that nobody took notice of his ‘gloire’, he fell into melancholy. Raymond Roussel, La Doublure (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1963).
simultaneously apparent and hidden mechanism that maintains just as it distances us from 'this thing' that exists separately from language. Both self and reality depend on languages and codes – 'a lining' – as the last silence may not reveal 'this thing'. 'The New Spirit' is premised on the impossibility of participating in processes of change; change can only be perceived after the fact and its impact is intransitive just like 'this thing' which exists independently of us: the 'debris of living [...] cannot be transmitted / Into another usable substance'.

Overall, the 'three poems' involve the failure of both language and experience; we are held by a 'life' which is 'unknowable'. (TP, 11) In keeping with Ashbery's ambivalence towards visual and verbal means to represent, we are left with the impression that life tends to become like the represented and not the opposite:

The whole thing is calibrated according to time's way of walking sideways out of the event, at the same time proceeding in a straight line toward an actual vanishing point. (TP, 23)

Such irony also coincides with a nostalgic sense for enigmatic paradoxes: as in Roussel's writing, the more language comes to bear the subject's imprint, language ultimately takes over the self. It is language which becomes more impermeable than reality, despite our will to:

break open the one physical act they know and reveal the kernel like a picture that is taking place before them in order to proceed definitely into the future, [...] at the stately pace of a caravan disappearing into an undivided somewhere, all its secrets locked'. (TP, 30)

Language is seen as bearing a dual thrust on our experiences. As the secrets of language remain locked, paradoxically, reality keeps recurring as if divested of the marks of change. Ironically, this realisation also liberates us from 'the grid of everyday language' (TP, 33); or rather, what we come to realise through 'the grid of everyday language' is that we cannot maintain a substantive relation to reality through language alone. Although change is all there is, and change is 'us', as in O'Hara, the traces of change are always absorbed inside language:

And things decay into the pit left for them
By that greater happening as it is imagined:
Shorn of duration. (TP, 40)

A break from language might also mean the end of 'existence', which is what Ashbery seeks to capture throughout *Three Poems*, and in 'The Self-Portrait in a
Convex Mirror' in the manner of Parmigianino. Rather than an invisible agency, existence is Ashbery's absent cause. That the subject always misses out on the 'event' might seem to defer the end of 'existence': the techniques of deferral may be the secret that Roussel's writing both veils and reveals. The appeal of Roussel's writing stems from appearing to hold indications as to how this outcome may be averted, as well as the will to reach out beyond it. Both Breton and Foucault responded to this duality in their different ways. Roussel's secret is what both Breton and Foucault wish to preserve and resist unlocking, a secret that for Ashbery, too, is an unfathomable principle which is both mechanical and non-causal. As he puts it in the third 'poem', entitled 'The Recital':

You know now the sorrow of continually doing something that you cannot name, of producing automatically as an apple tree produces apples this thing there is no name for. (TP, 110)

This can be read as an allegory or a metaphor for anything that like a Duchamp-type bachelor machine is born of desire, is repressed or realised in the reality that Aragon recognised in the worst inventions. Roussel's 'appareils' which are allegories of his writing, intricate as they are, defy principles of utility and use. The bachelor machine and the Rousselian text are allegories of a reality which refers to nothing outside itself. We can think here of Roussel's Martial Canterel in Locus Solus, who conceived of 'un appareil capable de créer une œuvre esthétique due aux seuls efforts combinés du soleil et du vent'. In Comment j'ai écrit certains de mes livres, Roussel also says that 'Martial' combines imaginary facts which amount to 'un monde extra-humain'. Roussel's writing suggests a realm where subjectivity and the external world, the contingent and the imagined cancel each other out: this, for Roussel, is the realm of reality itself, a reality that bears no referential illusion.

Such utter negation of the given was seen as a promise by Breton: as he put in the 1923 'Ligne brisée' which he dedicated to Roussel, 'Il n'y a qu'à toucher il n'y a rien à voir [...] Le ventre des mots est doré ce soir et rien n'est plus en vain.' (OCI, 186,

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Much later, occasioned by Jean Ferry's study on Roussel, while in Antibes in 1948 Breton 'saw' in Roussel, something not dissimilar to what Foucault subsequently 'read'; Breton allusively attributes to aesthetic experiences what Foucault attributes to language:

Sur le plan plastique, qui de nos jours – hors Duchamp – ne s'en est pas tenu là, qui s'est montré capable à volonté de déplacer le viseur jusqu'à nous faire “boucler la boucle” de la vision? [...] Avec Roussel, oui, c'est bien à un de ces mondes complets que j'ai su tout de suite avoir affaire, même si tout d'abord (et durablement) mon œil en a été ébloui. [26]

Moreover, Breton related Roussel's work to an incident from his New York years that once too often brought up the arbitrariness of signifying and referential systems. The pretext was 'a jumping bean' brought by a certain lady while he was in Lacan's and Caillois's company. Although this phenomenon was commonly attributed to an insect trapped inside the bean, the distinct responses of Caillois and Lacan were telling of their differing attitudes to the deceptive relation between the intellect and sight. Caillois insisted on splitting the bean, Lacan suggested that they throw it away, 'puisqu'il n'en serait pas moins avéré que l'irrationalité au moins apparente du phénomène avait suffi à nous faire prendre en suspicion notre système de références ordinaires'. [27]

For Breton on the other hand, Roussel's reflexive texts transcend both intellect and sight and offer aesthetic experiences in so far as "l'imagination se met en scène et [...] ne met en scène qu'elle même", as Hegel put it. [28] This is not unlike Foucault's view of a vision patterned on language, a dystopian foil to Breton's utopianism which however also rests on the inadequacy of reality:

the instant language starts, time stops. Turned to stone, the spectacle is presented not as an effect, but as a sign, a freeze-frame where one cannot tell what action has been stopped, not at which scene. [29]

Like a bachelor machine, Roussel's language is uncanny: it is ambiguously overdetermined and inexorable, yet driven by an uncontrollable impulse from within.

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27 La Clé des champs, p. 186.
28 La Clé des champs, p. 186.
In relation to this, Ashbery has noted how Foucault opposes his reading of Roussel to the Surrealists’ reading:

[The Surrealists] were bent on seeking a hidden significance beneath the surface of his mysterious prose, Foucault insisted that his work systematically imposes an unformed, divergent, centrifugal uneasiness, oriented not towards the most reticent of secrets, but towards the redoubling and the transmutation of the most visible forms.  

For both Breton and Foucault, Roussel’s secret unfolds in and revolves around language; yet whereas for Breton, the secret mystically points to, contains and is contained by another order of experience, for Foucault it is as centripetal as language itself. Neither rational, nor irrational, neither gratuitous, nor instrumental, reflexivity is, for Foucault, the most fundamental thing about language in general, and Roussel’s language in particular. This might also be translated into Duchampian terms, whereby Roussel’s work is a bachelor machine and our knowing or unknowing of its functioning does not make it any less transparent. For Breton however, Roussel’s secret, the secret that he does not disclose, resembles the supreme point of an occult, hermetic process. This however does not lessen our desire to grasp the process.  

Marcel Duchamp too, in his 1966 dialogues with Pierre Cabanne, acknowledged Roussel’s influence on his ironic attraction to the machine and to word play, and said that ‘son jeu de mots avait un sens caché, mais pas au sens mallarméen ou rimbalien, c’est une obscurité d’un autre ordre’. A play on sound, sight and meaning, a play on resemblances and differences at the level of the signifier, it also involves the role of subjectivity in sense perception and cognition, as Breton implied with his anecdote. As Roussel’s imprint on Ashbery’s writing also shows, and as Breton and Foucault suggest, Roussel’s writing is utopian and dystopian at once; neither can language generate reality nor can reality defeat language. As Ashbery put it, in Roussel’s descriptions language becomes a medium that is ‘both seamless and pedestrian’.  

Breton’s, Duchamp’s, Foucault’s or Ashbery’s fascination with Roussel is incited by a mystery located in a different order in each instance. Roussel seems to want to liberate the signifier from its context, to arrive at the purity of the acoustic or the

30 Foucault, Death and the Labyrinth, p. 59.
31 La Clé des champs, p. 192.
visual image. As for Duchamp, he worked with language in a manner reverse to Roussel's: whereas Roussel seems to be willing to produce new, imaginary signifieds out of existing signifiers, Duchamp extracted signifiers from their environments, in suspended states where the signifier seems to be 'hung in a limbo', like the mass-produced objects in the ready-mades. Or else, the signifier is a threshold, hermetic and open at once, where the subject is both an agent and a passive viewer. Roussel seeks to produce autonomous verbal artefacts, whereas Duchamp, following on from Roussel attacked the presumed autonomy of any one verbal artefact. Roussel on the other hand, also suggests the limits of experience, rather than liminal experiences by making vision and language indistinguishable. Ashbery, despite his nostalgia for the 'event', makes the signifier/signified distinction superfluous. For Ashbery, less equivocally than for Duchamp, we cannot step outside language. Still, Ashbery's fascination with Roussel's, just like Breton's, Duchamp's or Foucault's, revolves around the possibility of eliminating our distance from the referent.

Moreover, unlike the Surrealists, Ashbery is hesitant as to whether he is seeking the referent inside representation or beyond it; ironically, though, if reference precedes language, it also precedes the contingent experiences which are the only ones we are capable of knowing; more accurately, reference escapes our ways of knowing. In a manner reminiscent of Cornell's difficulty of dissociating objective from formal principles, Ashbery's work is marked by hesitancy as to the reflexive and referential aspects of language. Unlike O'Hara, the poem for Ashbery is not the primary form and content of his experience. Like the instance of utterance, the moment of perception cannot be reconstructed. 'Existence,' or the 'event' in Ashbery's writing become the avatars of Cornell's sublimation of the aesthetic object. Equally, Ashbery's anxiety over the discrepancy between the instance and the contents of perception, is similar to O'Hara's anxiety for presence and immediacy.

The following can be read as Ashbery's own approach to Roussel's enigma of language, as much Cornell's boxes constitute a response to De Chirico's notion of the enigma of emptiness:

34 See Molly Nesbit, 'Ready-Made Originals: The Duchamp Model', *October*, 37 (Summer 1986), 53-64 (p. 64).
if [the stars] were not there the question would not exist to be answered, but only as a rhetorical question in the impasse grammar of cosmic unravelings of all kinds, to be proposed but never formulated. (TP, 51)

In Ashbery's poems names arbitrarily precede and come after things: Ashbery's images come from the opposite end of Aragon's utopian nominalism in *Le Paysan de Paris*, where whatever he names assumes a real guise, where language is an experiential and not a mediating, alienating device. Ashbery exposes how language is the product of texts and texts are the product of language. In response to this, Ashbery progressively radicalised his texts either by closing or negating the gap between discourse and reality, positing the structure and the contents of perception as indistinct; this also amounts to persisting in seeing them as irredeemably incommensurable. Reality is something that only exists outside the text, yet only texts are available to us. Either way, our experiences inevitably fail us. In this sense, his recurring parodies of the inauthenticity of sense perception are also responses to the failure of reference. At the same time, like O'Hara, Ashbery is ambivalent towards the repressive and the liberating effect of a representational culture; that the poems stage the differal and the constant obstruction of meaning is Ashbery's response to, and sole defense against, a culture of indiscriminate consumption, as in *The Vermont Notebook*. His immersion in language, is not unlike O'Hara's indiscriminate embrace of things. Similarly, exposing the inadequacy of representation, while accepting that representation is all there is, comes across as the only viable form of critique.

Throughout Ashbery's poetry, the anxiety over the conflict between language and experience is intensified for as long as language and experience remain incommensurable, yet same. Ashbery's poems dramatise how reference is defeated because signs remain symptomatic of how language represses rather than opens onto life. Ironically, discourse is as opaque and impenetrable as the immediacy of the 'event' is unattainable. Ashbery sets up a vast space in order to contest the identity of discourse to itself and to 'lived' experience, while emphasising that this discrepancy is all there is. Like O'Hara's poems, or a Cornell box, Ashbery's most Surrealist-derived poems are an expression of how, paradoxically, language grants validity to
the category of experience. Ashbery elaborated on the limitations of the text and his implied critique of Surrealism is not unrelated to his equivocal embrace of language.

Unlike Roussel, Foucault and the Surrealists, Ashbery resolves neither the enigma of language, nor of experience; enigmas they are paradoxically self-redeeming and self-negating. Ashbery's textual dissidence complements and collides with O'Hara's exuberant complicity. In their respective ways, they express the impossibility of transcending representation; they redeem neither form, nor contingent experiences. Hesitating between forms and means to recover the 'event', Ashbery's texts, ultimately regret the power of language:

You know now the sorrow of continually doing something that you cannot name, of producing automatically as an apple tree produces apples this thing there is no name for. (TP, 110)

Ashbery's awareness of the paradox of language brings back Cornell's indecision as to the identity or discrepancy between forms and contents, O'Hara's anxiety over the deceptive and inescapable identity between the two in the life/poem equation, and ultimately, the earlier Surrealist intent to exploit critically such patterns of identity or discrepancy. If so, Ashbery's implied critique of Surrealism targets less Surrealism's utopian and subversive tendencies, but rather the fact that in Surrealism the promise of a more substantivite relation to the world remains unfulfilled.
Conclusion

A society, as it becomes less and less able [...] to justify the inevitability of its particular forms, breaks up with the accepted notions upon which artists and writers must depend at large for communication with their audiences. [...] All the verities [...] are thrown into question and the writer or artist is no longer able to estimate the response of his audience to the symbols and references with which he works.¹

Substituting art or culture for society, as Greenberg does in his critique of society’s inability to legitimise any means of artistic expression, and the resulting uncertain relation between the reception of artistic forms and the forms themselves, casts a special light on View’s, Cornell’s, O’Hara’s, and Ashbery’s respective dialogues with Surrealism, and with their own historical, cultural and social contexts. The loss of an organic link between the mode of production and the reception of art, was what incited Greenberg to defend abstract art’s turn to form as the only legitimate and viable response to historical reality. As discussed in the introduction, Greenberg’s purism was underscored by an implied pessimism faced with abstract art’s growing resistance to represent something other than ‘the processes of its medium’. Rather than negating the artists’ ability to assimilate reality, Greenberg negates the representation of a reality which was becoming irreversibly mediated by the ‘vicarious’ forms of the new ‘ersatz’ culture of ‘kitsch’.

Greenberg posited form as the only historically-conditioned category that could accommodate creative, cognitive and critical principles against the alienating impact of ‘kitsch’. Yet art’s ability to transcend its context worked in a reverse manner too: the new ‘ersatz’ culture not only transcended, but also integrated art within its own modes of production of new forms. With regard to this, what writers in View intuited through Surrealism, which was also what Cornell, O’Hara and Ashbery engaged with subsequently in distinct ways, was how the gap between the presumed truth and authenticity of form on the one hand, and the untruth and falsity of mass culture on the other, was becoming increasingly imperceptible. In a manner that complements just as much as it opposes Greenberg’s insights, instead of taking issue with either the

dichotomy or the unwanted blending of high and mass culture, writers in *View* approached this discrepancy as symptomatic of contradictions endemic and necessary to the continuation of culture at large.

However problematic notions of form and intent were, and however conflicting the role of both a subjective and a collective agency in social change seemed to be, paradigms for the social role of art and the critical value of forms were still needed. With regard to this, Surrealism appeared irredeemably conditioned by its history, not only because of its resistance to abandoning figurative forms but also because any form of critique that followed on from Surrealism, as Barnett Newman implied, had to address less explicit and direct, though at times more predictable forms of repression and exclusion: as Newman put it, because the war ‘has robbed us of our hidden terror [ ...] we now know the terror to expect’. This is why a redemptive intent on the part of the artists was dissociated from destructive principles in the emerging Abstract Expressionism.

It is not paradoxical that *View’s* cultural pluralism and its affinity for the contingent on the one hand, and Abstract Expressionism’s resistance to participating in a tangible reality on the other, were each in their own way intended to revise the unequivocal opposition between regression and progress; neither the development of form nor of cultural practices unaware of their potential for resistance were expected to have an immediate impact on manifest forms of conflict. In neither context, did Surrealism seem to offer a historically viable alternative. Whereas Surrealist thought had sought to turn the antinomies of culture into a dynamic principle of change, any form of critique had to assume these antinomies, as *View’s* approach to Surrealism implied: these antinomies were the only conditions of the very possibility of critique. The fact that Greenberg and Rosenberg turned a revolutionary ethic of change into an ethics of the permanence of art and individual creativity, is symptomatic of this. Their views express a cultural pessimism that could hardly accommodate Surrealism’s doubly destructive and redemptive polemics.

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As I suggested in chapter One, these tendencies impacted on the self-perception of Surrealists in the 1940s, which was most evident in the Surrealist approach to myth. Through myth, Surrealist practitioners revised the antinomy between form and content not only in art but also at the level of subjective and collective experience, and sought to redefine notions of agency; as I tried to show, thought on myth was an expression of Surrealist anxiety in relation both to the role of the individual and the role of the collective in an emancipatory cause that seemed to be beyond the subject’s grasp. This incited an exploration of how a dialectic of unity and fragmentation determined not only the modern subject’s but also the primitive one’s relation to history; this led to the assertion of subjective principles against the impersonal forces of history.

Greenberg described a similar dialectic between unity and fragmentation in his account of how an alienating historical condition intersects with the forms of abstract art. In his 1949 essay ‘Our Period Style’, he claimed that a ‘principle of unity’ underlied the apparent dichotomy between the ‘discord, atomization, disintegration, unprincipled eclecticisms’ on the one hand, as well as ‘the new unity of style in the visual arts’ on the other. For Greenberg, abstract art conveys this unity precisely because of its ability to make ‘more explicit and prominent’ the increasing rationalisation of social life, without succumbing to any pressure to rationalise itself. Greenberg emphasises art’s ability to express an alienated reality while remaining untainted by the alienating impact of that reality itself. On the other hand, this ability through art to remain untainted by alienation is symptomatic of the fact that reflective immersion in processes intrinsic to the development of art rests, ironically, on the intensification of the unreflective and ‘vicarious’ forms of mass culture. At a step removed from Greenberg’s approach, View sought to turn this opposition into an element of cultural critique; in order to set up such an alternative paradigm in the margins of both high and mass culture, it turned to the spirit rather than the letter of Surrealism.

It is against the backdrop of the sense that an alienating culture is able to produce criticism of itself, that I approached the impact of Surrealist theory and practice on

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3 Greenberg, The Collected Essays, II: Arrogant Purpose 1945-1949, pp. 322-6 (pp. 325-6).
Cornell’s boxes and collages, on the ‘things’ that populate O’Hara’s poems, and on the lost link between language and reference in Ashbery. As I suggested, Cornell’s attachment to his objects, O’Hara’s indiscriminate need for poems and ‘things’ alike, Ashbery’s wish to ‘move in and out of some other’ as yet unspecified ‘space’, all these features speak of nostalgia for a tangible reality. By being implicitly critical of how both the letter and the spirit of Surrealism are historically conditioned, Cornell, O’Hara and Ashbery each regret the transience of subject/object relations which may yet be historically meaningful – in both material and conceptual terms – in the struggle against a reality which is experienced as thoroughly representational.

Cornell holds onto transcendent experiences and, as argued in Chapter Three, his nostalgia for an unmediated contact with the world is determined by a dialectic, impossible to resolve, between a projective wholeness and an unsolicited closure. What comes across as an unresolved conflict in his boxes between their content and their formal principles stems from Cornell’s sense of his own inability to resolve the dialectic between the contingent and the transcendent. As I hope to have shown, the analogous unresolved dialectic between form and content in the boxes undermines the critical value of irresolution altogether. In relation to this, it is useful to remember Baudrillard’s point about the failure of the objects which one feels the compulsion to ‘collect’: these objects remain too ‘concrete’ to redeem an ‘impoverished’ humanity that remains cut-off from the processes that once went into these objects; and I would like to add to this point that these objects also end up as too abstract to preserve their contingent aspects.

O’Hara on the other hand, demystifies the categories of form – neither transcends the contingency of context. He turns his own embeddedness in an untranscendable culture into the only form of legitimate resistance, and he does so with a double-edged irony, both cynical and regretful. O’Hara’s relation to his poems rests on a therapeutic as well as traumatic sense of detachment from his stated empathy with life as it is. I demonstrated how this occurs in both Cornell’s boxes and O’Hara’s poems at the level of the relations between the aesthetic object and the commodity: a step away from Cornell’s slot-machines where substantive experiences are inflected through delusions of individuality within mass culture, O’Hara is critical of his own
insight into an integrative culture. The commodified guise and function of O’Hara’s poems is intended as a critique of the supposedly disruptive potential of the category of the object itself. Rather than being oppositional, his poems embrace a representational culture at the expense of unmediated experiences – O’Hara consistently sees reification as a platform for the critique of false promises of transcendence. In thematising our powerlessness to grasp what ‘things do to us’, O’Hara builds up a dystopian view of subject/object relations and of the powerlessness of critique.

In Ashbery’s poems, the dichotomies between matter and form, collapse and come to be perceived as a fact of language alone. At the same time, his poems are as nostalgic just as they are critical of substantive experiences. While his poems represent attempts to break free from language, Ashbery is ‘worried’ about restoring a lost relation with a reality which might reveal itself to be just as deceptively autonomous as the aesthetic object. This is why, like O’Hara, Ashbery also sees the poem as an extension of the self. Less empathetic with urban or mass culture, more speculative and more mundane at the same time, Ashbery suggests a slightly more ambivalent approach to Cornell’s and O’Hara’s with regard to the conflict between aesthetic and cultural experiences. As in O’Hara, throughout Ashbery’s poems the production of meaning is desubjectivised, as self and world reflect each other, but not on each other. Yet, Ashbery’s reflexive principles can also be read against the grain, as a critique of the paradoxes of postmodern culture and its simultaneously diversifying and homogenising effect whereby everything is different, yet remains the same.

Cultural and artistic tropes intersect in View’s, Cornell’s, O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s various and varied dialogues with Surrealism. It seems that the fact that ‘making art in America is about saving one’s soul’ as Charle Simic wrote about Cornell; that it is a ‘grace to be born and live as variously as possible’ in postwar America, in O’Hara’s words; that as Ashbery tells us, ‘they dream only of America’, dreams as undefined and undefinable as ‘they’ –; it seems that all these experiences are symptomatic of the

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fact that the distance from Breton’s narrator in *Nadja* setting off at the *Hôtel des Grands Hommes* on his quest for convulsive beauty to Ashbery’s *Hôtel Lautréamont* is as immeasurable as the gap between subjectivity and the world of objects is closed.

Still, these artists’ dialogues with Surrealism bring back in a reverse manner Surrealism’s synthetic and totalising aspirations. In the context of recent readings of Surrealism that highlight how Surrealism may be seen as anticipating poststructuralist and postmodernist critical strategies, Cornell’s boxes as well as O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s poems bring into play the relations between avant-garde, modernist and postmodernist principles, at both the historical and the formal levels.

This is why Surrealism has been examined here less as an influence on the formal aspects of their works but rather as the historical reminder of the reality that these works wish either to assimilate or to negate. Negating, or critical as their approach to Surrealism might have been, the dialogues with Surrealism of the artists I have discussed here inflects questions central in their work. How are forms simultaneously reflexive and referential? How can social or historical experience be represented, or else, how are we to rethink the relation between language and experience? How can life be integrated in the work and vice versa, when reality comes across as thoroughly representational and representation is the only reality available to us? How would this distinction be maintained without a theory of agency? These were the questions that the Surrealists addressed through the category of the object: a physical entity and a concept, meant to be simultaneously self-fulfilling and destructive in relation to both reality and representation.

In the light of this shift of emphasis, I asked how Cornell’s, O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s uses of Surrealist principles may challenge or strengthen claims like, for instance, Hal Foster’s, that ‘to take Surrealism as seriously as possible’ is to see Surrealism ‘less as an object to be subjected to theory than a theoretical object productive of its own critical concepts’?\(^5\) Productive of its own critical concepts as it was, Surrealist thought also addressed its historicity, and it is on the basis of the

\(^5\) Foster describes Surrealism as ‘a related set of complex practices, one that develops its own ambiguous conceptions of aesthetics, politics, and history through difficult involvements in desire and sexuality, the unconscious and the drives’. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1995), p. xviii.
historicity of Surrealism’s categories that I situated Cornell’s, O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s encounters in relation to each other and to the Surrealist precedent. With regard to this, it is important to remember once again that Cornell approached Hollywood stars, the circus, the Romantic Ballet, the fleeting aura of his favourite starlets, commercial enseignes, the teachings of Christian Science, the scraps of old film sold by weight in a New Jersey warehouse, as objects in which the imprint of the subjective processes that went into them was not fully effaced. On the other hand, this cannot be said of the raw material that went into O’Hara’s poems, or for instance, of Ashbery’s *The Vermont Notebook*. *View*’s difficulty in sustaining the distinction between mass-produced culture and a popular imaginary can be seen as an anticipation of this problematic.

Cornell’s untheorised attempt to redeem a reified reality as well as O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s acceptance that a reified reality is all there is, are as historically conditioned as the Surrealist attempt to recover non-alienating subject/object relations. Surrealism sought to redefine the links between subjective and collective experiences, and to suggest emancipatory ways of rethinking and acting on them. As I have tried to show, the Surrealist approach to the category of the object involved a reflection on the transience of any one element of a critique, while at the same time challenging both the determinism and the relativism of context. In Surrealist thought, our experiences are neither merely the product of subjective consciousness, nor are they exclusively the product of historical relations independent of subjectivity. The Surrealists attributed new symbolic values to objects that bear the imprint of the subject on them and vice versa.

I have described how *View*’s, Cornell’s, O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s dialogue with Surrealism inflects this problematic in ways that allowed us to question whether the negation or the loss of the ability to contemplate something other than what there is has an emancipatory effect. Their works involve both the broken promises of modernity and the discontents of postmodernism; they bear the inescapable discrepancy between the intent inscribed in the work and its impact on reality.

Addressing the incommensurable relation between Surrealism and a ‘structural change’ that did not occur, in his 1942 *Prolégomènes à un troisième manifeste du*
surréalisme ou non, Breton referred to aspects of reality that assume a Surrealist guise independently of the spirit of Surrealism:

il s’en faut de beaucoup déjà, que le surréalisme puisse couvrir tout ce qui s’entreprend en son nom, ouvertement ou non, de plus profonds “thés” de Tokio aux ruisselantes vitrines de la Cinquième avenue, bien que le Japon et l’Amérique soient en guerre. Ce qui, en un sens déterminé, se fait ressemble assez peu à ce qui a été voulu.⁶

It is not the fact that the shop windows of Fifth Avenue or the deepest tea-houses in Tokyo assume a Surrealist guise that Breton resents here, but the fact that this barely resembles or brings about effects intended by Surrealism. What Breton anticipates with distaste here is exactly what Cornell, O’Hara and Ashbery see as appealing and lacking in their encounter with Surrealism; while drawn to Surrealism’s intent to estrange us from the given, they also own up to the inefficacy and the datedness of Surrealism’s means of critique. They bear witness to this in what I have described as the levelling of the distinction between antinomies central in Surrealist thought. The tensions between form and content, language and experience, subjectivity and the realm of objects can no longer be assimilated in dialectical structures which, unresolved or not, would bring about substantive change. In the works of Cornell, O’Hara and Ashbery, Surrealist irony, divested of its oppositional thrust, becomes an expression of alienated empathy rather than the precondition for a distance both empathetic and defamiliarising.

Maurice Blanchot’s evocation of the persistence of the spirit of Surrealism sounds now like a gloss on Breton’s way of seeing Surrealism as assimilated by realities that assume a Surrealist guise independently of Surrealism’s intent:

Le surréalisme s’est évanoui ? C’est qu’il n’est plus ici ou là: il est partout. C’est un fantôme, une brillante hantise. A son tour, métamorphose méritée, il est devenu surréel.⁷

In the rest of his essay Blanchot discusses how the practice of automatism both undermines and redeems the possibility of an unmediated relation between subjectivity and language and how the Surrealist ‘practice’ of language is premised

on the subject’s possibility to realise itself as a totality beyond relations of exchange.\textsuperscript{8} Similarly, in respect of the fact that Surrealism is everywhere and therefore can no longer be pinned down in specific moments, Blanchot strikes a much more optimistic note than Breton’s. Yet like the dialectic between a subject which is productive of language and a subject that is constituted in language, the elimination of the boundaries between language and reality is always aborted in the last instance. Therefore Surrealism’s ‘metamorphosis’ can yet again be vested with ambivalence. As Cornell’s, O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s work shows, the letter of Surrealism has been rendered somewhat powerless before a culture that has the ability to encompass and even foster what it excludes and represses. Realising this, O’Hara’s poems assimilate Surrealism’s negating irony in a reverse manner. In his poems, it is not Surrealism that has become ‘surreal’ in its turn; like the structure of the poem which allows O’Hara to take everything in, it is the world of exchange that has assimilated Surrealism. This is why O’Hara sees no reason to deny exchange value. In Surrealism, the interface between useless commodities and artworks, dated and banal objects became the ground for the critique of both artistic and technological advances, of both artistic originality and commodity production. On the other hand, as I have tried to show, Cornell’s boxes remain purposeless, enigmatic objects that for all that have not been radically detached from the means-ends rationality that brought them into being in the first place.

Driven by an attitude not dissimilar to O’Hara’s, in a review of an exhibition of Surrealist art in 1964, Ashbery described Surrealism in terms that give a double-edged twist to Blanchot’s seeing Surrealism as a ‘brillante hantise’:

[Surrealism] has become part of our daily lives: its effects can be seen everywhere, in the work of artists and writers who have no connection with the movement, in movies, interior decoration and popular speech. A degradation? Perhaps. But it is difficult to impose limitations on the unconscious, which has a habit of turning up in unlikely places.\textsuperscript{9}


Ashbery speaks of Surrealism with an ambivalence which brings to mind Harold Rosenberg’s response to Cornell’s slot-machines, as well as it can be seen as an inadvertent critique of Breton’s uneasiness to what he perceived as the vulgarisation of the Surrealist programme of aesthetic and cultural revolt in the 1930s in America. What is unambiguous though in both instances, is the realisation that the boundary between reality and art, between reality and the imagination, between socialised consciousness and the unconscious is no longer there. Resembling mass-produced objects just as much as they were intended as aesthetic objects, Cornell’s slot-machines negate neither use nor exchange value. In fact they exist in a context of relations of exchange. Similarly, the fact that the spirit of Surrealism turns up in ‘unlikely places’ no longer has an emancipatory effect.

In breaking down barriers between hitherto distinct levels of cultural practice and discourse, postmodernist forms problematised the value and efficacy of opposition and the assimilative mechanisms of culture. Ironically however, relations of domination have become as resistant as the oppositional tactics aimed at them. As if against the grain, O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s, post-surrealist and ‘post-anti-aesthetic’ attitudes seem to imply that it may not be long before not only the spirit of Surrealism but also the letter of postmodernism, dominant and diffuse, will also seem as historically conditioned as the historical avant-garde. Therefore, rather than seeing Surrealism as anticipatory, as promising the end of the promises of modernity and as offering a paradigm for the critical value of unresolved antinomies, we may need to start wondering whether and how such irresolutions may be exceeded or passed beyond.

In his highly controversial defense of the ‘unfinished project of modernity’, Jürgen Habermas directed his critique not only against a pluralising postmodernist agenda but also against the historicity of the totalising intent of the historical avant-garde. Referring to Surrealism, he wrote:

First, when the containers of an autonomously developed cultural space are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow.10

The Surrealist affinities I have discussed in this work have been predominantly described as responses to the failure of emancipatory effects to follow on from the 'desublimation of meaning' and the 'destructuring of forms'. The reversal of the categories that structure our experiences did not bring about a substantive, liberating change in our relation to either language or reality. It is because of and not in spite of this that, during its American years, Surrealism's faith in the redemption of irreconcilable oppositions and in the potency of the impossible grew instead of declining; and that even at the most nostalgic or parodic moments, the American dialogue with Surrealism redeemed it for maintaining its faith in the dialectic between what is real and what is possible.
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