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Unpacking Cornell: Consumption and Play in the Work of Rauschenberg, Warhol and George Brecht

Anna Dezeuze

Abstract

This article examines the contrasts and affinities between the works of Joseph Cornell and three artists working in New York in the 1950s and 1960s, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and George Brecht. While Rauschenberg and Warhol explored the persona of the artist as consumer which Cornell's practice as a collector and 'fan' had initiated, Brecht's work highlights another significant innovation of the older artist's objects: the use of play. The relations between consumption, collecting and play emerging from the dialogue between Cornell and these younger artists reflect more general questions about the ways in which meaning is constructed through assemblages of everyday objects and images.

Fig. 1: Joseph Cornell, *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)*, 1945-46, box construction, 52.1 x 40.6 x 8.9 cm. The Lindy and Edwin Bergman Joseph Cornell Collection, Chicago. © The Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation/ VAGA, New York/ DACS, London, 2004.

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In a 1981 article, artist Robert Morris listed Joseph Cornell as one of the four cornerstone figures of American art, along with Edward Hopper, Marcel Duchamp and Jackson Pollock. According to Morris, each artist embodied a distinct trend running from the 1960s to contemporary art, and Cornell's work, he claimed, was representative of 'an impulse to the decorative.'[1] While conferring significance to Cornell, Morris's article clearly condemns his work and its 'decorative' impulse for being escapist and for refusing to tackle any of the serious 'problematics' characterising modern art such as 'the redefinition and breakdown of forms, the reflexive stance, the role of the self, etc.'[2] In a sense, Morris's opinion is representative of a widespread reading of Cornell's oeuvre: dismissed as sentimental, conservative and undemanding, Cornell's work indeed often emerges as the negative counterpart of Duchamp, who has regularly been heralded as the father of 'postmodernism' for the last forty years or so.

In order to question this reading, I wish to explore the affinities between Cornell's works and those created, in the 1960s, by American artists of the first so-called 'postmodern' generation. Rather than rehearsing historical narratives of influence, I wish to analyse works by Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol and George Brecht in relation to two themes which can be traced back to Cornell's work: the conception of the artist as a consumer on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the spectator's participation in the artwork through play. At the crossroads of these two themes, another broader question, central to all four artists' works, arises concerning the ways meaning is constructed through the combination of objects and images. By addressing these three concerns, I will demonstrate how re-reading Cornell's work through his legacies emphasises the very complexities that opinions such as Morris's fail to acknowledge. In turn, a closer look at Cornell's multiple legacies will help unpack the various processes involved in choosing, assembling, presenting and representing everyday objects in works sharing a common 'assemblage,' 'junk' or 'Pop' aesthetic.[3]

Portrait of the Artist as a Consumer

Although Rauschenberg knew Cornell's work since the 1940s, it was not until 1952, during his trip to Africa and Europe, that he produced works which could be really described as Cornellian: his series of *Scatoli personali*, or *Personal Boxes* (Fig. 2).[4] Created and

exhibited while the artist was in Italy, these works consisted of different kinds of small boxes, 'ranging from a Victorian change-purse to Baroque crystal cases to the discard pile of any street,' which were filled with natural objects, such as animal bones, insects, feathers, stones, shells and twigs, combined with found or purchased artefacts, including mirrors, engravings, beads, fabric and watch-parts.[5] While the *Personal Boxes* lined with satin or velvet suggest the preciousness of Cornell's homages to ballet dancers, the old-fashioned engravings and objects chosen by Rauschenberg 'for the richness of their past,' function, like the maps, reproductions and Victorian artefacts included in the assemblages of the older American artist, as embodiments of an exotically remote European culture.[6]

Fig. 2: Robert Rauschenberg, *Thirty Scatoli Personali*, ca. 1952. Arranged and photographed by the artist, floor of Pension Allegi, Rome, 1953. © Robert Rauschenberg/ VAGA, New York/ DACS, London, 2004.

> As a crucial part of his early childhood, Rauschenberg built a small sanctuary within a shared room by using crates and planks to create a dividing wall for privacy. In the resulting compartments, he collected and arranged a great miscellany of things that were meaningful to him, obsessively adding jars and boxes and all sorts of found specimens such as rocks, plants, insects, and small animals.[7]

This biographical detail reported by Walter Hopps evokes Cornell's own collecting practice, similarly articulated through compartmentalisation, jars and boxes. Indeed, the words 'privacy,' 'meaningful,' and 'obsessively' chosen by Hopps would easily find a place in the critical vocabulary used to describe Cornell's work and life, while the image of the 'sanctuary' is a recurrent trope in the artist's own writings.[8] Wandering through the Roman flea markets and gathering souvenirs, Rauschenberg the tourist created very 'personal' boxes permeated with the childhood collecting impulses which he so obviously shared with Cornell the imaginary traveller.

On his return from Europe, however, Rauschenberg was eager to distance himself from this Cornellian dimension of his work. Asked about his relation to Cornell's work, he would later explain: 'The only difference between me and Cornell is that he puts his work behind glass, and mine is out in the world. (…) He packed objects away, and I was *unpacking* them.'[9] In his *Combines*, started in the mid-1950s, Rauschenberg indeed seems to be emptying out the contents of a bag of objects found in an attic or junkyard, apparently abandoning the compartmentalising device of the box in favour of what Leo Steinberg would call the 'flatbed picture plane,' a surface acting as a receptacle for random assemblages of objects.[10] Rauschenberg's statement concerning Cornell's work embodies the ambivalent position of his *Combines* in relation to the dominant trend of Abstract Expressionism. While Cornell's work served as a useful alternative to the Abstract Expressionists' rejection of figuration and literary content, Rauschenberg nevertheless sought to maintain a validating connection between his *Combines* and their large-scale gestural paintings. And one of the means to achieve this was to contrast the brash, direct character of his works with Cornell's smaller, more contained boxes.

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Taking Rauschenberg's 'unpacking' even further, Andy Warhol began in the late 1960s to hoard objects into his *Time Capsules*, cardboard boxes filled with objects, photographs and printed material (Fig. 3). When Cornell used the term 'time capsule' in a 1963 Christmas card,[11] he obviously had a more poetic image in mind than a miscellaneous array of photographs, envelopes, receipts, baseball caps and t-shirts thrown together into a box. The visual aspect of Warhol's *Time Capsules* recalls the stacked boxes of Cornell's studio, with their handwritten labels denoting their contents. In Cornell's working process, these boxes contained parts to be used in the future, and their selection and categorisation constituted only one stage in an ongoing project. In contrast, Warhol's *Capsules* are merely symptoms of the artist's urge to acquire objects, a tendency which would turn into a full-blown frenzy once he had enough money to spend in the 1970s, cramming his house with collections ranging from space toys to art deco Cartier watches. The apparent absence of selection criteria in Warhol's collectomania was also a characteristic of *Raid the Icebox*, the show he curated in 1969 at the Institute for the Arts in Houston by drawing on the collection of the Rhode Island School of Design museum. To the exasperation of one of the curators, for example, Warhol chose to exhibit the museum's whole shoe collection, including duplications, along with randomly chosen paintings, umbrellas, and hatboxes.[12] In these instances, the drive to collect emerges as a continuous flow which can only be interrupted by arbitrary categories of classification.

Fig. 3: Andy Warhol, *Time Capsule 44*, contents dated primarily 1950-1973. Photograph Richard Stoner.
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In contrast with the male-gendered world of Abstract Expressionism, Rauschenberg and Warhol shared with Cornell the attitude of the consumer, a role traditionally associated with the feminine realm of domesticity and privacy. That both Rauschenberg and Warhol were gay, as some have also suggested about Cornell, or that Cornell and Warhol as adult men chose to live with their mothers, are biographical facts which may support the general argument that Cornell provided an alternative model for the artist within the aggressively heterosexual context of Abstract Expressionism. Rather than pursuing this kind of biographical connection, however, I wish to highlight how these three artists all investigated the acquisition of objects as a renegotiation of the relations between the public and the private. While Cornell hoarded objects in his basement and and often worked on the kitchen table, using the family house as a bastion for his privacy, Rauschenberg abandoned the intimacy of the *Personal Boxes* constructed in hotel rooms in order to situate his *Combines* at the boundaries between indoors and outdoors, public and private. Bringing together domestic objects and detritus found on street, the *Combines* exist in the liminal space of the yard.[13] Morris singled out the 'family attic trunk' look of these works when he described them as part of Cornell's 'decorative tradition.'[14] The faded and crumpled fabrics, worn out domestic objects, torn scraps of newspapers and old family snapshots are indeed objects that can be found in the attic as well as in the cellar or the shed — domestic spaces set apart from other rooms in order to store discarded objects, in a limbo between past and present, use and obsolescence, meaning and irrelevance.

In his biography of Warhol, Wayne Koestenbaum argued that the impossibility of public expression led many gay men in the 1950s to throw themselves into consumption and home decoration, 'amassing artworks, cleansers, masks, records, and receipts, with a curatorial intensity that Warhol would translate into an art of serial and repeated imagery, and into the collections … that were his signature.'[15] Thus, in addition to a shared attraction to dime store items, souvenirs and popular magazines, what linked Warhol and Cornell was their exploration of the very processes of accumulation and repetition which make up the dynamics of shopping and collecting. Recurring imagery within a series, and repeated photographs within single works, are characteristics of their oeuvres that could be directly related both to their love of cinema and their obsessive fixations on specific images and objects.

The shift from the Abstract Expressionist notion of the expressive, emotive, 'action painter' – to use Harold Rosenberg's phrase – to the conception of the artist as consumer, allowed Rauschenberg and Warhol not only to negotiate relations between public and private in radically new ways; it introduced an unapologetically passive stance in a discourse celebrating the active involvement of the artist in the 'arena' of the work.[16] Cornell was attracted to Goethe's Werther or Nerval's narrator in *Aurélia* because they shared his belief that 'a passive attitude is required for sudden illumination.'[17] However far away Rauschenberg and Warhol may seem from those Romantic models, they share with Cornell this receptivity to objects and experiences. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, 'leaving things "open" has been Rauschenberg's most frequently used expression in describing his artistic stance.'[18] In his desire to 'collaborate' with objects, Rauschenberg conceived the surfaces of his paintings as simple receptacles for detritus whose material qualities are further highlighted by being pasted, creased and covered in paint. Warhol's apparent passivity is even more extreme, as he produced series upon series of images depleted through mechanical repetition because, as he claimed, he wanted 'to be a machine.'[19]

'Warhol was a fan all his life, beginning in Pittsburgh, where he filled in colouring books of stars while he was home from school,' recounts Mathew Tinkcom.[20] Discussing the activities of cutting out, pasting and colouring in images of stars as behaviour typical of 'the sissy and the fan,' Koestenbaum noted the kinship between Cornell's homages to ballerinas, Rauschenberg's assemblages and Warhol's silk-screened portraits of Hollywood stars.[21] Indeed, both Warhol's 1963 *Blue Liz as Cleopatra* and Cornell's 1945-46 *Untitled (Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)* were created around a glamorous portrait cut-up and 'coloured' in blue (Fig. 1). As such, they can be read as extensions of the fan's domestic hobbies, all aimed at recapturing, and multiplying, the intensity experienced by the spectator sitting in the cinema's anonymous darkness, waiting to be 'illuminated,' like Werther or Nerval, by an adored woman's dazzling presence. Collecting memorabilia, 'hoarding and sifting coincidences' are poor, but necessary, substitutes for this originary experience, which is based on the simple premise that, as Koestenbaum has put it, '[f]ans have no minds of their own. They only figure as emanations of the diva's will, as mind readers.'[22]

Rebuses

Just as the fan gazes at the photograph of the star in order to be transported into another world, viewers of Cornell's work are invited to imagine the kind of narratives that underlie the collections of objects in their boxes, in a process denigrated by Morris as an 'unthreatening reverie.'[23] Cornell was indeed concerned with weaving what he once called a 'tenuous thread' which would hold together images, objects and evocations.[24] Through imaginary shifts of scale, or formal analogies and repetitions, Cornell set up chains of associations which can transport the viewer into reveries spiralling out of the most fragile assemblages. Rauschenberg's *Personal Boxes* explored similar kinds of chains of associations. A bell, for example, is attached to a bird skull 'in reminiscence of her song,' just as the fragments of musical scores in works by Cornell often conjure snatches of distant melodies.[25] Cornell's remark that, in his *Soap-bubble Sets*, the 'fragile, shimmering globules become the shimmering but more enduring planets'[26] describes a poetic scale shift similar to Rauschenberg's note that in one of the *Personal Boxes* a 'bone on the stage of a box no bigger than a tube of lipstick becomes a miniature monument.'[27] Those kinds of mechanisms of association are *precisely* what Rauschenberg took great care to avoid in his *Combines*, as he sought to sever the 'tenuous thread' holding objects together. The viewer's gaze is condemned to wander aimlessly across the surface of these deliberately messy paintings in which, according to John Cage, 'there is no more subject … than there is in a page of a newspaper.'[28] Like Cage, Rauschenberg rejected the Abstract Expressionists' probing of subjectivity;[29] by exposing the canvas to the random noise of everyday life, he sought to dismiss the potential emotional connotations which an object can carry. In that sense, Rauschenberg's explicit rejection of what he called 'clichés of association' establishing 'superficial subconscious relationships'[30] stands in stark contrast with Cornell's 'image-chains' which, according to Carter Ratcliff, 'often run along the lines of well-worn clichés,' linking for example the image of the butterfly to that of the swan in order to allude to the dancing ballerina.'[31]

Yet, despite Rauschenberg's claims, more than one critic has attempted to interpret the iconography of his *Combines*. While some have perceived allusions to his childhood, or coded references to his homosexuality, Charles F. Stuckey actually claimed, in 1977, to have

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deciphered Rauschenberg's *Rebus* by associating words with each group of letters, image and object in the work and stringing them into a sequence.[32] This kind of interpretation seems to bring Rauschenberg's work closer to Cornell's, as the idea of the artwork as a rebus to be deciphered was dear to Cornell.[33] Rauschenberg soon came to realise that he could not control the chains of associations triggered by the juxtapositions of images, objects, words and colours.[34] As Helen Molesworth suggests, the narrative constituted by these associations is intimately associated with the notion of taste, and trying to avoid these 'clichés' can at best be a means to explore the very processes through which taste is constructed. Highlighting the tension between 'Rauschenberg's extremely visceral use of paint' and the 'extraordinarily erudite knowledge base of current events and historical subjects' required to understand the *Combines* — 'like the work of Joseph Cornell'— Molesworth concludes:

> In Rauschenberg's work, taste is offered as that which glues together, much like the glue that holds together the collages of the combines. One cannot be rid of taste, one can only hope to keep it plastic and viscous, preventing it from fossilising and hardening.[35]

Warhol went one step further in following Rauschenberg's desire to evacuate all '*clichés* of association.' Explaining his use of repeated, identical images, he claimed that '[t]he more you look at the same exact thing, the more the meaning goes away, and the better and emptier you feel.'[36] Warhol's serial repetitions of Marilyn Monroe's photograph are indeed different from the framed portraits included in Cornell's boxes (Fig. 1). The latter hover behind coloured veils signifying glamour, unattainability and mystery, while in Warhol's work the face of Monroe is revealed as a decomposing construction of mass media. Nevertheless, both clearly draw on the photograph's power as a receptacle for the viewer's projections: it is difficult to read Warhol's *Marilyns* independently from her suicide, a reference which inevitably darkens the artist's avowed celebration of consumer culture, suggesting the other side of the American dream.

Indeed, I would like to argue that Cornell, Rauschenberg and Warhol grasped and explored, in different ways, what Roland Barthes described as the status of the photograph as a 'message without a code' whose 'objective' appearance could act as a springboard for the most varied connotations and associations.[37] Highlighting Cornell's interest in Sigmund

Freud's theory of 'condensation' in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Michael Moon compared the relation between the artist's boxes and his prolific writings to the discrepancy between the 'laconic' contents of the dream and the wealth of thoughts which dream-symbols bring together.[38] Similarly, Barthes noted the kinship between the 'rhetoric' of the photograph and the mechanisms of dream images, a relation which Krauss suggests was being explored by Rauschenberg in his silk-screens, when he, like Barthes, realised the inescapability of the image's 'connotational swarms.'[39] With Warhol, the repeated and depleted photographs can no longer act as pathways into the mind's workings — whether it is reverie, as in Cornell's works, or memory, as in Rauschenberg's.[40] Images for Warhol act as screens masking traumatic experiences which sometimes disrupt the silk-screened surfaces in the form of cuts or 'blips' suddenly rupturing an image, a face, a perfect smile.[41]

'Since humans have an infinite capacity to invent properties, and to find similarities and differences in things, based on these properties, relations can be found between even an infinity of things.'[42] This note, written down by George Brecht in a 1959 notebook, shows the artist directly addressing the issue raised by Cornell's, Rauschenberg's and Warhol's works. Brecht, who studied with Cage and would later go on to become one of the most prominent members of the Fluxus group, was working at the time as a chemist and reflecting on the relations between art and science, in particular in terms of philosophical structures of knowledge and perception. If humans can find relations between 'an infinity of things,' as Brecht suggests, it follows that any attempt to create random assemblages, like Rauschenberg, or 'empty images,' like Warhol, is doomed to fail. This was the conceptual starting point for Brecht's first exhibition, the 1959 *Toward Events* at the Reuben Gallery in New York.

In this exhibition, Brecht showed three-dimensional containers filled with a variety of objects. *The Cabinet*, for example, was a medicine cabinet hung on the wall containing, amongst other objects, a magnifying glass, two porcelain cups, a yoyo, a bottle filled with pink liquid, a container full of seeds, a bell, a clock, a large egg cup, a miniature statue of liberty, and a word-game (Fig. 4). The invitation to the exhibition urged visitors to open the containers and handle the objects 'in ways appropriate to their nature' and then put them back.[43] 'It is within the spirit of the work,' Brecht would later explain, 'that (as in life in general) parts may

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be lost, broken, spilled, stolen, replaced, contributed, soiled, cleaned, constructed, destroyed.'[44] By providing spectators with the possibility of constructing their own narratives, Brecht is redirecting our attention away from any interpretation of the objects' meaning for the artist. As we try constructing possible relations among objects and between the objects and their containers, there is no unifying 'flatbed picture plane,' no painterly trace, no artistic subjectivity to guide us. Impossible to trace back to a biographical context, the symbolic associations carried by the objects can only be attributed to individual viewers' own projections. In order to avoid the condensation at work in the object-as-symbol, 'Brecht's work,' as Henry Martin put it, 'asks us to look at things more slowly and one at a time.'[45]

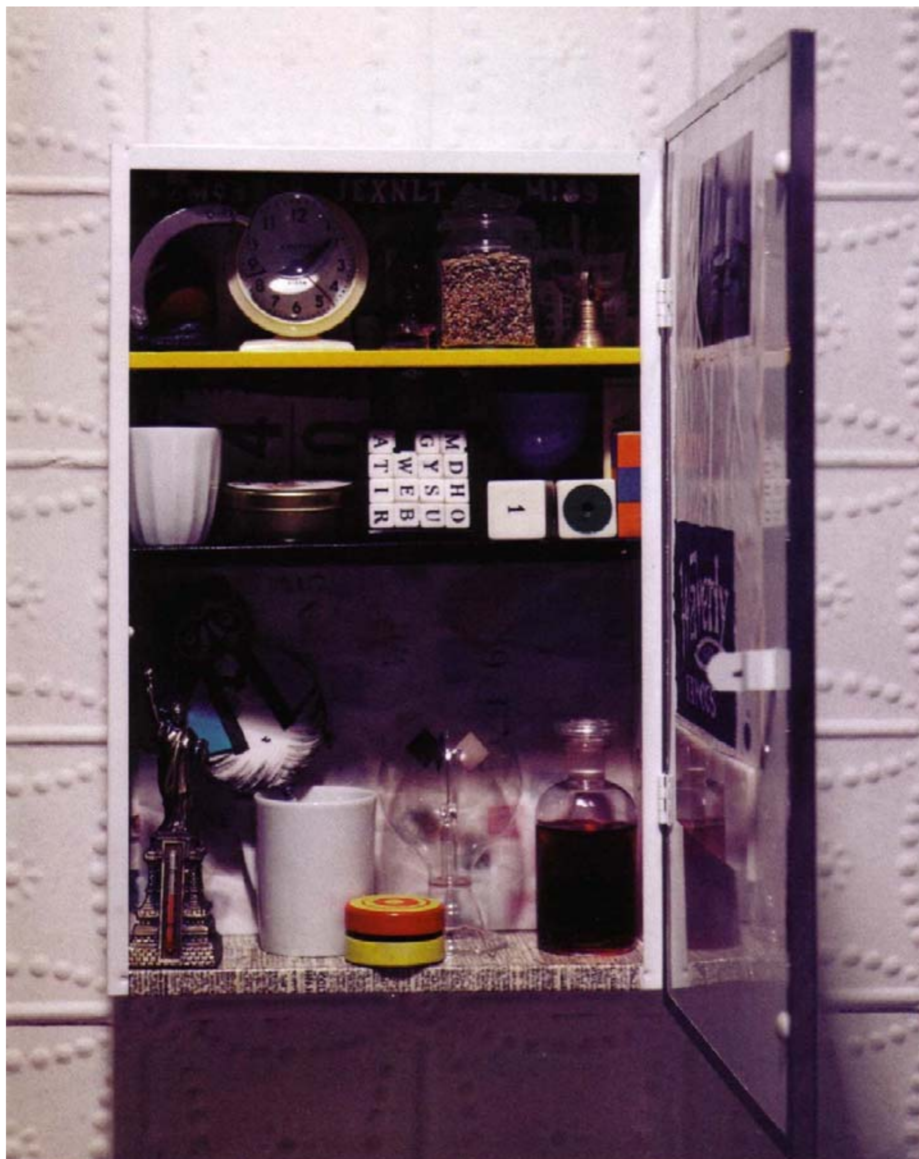

Fig. 4: George Brecht, *Cabinet*, 1959 (destroyed). Photograph: Scott Hyde.

With no pedestal, no signature and no modifications to mark them out as artworks, each object remains resolutely faithful to its everyday use, and asks to be handled as such. Even the words included in *The Cabinet* mock all attempts to read a hidden meaning, as viewers can arrange the letters in the word puzzle indefinitely. Dream images can be analysed as condensations of desires and fears, photographs are caught up in complex rhetorical networks, but 'sometimes,' as Freud is said to have admitted, 'a cigar is only a cigar.'[46] And works such as *The Cabinet*, so to speak, offer us *only* cigars.

The nature of Brecht's relation to Cornell can be more specifically analysed through *A Christmas Play for Joseph Cornell* (Fig. 5), a work which stands out as one the most enigmatic and poetic of his text pieces, also known as 'event scores.' Asked about this work, Brecht said that it came from a dream which evoked the 'atmosphere' of Cornell's work – indeed, the text seems to capture this in the title's reference to Cornell's favourite time of the year, as well as the stage description of a landscape including snow, sun and mist, and the choice of two children as characters.[47] Brecht's suggestive association of Cornell's influence with a dream image, and the unusually literary dimension of *A Christmas Play* is, however, downplayed both by the exceptional nature of the score in the artist's collected works and by the artist's active resistance to interpreting his Cornell dream. 'A dream just comes as something unusual and I *accept* it, just as I accept anything else,' he explained.[48] This acceptance is a crucial characteristic of Brecht's supreme detachment, an attitude which urged him to reject not only symbolic interpretations of the objects included in his assemblages, but also direct comparisons between his work and Cornell's. Although he was sensitive to Cornell's boxes, and even seemed to wish to contact him at one point in 1961,[49] Brecht distinctly sought to distance himself from the older artist, stating: 'There is so much nostalgia in his work and I have a horror of nostalgia.'[50] Instead of the past captured in a box, Brecht invited viewers to interact with his works in the present. With every viewer, the work changes – according to the artist, it is 'more in the nature of a performance (music and dance) than of an object.'[51]

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A CHRISTMAS PLAY

for Joseph Cornell

Empty snow-covered field, frosted horizon sun glaring through the mist. In the near distance a bathtub lies on its side, open toward us.

FIRST CHILD: Do you see that dark figure behind the crèche?

SECOND CHILD: (Does not speak.)

Fig. 5: George Brecht, *A Christmas Play for Joseph Cornell*, score from *Water Yam*, New York, Fluxus, 1963. Courtesy Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Foundation.

Forgotten Games

Like Rauschenberg's disavowal of Cornell's influence, Brecht's focus on the older artist's 'nostalgia' obscured another, more relevant aspect of his work. For Cornell had, before Brecht, explored the possibilities of introducing movement within static assemblages by inviting spectators to interact with them through touch. The tension between a fixed structure and mobile elements is a significant aspect of many of Cornell's works and was embodied most dramatically in his 1950s series of white grids and *Dovecotes*, inspired by Mondrian's geometric compositions.[52] In these works, the quiet rigidity of the white grid is disrupted by small balls or blocks which move around noisily in each compartment when the work is shaken. This playful irreverence for geometry, I would like to suggest, reflects in fact Cornell's more general preoccupation with the tension between order and chaos within his working process, as he constantly strove to control the drive to amass objects by arranging and classifying them.

As Dawn Ades has pointed out, many of Cornell's works require the spectator's intervention 'before they can come alive.'[53] Although the museum literally forbids these kinds of interventions, I believe that they are intrinsic parts of the works, and a recent DVD on Cornell which allows viewers to virtually open closed lids and drawers, or to listen to the rattling sounds made by the boxes when they are shaken around, successfully reveals the

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different modes which these interactions can take.[54] Firstly, finding hidden elements in the boxes multiplies the dialectic between visible and invisible, memory and discovery, which runs through the imagery and themes of the boxes. In objects such as Cornell's 1948 *La Favorite* viewers are invited to open the cabinet and take out a bisque angel or a velvet covered box, in much the same way as participants in Brecht's *Cabinet* are encouraged to handle everyday objects. In the dossiers of images, objects and texts such as *The Crystal Cage (Portrait of Berenice)* (c.1934-67) or *GC 44* (c. 1944-70), the documents contained in the box can be taken out, looked at one by one, read and shuffled by viewers as they wish. In these works, the chains of associations which keep the assemblages together have clearly been dismantled, thus prefiguring Rauschenberg's questioning of the 'taste' which 'glues' together randomly collected objects. In these 'dossiers' by Cornell, as Don Quaintance has pointed out, '[m]anipulation by the hand linked to visual recognition by the eye is essentially a recapitulation of the creative process: the viewer becomes an active participant in the art-making.'[55] This close relation between manipulation and creative process was, of course, what Brecht sought to highlight in his *Toward Events* exhibition.

The second kind of participation involved in Cornell's works involves shaking the boxes, so that rolling balls, rustling sand or tinkling bells suddenly introduce an important sound element to the assemblages. Similarly, the press release for Brecht's 1959 exhibition explained that '[t]he sounds of the components as they are manipulated by the viewer, their smells, as well as their visual, tactile, and symbolic values contribute to the effect of the experience.'[56] Brecht's 1960 *Play Incident* is a continuation of this exploration – in it, viewers are invited to drop a ball which produces sounds as it hits nails concealed in the box. This device for creating sound is strongly reminiscent of works by Cornell in which balls can be inserted and hit bells as they roll down ramps: in *Swiss Shoot-the-Chutes*, for example, the sounds evoke the cowbells of pastoral Switzerland.

In Cornell's works, touching and handling small objects is not only associated with the activity of collecting: it triggers above all associations with the field of play. Cornell's work relates to toys both by direct references and by analogies. An early work such as the 1933 *Untitled*, for example, contains a children's game of jacks; later boxes include balls, marbles, dice, blocks, and spinning tops. Like Cornell, Brecht used games and toys in his works: his

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1959 *Suitcase*, for example, includes a skipping rope, juggling sticks, balls and playing cards (Fig. 6). By taking these toys out of the framework of Cornell's boxes, Brecht isolated the spontaneous impulse to play from Cornell's complex network of symbolic associations. Moreover, by allowing viewers to handle and play with the toys directly, Brecht downplays the nostalgia which colours the toys in Cornell's work.

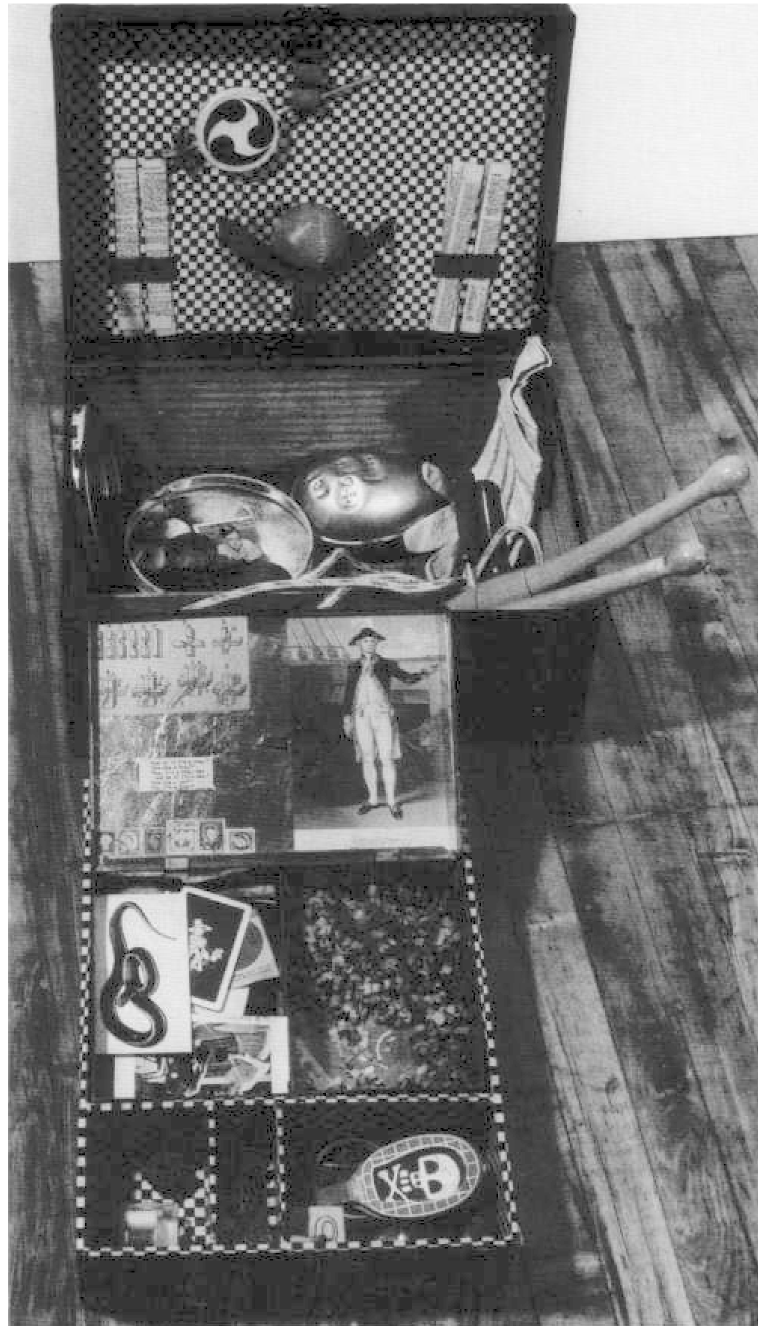

Fig. 6: George Brecht, *Suitcase*, 1959, mixed media, 20 x 41 x 30 cms. Collection Reinhard Onnasch, Berlin.

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We are unable to play with the jacks in the 1933 *Untitled* but we are invited to shake the box, whose sound is a faint echo of distant pastimes. Similarly, one cannot insert coins and play with the *Medici Slot Machines* — the toys included in these works seem to belong to the long-deceased Medici children under whose portraits they are placed. In a diary note, Cornell wrote that 'perhaps a definition of a box could be as a kind of "forgotten game," a philosophical toy in the Victorian era, with poetic or magical "moving parts."'[57] The title of the work *Forgotten Game* thus evokes both children's games, forever lost to adults, and the Victorian 'philosophical toys' of the past which brought together imagination and scientific invention.[58]

Although they do not refer to the 'forgotten games' of Victorian times, Brecht's toys are nevertheless also caught up in a network linking play, science and imagination. As the artist concisely put it, 'games include everything: intelligence, intuition, imagination, science, theater.'[59] Just as Cornell can be said to see games as containing 'the first seeds' of the child's 'ability to construct pattern and meaning out of chaos,'[60] Brecht conceived of play as the site in which to explore the processes by which knowledge is constructed. 'The appropriate question is not: what is being? but how do I know?'[61] This remark was jotted down by Brecht in his notebook as he was attending a course about Ernst Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, a study of symbols as the starting point for both science and art. As a result, Brecht started to classify the objects which he included in his works according to the way they are perceived. Maps, pictures, words and numbers are described as 'symbols,' for example, while objects such as a stone, shell or a piece of cloth are perceived directly 'in their Suchness.'[62] All these objects, presented in a non-hierarchical, non-structured way, are to be apprehended by viewers through play, thus triggering an increased awareness of the various processes of symbolisation at stake in aesthetic and everyday experiences alike.

Like play, Zen, according to Brecht, is a means of relating to experience directly, in a 'non-symbolic' way.[63] Influenced by Zen, Brecht produced works in which knowledge and perception are explored through game-like exercises recalling Zen *koans*, pedagogical exercises, often in the form of riddles or paradoxes, used as tools for meditation. Is Cornell, then, also 'a happy Zen master,' as Morris described him?[64] A work such as the *Untitled*

(*Penny Arcade Portrait of Lauren Bacall)* (Fig. 1) seems to suggest quite the opposite: whether we conceive it as capturing the fleeting, but intense, experience of the fan communing with his star, or as a means to sublimate a dangerously erotic female figure threatening the innocent world of childhood, it suggests a complex nexus of desire and fear, longing and loss, quite at odds with the image of a detached Zen monk. What is Zen-like in this work, however, is the state of absorption which it encourages in the viewer as soon as he or she drops a small red ball through a small door in the upper right corner of the work. As we are invited to hear the ball roll down the glass ramps, catch a glimpse of it as it passes in front of Lauren Bacall's face, and watch, mesmerised, as it finally arrives in the central, mirrored compartment in the lower part of the box, we are inevitably caught up in Cornell's world. Placed in the space of play, which hovers between reality and illusion, we suddenly become more sensitive to both symbols and 'things in their Suchness,' fantasies and everyday life.

When Barthes sought to redefine the artwork as 'Text' in 1971, he turned to the concept of play. Opposing the activity of 'consuming' a text to that of 'playing' with a text, Barthes explained that the French verb *jouer*, to play, should be used in this case in its different semantic meanings:

> the text itself plays (like a door, like a machine with 'play') and the reader plays twice over, playing in the text as one plays a game, looking for a practice which re-produces it, but … also playing the Text in the musical sense of the term.[65]

In Cornell's work, the invitations to open doors, lids and drawers, and the movement of balls and cubes which momentarily disrupts the stillness of many carefully crafted arrangements, all seem to evoke the first meaning of 'play' singled out by Barthes. Moreover, the recurring references to games and toys as well as the tactile manipulation encouraged by the artist certainly invite viewers to play with them like children's toys and games. To these two dimensions, Brecht added the third aspect of play by using the model of the score for his three-dimensional works and comparing the viewers' interaction with the objects to a musical performance. If in Cornell's work tactile participation serves to extend our perception of the work, Brecht's three-dimensional objects cannot exist without the viewers' activities, thereby demonstrating that 'things do not exist separately from the relationships into which they

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enter.'[66] Nevertheless, a comparison between Cornell and Brecht reveals that a performative, participatory dimension can be found in the former's work, as both rely on the gestures of the viewer to complete their assemblages, in the same way as the Text, according to Barthes, requires an active, rather than a passive, reader. Like Barthes's readers, the viewer-participants in Brecht's and Cornell's work locate the hinges around which the assemblage *plays*, they *play* with its loose components, and perform the work as if they were *playing* a music piece on newly acquired instruments of imagination, meditation and knowledge.

Thus, however laboriously constructed and seductively presented, meaning is constantly undermined by Cornell through the introduction of play. Cases and *Dossiers* give the impression of being precariously arranged, contingent on the haphazard shuffling of miscellaneous pieces of paper (this precariousness is also highlighted by some museums' policy of storing and transporting Cornell's boxes in pieces, thus dis- and reassembling these objects every time). Very often, the strict order of the boxed assemblages is subverted by the random parasitical movements of rolling balls, shifting sand or tinkling bells. Bubbles are always on the point of bursting, the spectacle of the penny arcade inevitably vanishes once the ball has run its course, and play stops as soon as we break the absorption and illusion which it presupposes. In effect, acknowledging that we are playing with Cornell's boxes means admitting that reality, with all its anxieties and complexities, can only temporarily be kept at bay.

In mapping out contrasts and affinities between the works of Cornell, Rauschenberg, Warhol and Brecht, I have suggested that Cornell's work acts as a compass to navigate through the issues at stake in 1960s American artworks seeking to establish relations with the world of everyday objects. 'Junk' and 'pop' works explored the ways in which consumers negotiate their identities through the acquisition, storage and display of commodities. Rauschenberg and Warhol followed Cornell's collecting practice through different routes: while the former abandoned his early fetishistic *Personal Boxes* for the *Combines*'s semi-public 'yard' or 'attic' aesthetic, Warhol's works offer themselves as products of the fan's passive mindset, interweaving the artist's own personal obsessions with capitalist America's collective adulation of commodities and stars alike.

Like Rauschenberg and Warhol, Brecht sought to 'unpack' Cornell's boxes by moving away from the symbolic chains of associations contained in his assemblages. Brecht, however, went further than the two other artists because he incorporated their questioning of symbolic processes within the very structure of his works, by inviting an active participation on the part of the viewer. Paradoxically, Brecht was able to achieve this *precisely* by using a specific Cornellian device: play. Looking back at Cornell through his legacies, then, allows us to see how his boxes contain the seeds of their own 'unpacking,' thus establishing them as seminal works for generations to come.

FIRST CHILD: Do you see that dark figure behind the crèche?

SECOND CHILD: (Does not speak.)

The two main characters in Brecht's *Christmas Play* (fig. 5) demonstrate that it takes two to create an illusion. Cornell's works are poetic demonstrations that play can simultaneously conjure and dismantle narratives of taste and knowledge; Rauschenberg sought to escape from the clichés of taste through the noisy silence of junk; Warhol never ceased repeating the single narrative of the compulsive consumer. Refusing to give us symbols to decode, Brecht still remains silent to this day.

This article is a revised and expanded version of a paper I gave at the conference *Boxing Clever: A Centennial Re-Evaluation of Joseph Cornell*, University of Essex, 17-19 September 2003. I would like to thank the organisers, Stephanie Taylor and Jason Edwards, for their comments on both the form and content of the paper.

[1] Robert Morris, 'American Quartet,' *Art in America*, December 1981, 96.

[2] Morris, 'American Quartet', 101.

[3] Two landmark exhibitions signalled the emergence of the 'assemblage' or 'junk' aesthetic usually associated with the idea of a 'neo-dada' movement: *New Forms, New Media I*, held at the Martha Jackson Gallery, New York in 1960, and, one year later, *The Art of Assemblage*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Both exhibitions included Cornell's work alongside

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Rauschenberg's and Brecht's. That these 'junk' practices were precursors for Pop art in the 1960s is indisputable.

[4] According to Hopps, Rauschenberg found out about Cornell's work through the parents of his wife Susan Weil who owned some of his works. Weil's parents also introduced their son in law to Cornell's dealer, Charles Egan, who would give Rauschenberg his first exhibition. Walter Hopps, 'Introduction: Rauschenberg's Art of Fusion,' in Walter Hopps and Susan Davidson, eds, *Robert Rauschenberg: a Retrospective*, Guggenheim Museum, New York, 1997, 23.

[5] Robert Rauschenberg, *Scatoli e feticci personali*, Galleria dell'obelisco, Rome, 1953, rep. in Walter Hopps, *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, The Menil Collection, Houston and other venues, 1992; Houston, Fine Arts Press, 1991, 232.

[6] Branden Joseph's recent discussion of Rauschenberg's *Personal Boxes* is the first in-depth analysis of these works, destroyed in large part by the artist. Although Joseph refers to Walter Benjamin and the surrealists rather than to Cornell, he provides a very useful reflection on how Rauschenberg sought to negotiate his relation to history and the past in these and subsequent works. See Branden W. Joseph, *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, 2004, 131–139.

[7] Walter Hopps, 'Introduction,' in *Robert Rauschenberg: The Early 1950s*, 14.

[8] Dore Ashton spoke of 'Cornell's ambiguous and ubiquitous word "sanctuary",' in 'Joseph Cornell,' in Dore Ashton, ed., *A Joseph Cornell Album*, New York, 1974, 65.

[9] Rauschenberg, quoted in Deborah Solomon, *Utopia Parkway: the Life and Work of Joseph Cornell*, New York, 1996, 237.

[10] See Leo Steinberg, 'Reflections on the State of Criticism' (1972), rep. in Branden Joseph, ed., *Robert Rauschenberg*, Cambridge, Mass., 27. This text is an excerpt from a larger essay, 'Other Citeria,' which was originally delivered as a lecture in 1968.

[11] Cornell, cited by Ashton, 'Joseph Cornell,' in Ashton, ed., *A Joseph Cornell Album*, 68.

[12] For more information about this exhibition and Warhol's collectomania, see Michael Lobel, 'Warhol's Closet,' *Art Journal*, Winter 1996, 5: 4, 42–51.

[13] What Babette Mangolte called Rauschenberg's 'aesthetics of the yard' is explored in Helen Molesworth, *At Home with Duchamp: the Readymade and Domesticity*, Ph.D. thesis, Cornell University, 1998, 210–213.

[14] Morris, 'American Quartet,' 96.

15 Wayne Koestenbaum, *Andy Warhol*, London, 2001, 44.

[16] See Harold Rosenberg, 'The American Action Painters,' *Art News*, December 1952, rep. in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory, 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Cambridge, Mass. and Oxford, 1992, 581–584.

[17] Carter Ratcliff, 'Joseph Cornell: Mechanic of the Ineffable,' in Kynaston McShine, ed., *Joseph Cornell*, , Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1980, 60.

[18] Rosalind Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory' (1997), in Branden Joseph, ed., *Robert Rauschenberg*, 110.

[19] G. Swenson, 'What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I,' *Art News*, 62: 7, November 1963, 26.

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[20] Mathew Tinkcom, 'Warhol's Camp,' in Colin MacCabe, Mark Francis and Peter Wollen, eds, *Who is Andy Warhol?*, Pittsburgh and London, 1997, 113.

[21] Wayne Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality and the Mystery of Desire*, London, 1993, 64.

[22] Koestenbaum, *The Queen's Throat*, 26.

[23] Morris, 'American Quartet,' 101.

[24] Cornell's diary note on February 27 1945 reads: 'A 'link'— the 'reassurance' and 'continuity' of a thread so tenuous, so hard at times to keep hold of (or perhaps to communicate to others is what I mean).' Cited in Carter Ratcliff, 'Joseph Cornell: Mechanic of the Ineffable,' 48.

[25] Rauschenberg, *Scatoli e feticci personali*, 232.

[26] Cornell cited by Ashton, 'Joseph Cornell,' 64–65

[27] *Scatoli e feticci personali*, 232.

[28] John Cage, 'On Rauschenberg, Artist, and his Work' (1961), in *Silence*, London, 1978, repr, 1999, 101.

[29] On this topic, see for example, Moira Roth, 'The Aesthetic of Indifference' (1977), in Jonathan Katz and Moira Roth, eds, *Difference/Indifference: Musings on Postmodernism, Marcel Duchamp and John Cage*, Amsterdam, 1998, 33–47; Caroline A. Jones, 'John Cage and the Abstract Expressionist Ego,' *Critical Inquiry*, 19: 4, Summer 1993, 628–65.

[30] 'If I see any superficial subconscious relationships that I'm familiar with — clichés of association — I change the picture.' Rauschenberg, quoted in Dorothy Gees Seckler, 'The Artist Speaks: Robert Rauschenberg,' *Art in America*, 54: 3, May–June 1966, cited by Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory,' 99.

[31] 'Joseph Cornell: Mechanic of the Ineffable,' 54.

[32] 'Reading Rauschenberg,'*Art in America*, 65: 2, March–April 1977, 74–84.

[33] Dore Ashton explained that this was one of the reasons why Cornell admired Emily Dickinson's conundrum-like poems. Ashton, 'Joseph Cornell,' 43.

[34] This argument is cogently developed by Krauss in 'Perpetual Inventory.'

[35] Helen Molesworth, *At Home with Duchamp*, 219.

[36] Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *POPism: the Warhol '60s*, New York, 1980, 50.

[37] See Roland Barthes, 'The Photographic Message' (1961), in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath, 1977, 17.

[38] Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol*, Durham and London, 1998, 146.

[39] Krauss, 'Perpetual Inventory,' 108.

[40] Rosalind Krauss first developed the comparison between Rauschenberg's works and the space of memory in her 'Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image' (1974), in Joseph, *Robert Rauschenberg*, 39–55.

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[41] On these 'blips,' see Hal Foster, 'Death in America' (1986), in Annette Michelson, ed., *Andy Warhol*, Cambridge, Mass., 2001, 67–88.

[42] George Brecht, 'Notebook III, April 1959 – August 1959,' in Dieter Daniels, ed., *George Brecht: Notebooks I-III*, Cologne, 1991, III, 52.

[43] George Brecht, 'Invitation to *Towards Events*, New York, Reuben Gallery, 1959' [New York, Museum of Modern Art Library], n. p.

[44] George Brecht, 'Notes on the shipping and exhibiting MEDICINE CABINET (alternative titles: MEDICINE CHEST, CABINET), 1960,' unpublished document dated 11.16.61 [New York, Museum of Modern Art Library], n. p.

[45] Henry Martin, ed., *An Introduction to George Brecht's Book of the Tumbler on Fire*, Milan, 1978, 54.

[46] According to the London Freud Museum, the source for this well-loved quotation has never been located. Cf Hhttp://www.freud.org.uk/fmfaq.htmH

[47] Brecht, quoted by Michael Nyman, 'George Brecht: Interview,' in *Studio International*, 192: 984, November – December 1976, rep. in Martin, ed., *An Introduction*, 121, note 22.

[48] Brecht, in Irmeline Lebeer, 'An Interview with George Brecht,' *Chroniques de l'art vivant*, 39, 1973, rep. in Henry Martin, ed., *An Introduction*, 85.

[49] In a letter dated June 7 1961, Brecht asked William Seitz for Cornell's address. Seitz was the curator of the exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* at the Museum of Modern Art, in which both Brecht and Cornell participated. See George Brecht, *Notebook VII*, March – June 1961, unpublished, n.p. My thanks to Julia Robinson for this reference.

[50] Brecht in Michael Nyman, 'George Brecht: Interview,' 121, note 22.

[51] 'Notes on the shipping and exhibiting MEDICINE CABINET,' n.p.

[52] Diane Waldman claims that Cornell was directly influenced by Mondrian in *Joseph Cornell: Master of Dreams*, New York, 2002, 98.

[53] Dawn Ades, 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell,' in Kynaston McShine, ed., *Joseph Cornell*, 29.

[54] *Joseph Cornell: Shadowplay… Eterniday*, DVD accompanying the publication of the same title by Lynda Roscoe Hartigan, Walter Hopps, et al., London and New York, 2003.
[55] Don Quaintance, 'Ephemeral Matters: Traces of Cornell and Duchamp,' in *Joseph Cornell/Marcel Duchamp … in Resonance*, Menil Collection, Houston, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1998, 259.

[56] Anon., 'Brecht to show Events at Reuben Gallery,' press release for *Towards Events*, New York, Reuben Gallery, 1959 [New York, Museum of Modern Art Library], n. p.

[57] Cornell, cited by Ades, 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell,' 29.

[58] Ades, 29.

[59] Irmeline Lebeer, 'An Interview with George Brecht,' 88.

[60] Ades, 'The Transcendental Surrealism of Joseph Cornell,' 31.

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[61] 'Notebook II, October 1958 – April 1959,' in Dieter Daniels, ed., *George Brecht: Notebooks I-III*, II, 115.

[62] 'Notebook III,' 148.

[63] 'Notebook II,' 123.

[64] Morris, 'American Quartet,' 104.

[65] 'Le Texte lui-même joue (comme une porte, comme un appareil dans lequel il y a du 'jeu'); et le lecteur joue, lui, deux fois: il joue au Texte (sens ludique), il cherche une pratique qui le reproduise; mais … il joue le Texte.' Roland Barthes, 'De L'Œuvre au texte' (1971), in *Œuvres Complètes, vol. II, 1966-1973*, Paris, 1993, 1216. English translation by Stephen Heath, 'From Work to Text,' in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York, New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, 173.

[66] 'Notebook II,' 137.

Anna Dezeuze is Research Fellow at the AHRB Research Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies, University of Manchester.