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Chance encounters: The construction of meaning through the process of assemblage in the boxes of Joseph Cornell and contemporary jewellery of Thomas Mann

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INTRODUCTION

> Somewhere in the city of New York there are four or five still-unknown objects that belong together. Once together they'll make a work of art. That's Cornell's premise, his metaphysics, and his religion, which I wish to understand. He sets out from his home on Utopia Parkway without knowing what he is looking for or what he will find. Today it could be something as ordinary and interesting as an old thimble. Years may pass before it has company. In the meantime, Cornell walks and looks. The city has an infinite number of interesting objects in an infinite number of unlikely places. (Simic 1992: 14)

What I find quite captivating and intriguing about the art of Joseph Cornell is his method: the way he takes unassuming objects and scraps of text, the flotsam of his urban environment, and puts them together in interesting and sometimes unexpected ways. The art created through such a process becomes not just a representation of the world but an embodiment of it: the artworks are invested with meaning not only through the recontextualisation of the fragments contained within them, but because those bits and pieces have belonged to other people in the past - they have been held and loved and cared for and discarded. All the contexts of previous ownership are manifested, however ephemerally, in the final construction.

There were, in fact, several strands of thought that led me to Joseph Cornell as a subject for this thesis. The first had to do with Arjun Appadurai's book *The Social Life of Things,* in which he attributes to inanimate objects some of the characteristics of living things - they have a history, they circulate through time and space, their meanings and values are by no means static. I have always felt this way about things - that their objecthood is about more than their material condition - and the feeling was only reinforced by a recent visit to Buenos Aires, where I came across an extraordinary antiques shop. Walking into the small space, the sense of history - of things having been owned and cherished over generations by different people - was quite palpable, with the scratchy Ella Fitzgerald record being played on an old gramophone in the corner adding to the atmosphere. There were hundreds of objects carefully arranged: picture frames, crystal chandeliers, beaded necklaces, lace collars, hats, rocking-horses, silver boxes…It was a kind of cabinet of curiosities, containing the physical remnants of lives long over, fragments that combine to evoke a presence. It is that sense of presence that interests

me, and that was beautifully portrayed in the film *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain*[1], in which the title character discovers in her apartment a long-hidden box of childhood toys belonging to a boy who had lived there fifty years before. Just a few well-loved things – picture cards, marbles and tiny model cyclists from the Tour de France - are enough to reify an abstract existence. Amélie searches for the owner and returns the box to him: its contents reduce the bitter old man to tears as they reconnect him to the idealistic boy he once was.

Indeed, my interest in things goes beyond their aesthetic qualities, (although, that is also of great importance) to what might lie beneath. My curiosity is, in fact, neatly summed up by these words:

> You could imagine things ... as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols and totems (Brown 2001: 5).

And so, thinking about these things provoked an interest in the meanings that objects accumulate, and consequently the collage/assemblage artworks of Joseph Cornell.

From Cornell to contemporary jewellery is a small step: the scale, content and interactivity of many of his box constructions suggest a sensibility that is very much in line with the creation of objects that are intensely personal, precious and related to the body. Thomas Mann is the obvious choice of jeweller to compare with Cornell in this study, as he employs a narrative design vocabulary and an assemblage technique in making his work, as well as being personally influenced by the art of Cornell. Both these artists have in turn been very influential in my own work, and this investigation into their artmaking practices should provide a useful and enlightening backdrop to both my physical process in creating work, and my critical engagement with that process.

The title of this thesis, "Chance Encounters", comes from an image evoked by the Comte de Lautréamont in *Chants de Maldoror* - "as beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table" (quoted in Ades 1980: 16),

[1] Directed by Jean-Pierre Jeunet, 2001

which became a symbol of the surrealist enterprise, and which was visually referenced by Cornell in one of his early collages. It evokes the kind of whimsy present in much of Cornell's work, and, for me, activates the sense that the objects and images used by the artist have a kind of autonomy, a life of their own within the small universes of their created contexts. Indeed, expressing much the same sentiment in a different way, Max Ernst defined collage as "the fortuitous encounter upon a non-suitable plane of two mutually distant realities" (Ernst in Seitz 1961: 40): the key word here is 'fortuitous', which suggests not only the chance meeting of those previously unconnected elements, but that the meeting was also a positive one. Of course, the word 'chance' here does not mean that the physical relationships between these objects in the artworks are random, or that the artist did not intend for them to be as they are, although I think that contingency did have a large part to play in Cornell's process: indeed, many of his box constructions contain loose objects that call for the interaction of the viewer - their potential reconfiguration makes the chance encounter between audience and artwork an integral part of the construction of the work's meaning. So, the phrase is a layered one, which should become fairly clear through the course of this thesis.

My aim with this research is an exploration of collage and assemblage as artmaking strategies. Central to this project is an analysis of some of the theoretical issues thrown up by the physical processes of fragmentation and recombination, decontextualisation and recontextualisation, which are implicit in such strategies. The focus of this exploration is primarily the art of Joseph Cornell, although I will also be looking at the work of contemporary jewellery artist Thomas Mann and my own practical work, and suggesting some kind of affinity between us.

By nature, a topic such as this lends itself to investigation of myriad interrelated subjects, though it would obviously be beyond the scope of the thesis to research many of them. So, my intention is to focus on the process of collage/assemblage itself, and its centrality in the art of Cornell and Mann. To do this, I will be looking at their respective artmaking strategies in general, as well as concentrating on the analysis of a few key works by each artist. This, of course, will be done with reference to some ideas that might provide a theoretical framework within which to view them.

The basic hypothesis I will be working with is that Cornell's choice of objects and subject matter for his box constructions, and their interrelationship within each work, is far from arbitrary, and, furthermore, that the viewer's interaction is necessary for the completion of the work, as it is that process of engagement of the art with its audience that is central to any assigning of meaning. (A key feature of Cornell's constructions for me is his use of glass - a material that has some interesting implications in terms of both the artist and the viewer). Again, the theory behind the practice of collage will be the focal point in terms of teasing out this hypothesis. This will be carried through into the analyses of Mann's and my own work, with the emphasis being on how they might be similar to, or different from, Cornell's.

Due to the nature of this particular topic, my research will not be structured around one significant theory - rather, it will touch on several different strands of theory to provide a framework from which to view the subject matter. Some of the ideas that I find relevant to this project are outlined below:

The major issue to be raised is that of the construction of meaning in the process of cutting and pasting that constitutes collage or assemblage, and how we might have access to that process through analysis of the finished work. As a background, I will be looking at semiotic theory, and some psychoanalytical texts, such as Freud's theory of the 'Uncanny' and of dreams. Some of Walter Benjamin's ideas on art in the era of mechanical reproduction will also be useful to explore: he says, for example, "the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" (Benjamin 1936: 65)- the function of the collage technique, I would suggest, is one of re-attachment, of creating original works out of fragments of stuff that have been devalued because of their endless reproduction. However, it is important to keep in mind that all these various strands of theory are very general: for a more in-depth exploration of Cornell's method it will be enlightening to look at some of his own writings. The artist was an obsessive documenter, and left behind a wealth of written material in personal diaries, dossiers and letters: from observations of his urban environment - mundane recordings of quotidian existence - to arcane musings that tend towards poetry. Fragments like this one might serve as a valuable starting point in a

discussion of meaning:

> original inspiration of the magic simplicity of store windows... Project... large or small cage with mobile effects: swinging perches, swinging rings, pieces of bird-feed, etc.etc.... consider exotic colourings (notebook-scrapbook)... try for effect of prolonged motion from mobiles... (Cornell in Caws 1993: 220).

Following on from a more general background to collage and assemblage, will be an exploration of Cornell's use of the box format in his art production: his choice is significant, and it raises several interesting issues - about preservation, containment and preciousness, for example. Here I will be examining the ideas of Susan Stewart, who writes about the miniature, the souvenir and the collection, and relate them to what I think might be at work in Cornell's boxes. She explores issues around time, nostalgia and interiority that I think are very pertinent to this discussion, and will be analysed in depth. She says of the miniature world, "the major function of the enclosed space is always to create a tension or dialectic between inside and outside, between private and public property, between the space of the subject and the space of the social" (Stewart 1984: 68), which is, I think, an important place from which to start a discussion of Cornell's use of the box as a framework in much of his art. Celeste Olalquiaga's book *The Artificial Kingdom* will also be informative here, as it traces the history of the Victorian urge to collect and preserve and display things in containers and under glass. Indeed, the glass in Cornell's boxes and how it functions is of key importance in this research, and it throws up some interesting questions about the relationship of the viewer to the artwork, which will be looked at in depth.

There seem to be two species of voyeurism - of an illicit watching - operating in Cornell's boxes: the first is that of the artist himself, whose obsessive collecting and idealised recording of moments of interaction with young women, real or imagined, (which form the subject matter of many of the boxes), is charged with sexual undertones; the second is that of the viewer, who looks through glass - the thing that protects and confers value on what is inside - into the box, containing a cherished and carefully constructed subject. Of course, what is going on in both these cases - the looking by Cornell as well as the viewer - is not as simple as that: some of the complexity will be explored with reference to writings by Dawn Ades and Mary Ann Caws on the subject.

Connected to this discussion of voyeurism is the idea of the fetish, something which has particular resonance in relation to the Surrealist project. Many of Cornell's boxes, most notably those devoted to ballet dancers and film stars, either contain personal scraps from the subject herself (sequins from a costume, for example), or can be seen as fetish objects in themselves. Although quite different in terms of their materiality, these boxes are similar in spirit to Edgar Degas' Impressionistic painted studies of ballerinas: intensely personal spaces that pay homage to individual dancers, they are also sites of reverie that turn the satin and tulle of the subject's costume into highly charged erotic objects.

All of these strands of investigation can perhaps be linked back to the 'store windows' that Cornell mentions in his diary: they are a primary source of inspiration for the boxes, in terms of both format and subject matter; they are a feature of Cornell's wanderings through the urban landscape and therefore bound up with his method; they reference longing and desire as the boxes do; and their panes of glass serve to heighten the preciousness of the objects contained inside, turning them into fetishes of a sort.

So, those are some of the ideas which will be examined further to form the core of the thesis. I will, of course, go on to discuss Thomas Mann's and my own work, with reference to these central concepts. In order to provide sufficient background to my exhibition, which took place in May 2005, I will also look at some other things – filmmaker Jan Švankmajer, automata, and the history of collecting – that interest me and inform my working process: the conclusion that I reach will be based on the correspondences between these different subjects, an identification of, perhaps, what makes them all so intriguing.